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Russia

A balance sheet of the December movement

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On the occasion of the elections to the State Duma on December 4, thanks to Internet and with information provided by thousands of voluntary observers, Russian society has been able to take the measure of the massive vote-rigging to the advantage of the party led by Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev, United Russia. The protest meeting organized on December 5 was the starting point for a movement of protest against the present political system, a movement which is still accelerating. On December 10, massive mobilizations “For honest elections” organized by opposition groups coming from different political tendencies took place in Moscow and in almost all the big cities of Russia.

According to various estimates, there were between 40,000 and 60,000 people in Balotnaya Square in Moscow. In St. Petersburg there were nearly 10,000 demonstrators, and in some regions (Ekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Rostov and others), between 3,000 and 5,000. The spontaneous character of the mobilizations constitutes one of the elements which most differentiates these events from, for example, the “Orange revolution” of 2004 in Ukraine. The opposition was absolutely not ready for a sudden politicization of society, nor did it expect people to take to the streets. The movement did not have a clearly defined leadership and the majority of the participants in the meeting on December 10 did not indicate support for one or the other of the known political personalities who were occupying the stage. Two weeks later, on December 24, a new meeting brought together more than 100,000 people in Moscow. That makes it the most massive mobilization in the entire history of post-Soviet Russia.

The political forces

The parties represented in Parliament, which form an integral part of the system of “guided democracy” and which won seats in the new Duma, - the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), the centre-left party Fair Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) of Vladimir Zhirinovksy, a populist formation surfing on a wave of nationalism) - expressed their disagreement with the result of the elections but accepted it de facto. They did not support the demands for the annulment of the December 4 elections and the organization of a new poll, just as they refused to support the incipient movement. Although representatives of the CPRF and Fair Russia spoke at the meetings on December 10, the vast majority does not regard these parties as forces capable of leading the movement. So there were about 1,000 people at the meeting organized by the CPRF on December 18.

It is in fact the political forces which have been excluded for many years from the Putin system and which can count on their experience of public activity and of organizing street demonstrations that are playing a major political role in the movement: the liberals (especially the “Solidarnost” movement of Boris Nemtsov), the far Right (“Russian” movements, “against illegal immigration”, etc.) and the far Left (Left Front, Russian Socialist Movement (RSD), anarchists). Moreover, citizens’ organizations such as the movement of independent observers, defenders of human rights and the “white ribbon” movement “are also very active.

Although for the moment the liberals occupy centre stage, both the far Right and the far Left are trying to affirm their presence, take part in the organizing committee and propose speakers. The “battle for the stage” is accompanied by conflicts. So the Right whistles and shouts during the interventions of the liberals and the Left, and the Left does the same during the interventions of the Right.

The leaders

Among the leaders who have made their name known and won popularity in the framework of the mobilizations we find Alexeĭ Navalnyi, a young activist coming from civil society and from the struggle against corruption, who is not a member of any party. He advocates a synthesis between the “moderate” liberals and nationalists, maintaining openly many contacts with the far Right, which he regards as “an important part of the movement which is representative of the population”. We also find the liberal leaders Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov, who began their careers in the 1990s in the “Yeltsin camp”. They have the support of the liberal media but their past largely discredits them in the eyes of the majority of the participants. We must also mention Sergueĭ Udaltsov, leader of the Left Front, a young social and political activist with a post-Stalinist past. It seems that the authorities regard Udaltsov as the most dangerous of the leaders of the movement. He was taken into custody and has been held by the police for nearly a month by means of charges that have been fabricated, linking him to petty crime. His release was one of the demands of the meetings on December 10 and 24. His video intervention on December 24 received massive support. Ilya Ponomarev, a member of Parliament for Fair Russia who is close to the Left Front also plays a very active role. In addition, among the participants in the meetings are figures known as “apolitical” - journalists, writers and actors holding mainly liberal views - who enjoy the greatest popularity.

The masses

We can safely say that the absolute majority of the participants in the mobilizations do not support any political force. On December 10 and 24, many people present did not listen to the speakers on the stage but showed great interest in the political exchanges and discussions inside the meeting. According to interesting sociological data collected by the Levada centre, at the meeting on December 24 in Moscow 60 per cent of the participants were men, 62 per cent had higher education qualifications, 31 per cent were between 25 and 39 years old, nearly 25 per cent were less than 25 and 23 per cent were between 40 and 55. The majority of people described themselves as “specialists” (46 per cent) or “students” (12 per cent). In reply to the question concerning political convictions, the majority answered “democratic” (31 per cent), “social-democrat” (10 per cent) or communist/left (13 per cent). We can also affirm that many representatives of the “middle-class”, employees in the public sector and pensioners were present at the meetings.

The tactics of the Left

From the start, the Left – the Left Front, the RSD, anarchists and others – has played a big role in the course of events. In Saint-Petersburg members of the RSD spoke during the meetings and were part of the organizing committee. In Moscow a representative of the RSD would have spoken on December 24, but finally he did not because of manoeuvres by the liberals. In several regions (Irkutsk, Perm, Novosibirsk, Kaluga, Yaroslavl) the RSD was among the organizers and our representatives spoke during the meetings.

From the beginning, we in the RSD spoke in favour of the closest possible cooperation between all the representatives of the radical Left during the mobilizations, for a common tactic, for the formation of what we describe as a “left pole” during the mass meetings.

Since December 5 we have taken an active part in the permanent meetings of the left groups, where we discuss the situation and the coordination of our actions. The Left Front, the anarchists, the “Communists of Russia” (a faction of the CPRF), the Communist Workers’ Party and others also take part in them.

The principal common orientation consists of creating alternative spaces within the meetings and drawing passers-by into discussion. On the 24th, in Moscow, the RSD had a stand where it laid out its literature and it organized a workshop for making placards in which anyone who wanted to could take part. A "live microphone" was put at the disposal of everyone. There was also a thematic stand against the privatization of education in which the teachers' union and groups of students took part. The anarchists had their own "open microphone".

The future

It is obvious that after the 24th we must expect a temporary drop in activity, due to winter and the end of year festivities. However, everyone understands that the presidential elections on March 4 will be decisive and that they are close. Putin will try to stay in power by winning in the first round, to do which he must get 50 per cent of the votes. With his popularity in freefall, it seems obvious that this is only possible through massive vote-rigging. The next big gathering is planned for February 1, the date of the launching of the presidential campaign.

We intend to continue the work of strengthening of the RSD (which can count on a stream of new members) as well as the negotiations for the formation of a united front of the left organizations, in particular with the Left Front and others. Our angles of attack for the presidential elections are: not one vote for Putin, for popular control over the elections, for a social programme (against privatizations and austerity measures, control over big corporations and natural resources), for the development of massive mobilizations as the principal condition for a change of system.