The Return of the Russian Revolution: Nature of and Perspectives on the Wave of Social Protest in Russia

written by Alexei Gusev | June 17, 2012

"***Every generation needs a new revolution***"
Thomas Jefferson

"***The most dangerous thing is to create a system of permanent revolution.***"
Vladimir Putin

On February 4, 2012, more than 100,000 people marched on the streets in the center of Moscow despite severe cold (-20 C) demanding free and fair elections and the end of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian rule. Following on the mass demonstrations of December 10th and 24th in Moscow, in which tens of thousands of people took part, this shows clearly that the period of social passivity in Russia is over; the Putin era is nearing its end. The last time such large demonstrations took place in Moscow was in 1990-91 at the height of the democratic wave directed against the domination of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Then, as a result of these mass actions, the whole party-state system of the USSR began to crumble. Those who participated in those events twenty years ago are feeling the same atmosphere again: revolution is in the air.

The rising wave of protest has demystified the key myth of Putinism: the myth of a durable "consensus" between the people and the authorities in Russia. What was revealed is that it was not just a few small "marginal" groups but the mass of ordinary active people who no longer were willing to exchange their civil and political rights for Putin-style "stability." Many people were surprised by such an awakening after ten years of social hibernation. But in fact it was inevitable. The margin of security of the regime that had taken power in Russia at the turn of the 21st Century was limited from the very beginning.

Putin's "Bonapartism"

The emergence of Putin's authoritarian regime was a logical consequence of the political and socio-economic processes that had developed in Russia since the beginning of the 90s of the last century. The collapse of the party-state and the formation of nation-states on the ruins of the Soviet empire marked the advent of a bourgeois-democratic revolution. But this revolution only partly carried out its work of radically democratizing the political system and expropriating its ruling class, the bureaucracy. The democracy movement got co-opted by political forces representing a "reformist" section of the old bureaucracy, which seriously reduced the extent of the transformations. Instead of creating a completely new political system by the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, there emerged a mixture of old Soviet institutions and authoritarian presidential structures. In 1993 the latter won out, which led to the installation of a "hyper presidential" republic. Since the basis of the old regime had not been destroyed and since the new authorities were born of collusion between ruling groups, the key posts in the post-Soviet political elite were occupied by members of the ex-nomenklatura. Thus the period 1992-1999 was a kind of a slow "Themidor" of the third Russian revolution. As the historical experience of past revolutions shows, after Thermidor comes Bonapartism.[1]

Having completed the process of privatization toward the end of the 90s, the ruling class wanted a stable system, an "order" that would guarantee the continuance, the "conservation," of the new status quo. So it no longer needed the liberal elements of the political regime which enabled the elite groups to express their positions and compete during the period of the redistribution of property. This led to strong demand for conservatism, materialized in the figure of Putin, the supreme arbiter and guardian of the "new order." So Putin became the unique center of real power, elections to ruling institutions were de facto eliminated, the party system was replaced by a group of puppets subservient to the Kremlin, the media were transformed into a propaganda machine, etc. All of this was just fine for the bulk of officials, upper managers and businessmen, docile members of (Putin's party) "United Russia" as the price to pay for "stability." This situation closely resembled the one Karl Marx described in his article on French Bonapartism in the Nineteenth Century:

> The bourgeoisie confesses that its own interests dictate that it should be delivered from the danger of its own rule; that to restore tranquility in the country its bourgeois parliament must, first of all, be given its quietus; that to preserve its social power intact its political power must be broken; that the individual bourgeois can continue to exploit the other classes and to enjoy undisturbed property, family, religion, and order only on condition that their class be condemned along with the other classes to like political nullity; that in order to save its purse it must forfeit the crown, and the sword that is to safeguard it must at the same time be hung over its own head as a sword of Damocles. (*18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852)

If the majority of the ruling class supported the installation of a Bonapartist regime, the rest of the Russian population didn't much seem to care. In the early 2000s there were fewer than 10,000 people still ready to demonstrate for freedom of expression in Moscow, even fewer against the second war in Chechnia. Soon those demonstrations petered out, and even the explosion of the "revolt of the pensioners" provoked by the monetization of social benefits didn't change the situation.[2] This apathy is best explained by economic reasons; the Putin regime took power at a time when the economy was going through a rather stable period. It goes without saying that the authorities explained this as the result of their wise policies, but in reality this phenomenon was due to several objective reasons. First of all, the structural readjustment of the Russian economy was now completed; thus the serious recession of the adjustment period of 1992-1999 ended. Secondly, the price of petroleum products, Russia's chief export, began to rise. Finally, the financial crisis of 1998 brought with it a sharp rise in the price of imported goods; this led to a rising demand for cheaper, Russian goods on the internal market and therefore rise in their production.

With the end of the 90s — and the end of crises, budget deficits, galloping inflation and delays in the payment of salaries and pensions — people sighed with relief. The improvement of the socio-economic situation seemed to make the masses overlook for the moment the reduction of their political and civil rights. Nonetheless, by the nature of things periods of reaction are always followed by social and political upsurges. And good economic circumstances favor them: the less people are obsessed with daily survival, the more their horizons widen, the more they are ready for conscious activism. Besides, the increase in general wealth poses the question of its distribution: who benefits the most from this economic stability? As the history of popular movements shows — from the early 20th Century uprisings in Russia to the recent "Arab Spring" — the potential for explosive protest can accumulate behind the façade of outward well being of authoritarian regimes.

"On the bottom, they are no longer willing and on top they are no longer able"

PUTIN WAS MISTAKEN in believing that the rise in the price of oil would enable him to buy the

allegiance of the masses. Even though the price of oil in 2008, when the economic crisis broke out, was twice as high as in 2000, from that point on, according to public opinion polls, the authorities were losing ground. And the reason was not just the stagnation of real income among the population. More important was the feeling of the injustice of the present system where some (a minority) are enjoying all its benefits while others (the great majority) only get the crumbs of the cake. Just as at the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, aspirations, however vague, toward social justice became an important factor in social consciousness.

Indeed, since the advent of the "Putin order," social inequalities in Russia have not stopped getting worse. The richest 14 people concentrate in their hands 26 percent of the Gross National Product. Under the massive media cover of "the struggle against the oligarchs," huge material resources have been taken over by the clan of businessmen close to Putin and by the *siloviki* [members of the "enforcement agencies": Army, Interior, FSB, etc.] At the same time, the split between the wealthiest and the poorest has grown by 20 percent to a ratio of 1 to 17. The relative poverty of the majority of the Russian population has increased despite a certain amount of growth in incomes in the five years following 2000.

Putin's "reinforcement of the State," without any control from below, made it possible for the bureaucracy to begin lining its pockets as well as those of its "friends" in the business world. This was happening at every level of the state system from the President down to the townships in their districts. And what was the risk, when the fate of a functionary depended not on his voters but on his allegiance to the hierarchy. Even more-so, in that it is impossible to criticize these authorities in the media, which are subservient to this very bureaucracy. The logical outcome was a veritable explosion of corruption: according to Transparency International, Russia fell from the 82nd to the 143rd place, with a level of corruption comparable to that of Nigeria and Uganda. So it is totally logical that the ruling party be nicknamed "the party of crooks and thieves."

But the non-satisfaction of the socio-economic expectation of the population under Putin's regime merely reinforces an objective process of the formation of a consciousness of citizenship. The transformation of subjects into citizens is the direct result of social modernization due, in turn, to the immutable laws of economic development. A mature industrial society with developed technologies (notably information and communication), high degrees of urbanization, and popular education is naturally incompatible with authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. The emblematic figure of this society is the skilled worker whose daily activity requires certain autonomy and analytical capacities, and so he can't be entirely cut off from access to information or isolated from other people. Such a person is not easily subjugated by authoritarian manipulation and brain washing. Feeling himself (or herself) to be an individual, s/he naturally aspires to freedom in private and public life and, what is more, demands to participate in political life ("the crisis of participation" of political science). A system in which nothing depends on him no longer suits him ("the crisis of legitimacy"). If the regime denies him elementary political rights, even voting, protest will be inevitable, sooner or later. It is for this reason that the "communist" regimes collapsed, just as the dictatorships in Belarus and (in the long run) China are doomed to failure. And it is for that reason that Putinism in Russia can only be a passing phenomenon, even if the economic conjuncture were more favorable than it is now. The events of December 2011 show that its time is running out, if it hasn't already. The classic symptom of a pre-revolutionary situation is emerging: "Below they are no longer willing to live as before."

How About the Other Symptom of Such a Situation, the Crisis Above?

BY SUPPORTING THE INSTALLATION of Putin's Bonapartist regime, the Russian bourgeoisie of bankers and big company owners won big gains. It was in its interests that the State Duma (the Russian parliament), subservient to the President and transformed into a rubber stamp, adopted favorable

new laws on taxes, labor, real estate, etc. However, with the passage of time the Russian business community began to worry about a "Sword of Damocles" hanging over their heads, as in the case of Khodorkovski, ready to fall on any businessman who may have lost the favor of the central or local bureaucracy. Moreover, the *siloviki* had much too zealously transferred resources into the hands of the military-industrial group within the ruling class, which provoked the animosity of the bosses of civilian industries, above all in the energy sector. And Putin-Medvedev's foreign policy hardly corresponded to the needs of the stock-holders in "Gazprom" for example, who were obliged to foot the bill for increased military spending and for actions aimed at "restoring Russia's great power status" like the military interventions in Georgia.

The symptoms of the cleavage within the ruling class had to find an expression in the highest governmental circles. This is what happened in November 2011 when Finance Minister Kudrin stood up against the anti-social 2012-14 budget. The surprising fact that the "first liberal of the system" failed to show himself indifferent to the needs of public health and education, once again sacrifices for military expenses, in reality speaks to the indignation of part of the business community against the economic ascendency of the military-industrial complex.

But the main symptom of the crisis of the current administrative model is the inability of the Putin bureaucracy to successfully carry on elector fraud during the parliamentary elections. The techniques that worked in 2007 and 2008 flopped this time. Given this failure of the regime, some elements in the puppet political structures that had until recently been playing the role of a "domesticated opposition" have taken courage and begun to move. The attempts by some representatives of "Just Russia" to act independently show the decadence of the Putin system. Finally, even Medvedev, the alter ego of the "national leader," has declared that "the old political model is out of date" and promised some surface reforms. Thus, "above it is no longer possible to rule as before." Which, according to Tocqueville and Lenin, precedes revolution.

the Crisis to the Revolution?

REVOLUTIONS BREAK OUT when society feels the need for radical changes which cannot be brought about through reforms. These are possible to the extent that they correspond to the interests of the elite in power, or at least to its influential section. Thanks to reforms, ruling groups attempt to modernize the existing system and to hold on to power at the price of a few concessions. But the concession that Russian society is demanding of the Bonapartist regime — free and fair elections — is incompatible with the very existence of the regime. The little group around the "national leader" that has concentrated all power in its hands understands this very well, and that is why the path of reform is closed to it. The regime can be transformed only by the revolutionary path.

However, a pre-revolutionary situation is not yet the revolution. For the potential to be realized, it is necessary for several factors to be combined. The success of the revolution depends above all on the choice of the methods of struggle. Mass demonstrations are good for demonstrating and consolidating forces, but in themselves are not able to make the authorities capitulate. The government is able to tolerate such assemblies, even numerous, for a very long time. As historical experience shows, the most effective method is the political general strike. It means that the protesters are capable not just of talking but of acting, of imposing their pressure on the economy, the functioning of the state organs and, if necessary, of paralyzing them. The struggle for democracy could unite different social layers in an anti-governmental front. Thus, in October 1905, during the first Russian revolution, the political general strike involved not only factory laborers, but other workers and even the employees of the Senat and theater actors; such a massive uprising caused the Czarist regime to retreat.

No victorious democratic revolution of the 20th and 21st Century has succeeded without political

strikes. But during the recent events in Russia, this crucial word strike has not yet been pronounced, has not become a slogan. Doubtless, the initiators of these mostly spontaneous actions were afraid that such a method might be too radical and would not be supported by the masses; the lack of strike experience and the extreme weakness of the independent union movement are also factors. It may be the social conflict needs to worsen and the protest movement needs to develop more for the call for a strike to become realistic.

You can't discuss revolution without raising the question of violence. Government propaganda tries to identify these two notions, to persuade the population that revolution always means blood, death, and general ruin. But in reality mass democratic movements are hostile to violence and never use it first; on the contrary, it is most often unleashed by regimes that want to hold on to power at any price. Violence is the last recourse of these regimes, which have exhausted all other means of struggle against the social movement. That is why an important condition for the success of the revolution is a split within the forces of order where part of their personnel refuses to put down the protesters. If that eventuality seems real or extremely probable, the authorities will hesitate to have recourse to violence, which will increase the chance of a peaceful, soft victory for the revolution. This was one of the important causes of the success of the Russian revolutions in February 1917 and August 1991, as well as the "velvet" revolutions in East Europe and the "color" revolutions in the ex-USSR.

At the present hour, it is difficult to say what the attitude of the Russian police, the forces of the Ministry of Interior, etc. would be when ordered to suppress popular risings by force. On the one hand, according to a poll of the police officers union, only 7 percent of them consider the demonstrators as "extremists" and "enemy agents." On the other hand, nothing proves explicitly that in the critical situation the personnel of the forces of order would be ready to defend human rights and would choose the cause of the people.

The third important factor for the success of democratic revolutions is for the crisis within the ruling elite to worsen to the point of provoking a split within it. Thus, in 1917 the Czar was convinced to abdicate by influential Representatives and generals; and during the orange revolution in the Ukraine, the members of the Supreme Court and a number of local officials turned away from the regime. But in both these cases, the ruling elite was heterogeneous, its various representatives having certain autonomy. And that's what's missing in today's Russia: the agents of the vertical power structure selected by Putin are totally deprived of autonomy; also they know perfectly well that the dismantling of the system would automatically entail their fall from power. Only out in the provinces can one expect hesitations on the part of the local bureaucracy unhappy with the liquidation of federalism under Putin.

Therefore, despite the explicitly pre-revolutionary situation in Russia, the victory of the democratic revolution in the near future is not in the least assured. The death-throes of the Bonapartist regime could last a certain amount of time. But the revolution is ripening; it is inevitable; it is only a question of time; sooner or later it will break out.

And If This Revolution Succeeds?

OBJECTIVELY SPEAKING, the nature of this revolution is determined in advance: today it can only be political and democratic. Russian society is not ready to go further; distinct social groups that are conscious of their own interests have not yet defined themselves within it, which is quite understandable given long decades of totalitarian atomization, a serious economic recession and then Bonapartism. Society is still not structured, so there is no reason to expect miracles. The revolution will not solve socio-economic problems right away. But it can create the political and institutional conditions for their solution, more favorable to social struggles. Political freedom and

democracy are not a panacea — but without them no serious improvement of the social order in the interest of the great majority of working people is possible.

It is to that majority of workers that belong most of the participants in the protest movement that began in December, 2011. The Stalinists and some of the right-wing liberals claim, erroneously, that a "bourgeois mob" was in the streets of Moscow. According to a poll, 75 percent of the participants in the big demonstration of December 24 were salaried workers in non-managerial positions; 68 percent were low and medium-low income. On the other hand, their level of education was rather high: 83 percent had the equivalent of Bachelors or Masters degrees. Thus, one of the main forces in the struggle for democracy is this 21st Century proletariat — skilled, educated, but deprived of a decent share of the public wealth. The same social layer is driving the social movements in Europe.

As for their political opinions, a plurality (38 percent) of the demonstrators called themselves democrats, 31% sympathized with the liberals. As a general rule, the leaders reflect the movement. They are democrats in the broad sense of the term who have no clear social program or penchant for liberal positions. Despite what is proclaimed by official propagandists, a Communist backlash does not represent a real threat in Russia after the overthrow of Bonapartism. It is no accident that the Communist Party separated itself from the mass protests, calling them "the orange plague" (an allusion to the Ukrainian revolution): the Party has always been a hanger-on of the Putin regime, whose fall would weaken, rather than strengthen, it. Many of the people who voted for the Communists in the 2011 parliamentary elections for lack of a real alternative or to protest against the stranglehold of United Russia would certainly prefer to vote for other political forces in free elections. One quarter of the votes is the maximum number achieved by this political mutation, which has chosen Stalin as its idol. The radical clone of the CP, the Left Front, which combines appeals to return to the USSR with political exoticism: the ideas of Kadhafi.

The nationalist threat is much more serious. The Putin decade has witnessed a large growth of nationalist ideas of the type that turn easily into Nazism. And the regime is responsible for much of this, since it has no ideology other than statism tinged with nationalism. The structural immaturity of society, the lack of freedom in social life and the lack of developed political culture also favor the propagation of such crude ideological substitutes. This has resulted in the expansion of xenophobia, inseparable from nationalism, ethnic pogroms against migrants from the Caucasus (Kondopoga 2006), Nazi terror in the streets, thuggish violence of nationalist football hooligans around Manege Square in the center of Moscow (2010), etc. The mass protests against electoral fraud called forth feverish activity among the nationalists, who tried to attach themselves to the democratic movement so as to ride on the rising wave. Their main goal is to be recognized as a political force by public opinion. But behind the "democratic nationalists" hide genuine Nazis. Indeed, the very phrase "democratic nationalism" is an empty notion: the claim of superiority of "true Russian nationality" over other ethnic groups (made by the nationalists and now by Putin) is profoundly incompatible with the principles of democracy.

This is why the membership on the organizing committee of the protest demonstrations of individuals like Thor (Kralin) — the apologist for the assassins of Markelov and Baburova[3] — who is linked with Nazi underground structures — is a serious mistake on the part of the leaders of the democratic movement. The participation in street actions of the far right with their flags and their spokesmen on the platform can have serious consequences. Not only will those forces be de-marginalized, the authorities will take advantage of it. In the hope of attracting new protesters from the camp of the far right, the movement’s organizers are running the risk of discrediting their cause and shrinking its base. Even more worrisome is the appearance of a figure like the "nationalist democrat" Navalny, who would like to imitate the career of Jean-Marie LePen. This organizer of "Russian marches" and activist in the "Union of minority shareholders" openly aims at legitimizing nationalism. The example of Germany in the 20s and 30s shows where a movement of "Minority

shareholders" with an anti-corruption discourse can lead.

However, it is highly improbable that the victory of the democratic revolution will reinforce the nationalists. Their target audience is already divided between the nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party (of the notorious Jirinovsky) and the CP, which leaves little ground for new nationalists. According to the polls, 75 percent of the Russian population does not feel hostility towards other ethnic groups. Consciously or not, the majority of people in Russia realize that the acceleration of xenophobia is disastrous for their multi-ethnic country. And the rank-and-file activists of the protest movement showed their strong rejection of nationalism by booing the far-right speakers at the big Moscow demonstrations. Only 2 percent of the December 24 demonstrators identified with a party of Russian nationalists. Thus, without denying the danger of nationalism, one is forced to conclude that the accepted wisdom hammered home by the media ("If Putin is kicked out, the Nazis will get in") is nothing but a piece of propaganda.

Another issue constantly brought up by the propagandistic media is the return of the oligarchs. They claim that the fall of the regime would lead to a pure and simple return to the days of Yeltsin, with period figures like Kassianov, Nemtsov, etc. coming back to power. In reality, nothing is less likely. Putinism is a natural result of Eltsinism, and its collapse would take away with it the whole political construction that it was based on. The "super-presidential" Constitution of 1993 was the basis of today’s Bonapartism. There is little doubt that radical democratization would bend back the balance of powers in favor of the parliament. And even if Russia doesn’t become a parliamentary republic, in one manner or another, the people will have more influence on the formation of the government, so they will be able to block the road of discredited figures like Kassianov and of open spokesmen for the interests of big business like Prokhorov.

The objective task of the democratic revolution in Russia consists in liberating civil society from the authoritarian and bureaucratic yoke, in creating a political space where all social forces can express their interests. In the long term, this will permit the void on the left wing of the political milieu in Russia to be filled. The absence of an organized left movement (outside of tiny Trotskyist and anarchist groups) cannot continue for a long time, and the different Stalinists and phony social democrats of "Just Russia" party, parading as Leftists are not up to filling the bill. Today already, 17 percent of the protesters identify with the non-Communist Left. Their position is not yet represented politically. But sooner or later, the consolidation of the democratic left forces that are anti-totalitarian, internationalist, and defensive of human rights and the rights of the workers must begin.

Although it may upset the prudent Communist Zuganov, Russia has not "used up her supply of revolutions." History knows no limits to this supply: revolutions continue as long as their tasks have not been accomplished. For example, in France it took four revolutions over 80 years to establish a democratic system. The ruling group may well stage-manage demonstrations by street-sweepers under the slogan "Fuck the Revolution!" — such feeble ploys only indicate the febrile agitation that precedes death, the senile fear of the ineluctable end. "The laws of history are more powerful than the maneuvers of a bureaucratic apparatus."

Footnotes

1. The terms Thermidor and Bonapartism were born in France in XVIII-XIX centuries and later used by scholars and political thinkers to analyze general patterns of revolutionary and post-revolutionary developments in various countries. Thermidor means a victory of social and political forces that are hostile to the further progress of revolution and establish their own rule over society in the interests of the new elites. Bonapartism means a system in which the state bureaucracy, usually subordinated

to one man at the top, obtains a high degree of independence from society, concentrates all power in its hands and rule by authoritarian methods; while serving social interests of economically dominating classes, it suppresses them, as well as other social groups politically. (Classical analysis of this phenomenon in France under Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, or Napoleon III [1851-1870], is presented in works of Karl Marx.)

2. In 2005 various in-kind social benefits for pensioners, the disabled and some other groups were transformed in Russia into cash payments. Since they did not really compensate the services taken away, it provoked a series of protests, mostly from pensioners.

3. The anti-fascist lawyer and the young journalist killed by Russian Nazis.