

# Are Ordinary Russians Waking Up?

The reasons behind the protest actions in Russia in January 2021, the social forces involved, and the possible consequences

Tuesday 2 February 2021, by [BUZGALIN Aleksandr](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2021).

**Mass protests occurred in most regions of Russia on 23 and 31 January 2021. The total number of protestors throughout the country on 23 January was put by the authorities at fewer than 10,000, but by the opposition much more. The largest of the demonstrations was, as usual, in Moscow, where according to the official count 4000 people came onto the streets, while unofficial figures put much bigger number. Similar numbers took part in the protests on 31 January, but this time the clashes were much more fierce, and according to various accounts, between 2000 and 4000 people were detained...**

Why, after a long period of quiescence (the last mass protest demonstrations occurred two years ago in connection with the raising of the pension age to 65 years) have such relatively large actions broken out?

In formal terms, the demonstrations were sparked by the arrest of Aleksey Navalny, who since returning to Russia has taken on something like the aura of a martyr. But this was not the real cause. Navalny, who began as a nationalist, calling for restrictions on immigration and so forth, and who then reformatted himself as a neoliberal fighter against corruption, is in himself a figure of little interest. He has been transformed into a symbol of right-wing opposition by the people who have financed him, who have provided him with information available only to the security services, and so forth.

Not least important here is the fact that behind Navalny stands a section of the Russian establishment, including both owners of capital with an orientation toward finance and brokerage activities, and marginalised pro-globalist elements of the state bureaucracy. Another force backing Navalny has been the pro-liberal establishment of the West.

This behind-the-scenes manoeuvring, however, has been nowhere near capable of bringing people of many different stripes onto the streets. The key reason for this lies elsewhere: for decades now, **the majority of Russian citizens have been sunk in a morass of stagnation**. Each year since the crisis of 2008–2009, Russia's economy has either grown by one or two per cent, or shrunk by a similar amount. The incomes of the majority of citizens have not been growing. The median wage in Russia is about 34,000 rubles (less than 400 euros at the official exchange rate, and a little over 500 at purchasing price parity), while about 20 million people have incomes below the subsistence minimum (12,000 rubles or 135 euros per month). Not long ago, the pension age was raised by five years. The Labour Code effectively outlaws strikes...

The point, however, is not only that the majority of Russians find themselves in a dismal economic situation. **People have grown tired of the fact that they have been reduced to the role of a passive, disempowered mass, considered incapable as a matter of principle of creative social action**. These days the purpose of life, for almost all strata of Russian society, is restricted to

the consuming of prestige brands (in the case of the elites), or of shoddy knock-offs (in that of the masses). This is what has happened to us in practice, but it is something we implicitly reject.

Amid this consumerist decay, is there somewhere a place for the development of individuality and culture? Corporate capital and a semi-feudal bureaucracy smother anything of the sort, turning human beings into obedient puppets. This is suicidal for individual people and as a result, ruinous for society.

Just a few years back a revived sense of national pride, called forth by a relatively independent foreign policy course, provided a significant basis of support for a paternalist leadership. But this credit is now being exhausted. From the government, the majority want solutions to the country's key problems. They want a better quality of life for the majority, technological and economic development, and social justice. People have grown tired of being rabble, or at most, of existing merely to exercise their purchasing power. Even if they are only half-conscious of it, they want to be able to take control of their social and political lives

In a fully realised sense, this latter aspiration—to become the subjects of their being—is characteristic only of a minority. Nevertheless, it is something the majority implicitly strive toward.

### **To what purpose?**

In various regions of Russia, the protest actions have been very different. In some of the largest megacities, primarily in Moscow, the participants have consisted mainly of young people. Elsewhere considerable numbers of older people have taken part, including even supporters of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, whose leaders have not given their official support to the demonstrations. The truth is that there are now far more oppositional-minded citizens in Russia than those who emerged onto the streets and squares. The majority, however, have remained silent. Why?

Beyond question, the fear of arrest has played a role (according to unofficial figures, more than 2000 people were detained after the 23 January actions). But although this has been important, it is not the main factor.

The main reason is that **the liberal opposition, that has striven to become the leader of the protests, lacks the support of the majority of the population.** Let me stress: I am not talking here about support for human and civil rights, but support for neoliberal politicians.

The overwhelming majority of citizens of our country recall how in 1993 the pseudo-liberal Boris Yeltsin (Russia's president throughout most of the 1990s) ordered tanks to open fire on the country's first democratically elected parliament. They recall how demonstrations were dispersed with clubs, and how thousands of people seeking to defend the Supreme Soviet were then killed, wounded or repressed. We remember how the liberal "reforms" of that time brought not just stagnation, as at present, but catastrophe—the collapse of production by half, and of incomes by a third.

Meanwhile, the practical realities of the US (above all, the mass protests against racism and oppression, and the ruthless way in which they are broken up) and of Western Europe (the struggle of the "yellow vests", and the water cannon, gas and clubs on the streets of Paris) show that the "democracy for the few" (Michael Parenti) that characterises the neoliberal model of capitalism is a system of manipulation. Within this system, the majority of the population are puppets—in the first order of capital, and in the second, of the forces of state coercion. The majority of our citizens have no wish to exchange the Russian model, dominated by the security forces and capital, for the same thing in another guise. In Russia people sum up such choices with the remark, "Radish or horse-radish, neither is any sweeter."

Russians are not going to take to the streets in support of liberal leaders. Most of those who joined in the actions did so in order to say “No!”. There were few positive slogans (the portraits of Navalny carried by the initiators of the protests in Moscow and a few other cities should not be viewed in this way), and those slogans were extremely abstract...

### **So who were the protestors?**

Neither the author of these words, nor any other expert known to him, has any proper statistics on the social composition of the people who took part in the actions. Nevertheless, there are observations, testimonies and the results of analysis. The participants were extremely diverse, but most were among the relatively well-off residents of Moscow (where incomes are three times the Russian average) and of a few other big cities. The protestors were also mostly young people, including students, in some cases aged only 15 or 16. In the regions, as noted earlier, the protests were far smaller, and the young people were fewer.

Some of the participants, especially among the younger ones, undoubtedly took part because they considered it “cool” (you could post a photo of yourself next to a cop, or get in the news...). The mass coverage given to the actions by media networks, with reports coming both from within the country and from outside, also played a role. Within Russia and in the West, vast resources were expended on promoting the newly reappeared “liberal leader”.

Some people turned out to the protests because they genuinely espoused liberal values—individualism, private property, the market, formal freedoms—and were convinced that if these illusory freedoms came to pass, they personally would be successful, would be in demand, etc., etc. Such illusions are typical of students in Moscow and other large Russian cities, and this is no accident. The young people concerned receive an education based on neoliberal dogmas, run amuck in neoliberal cyberspace, and intentionally or not profess neoliberal ideology, often without being conscious of it. These young people actually do have certain prospects, and they are more likely to become successful free-lancers as part of a neoliberal milieu than in today’s semi-feudal Russia. At the same time, these prospects are largely a phantom apparition. Even the young people who achieve career success will not acquire genuine freedom, but only the illusion of it; they will not become individuals, but slaves. They will not be the slaves of bureaucrats, but of corporations. Indeed, they are already subject to ideological and cultural manipulation—not so much by the West as by corporate capital and the “total market”, that together impose on them the standards of a society of simulative consumption.

It is true that **there were also people at the protests who came to wage a fight for freedom**, even if this was of the bourgeois variety, and only freedom from authoritarianism, from the feudal arbitrariness of corrupt bureaucrats... These “freedom fighters” took part in the hope that the protests would open the way for honest elections, for real freedom of speech, for the chance to wage an open political struggle for a bright future. It was with these hopes that both sincere liberals, and considerable numbers of the leftists who were present came out onto the streets.

The majority, however—and I repeat this like a refrain—took part because they felt that continuing to live as they **had been doing was impossible**. Here, however, the question arises: if not as in the past, then what?

### **Illusory hopes**

The problem is that if **these** protests are successful, under **these** (neoliberal) leaders, then the people who organised the actions will construct a system that in its political respects will be no less harsh, that economically will be no more successful (and probably less so), and that in social terms

will be even more unjust.

Also illusory are the hopes nurtured by members of the left that they can “intercept” the protests, and shift them in the direction of struggling not just for formal freedoms, but also for social liberation, social justice and socialism. In the **given concrete situation and at the present moment**, that is not going to happen. At present, we on the left are weak; the masses on the streets are not ours. The Leninist theory that speaks of beginning with the struggle for bourgeois-democratic liberties, and of proceeding from there to waging a fight for socialism, is not going to work in this case; we face a different type of capitalism and a different relationship of social forces, even if the Russian Federation of the early twenty-first century seems outwardly to be extremely reminiscent of the Russian Empire in the early 1900s.

**Tomorrow, however, the situation may well be different.** The changes may come about very quickly. I noted the reason at the outset: for more than a decade, the Russian economic and political system has ceased to develop. Most of the population is barely surviving. We have been stripped of the possibility of being the creators of our own lives; we are unable to lead a human existence, rather than being turned into cattle who instead of enjoying fresh grass are fed on dry straw. We need to prepare ourselves for a transformation, to set to work wherever we find people who are ready for constructive joint action—in the trade unions, in organisations of teachers and medical staff, in social movements. This is what we, the members of the Russian left, are seeking to do.

Unfortunately, not all of us. There are some of us whose priority is engaging in electoral intrigues. But that is a topic for different article.

What I have written here may well be out of date within a few days, and I will be pleased if this is the case. However, I am afraid it will not happen; last summer I wrote in an almost identical vein about the protests in Belarus. The picture is repeating itself. The post-Soviet expanse is seeing the subtle ripening of a profound crisis. But so far, the explosion has not occurred.

---

**Aleksandr Buzgalin** is associated with the Russia Social Forum

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.