

Russia: « A Day of Anger »

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There have been an increasing number of demonstrations in various cities in Russia since the beginning of this year. People are rising up to protest against the brutal increase in the cost of living, income and other tax as well as the drop in salaries. Unemployment is also affecting an increasing number of people. The shock wave struck in Kalinigrad, where over ten thousand people took to the streets on January 30th to demonstrate and demand a reduction in the road tax that had been increased by 25% by the regional authorities, as well as to demand an economic renewal policy for the region and an end to the “dictatorship of the ruling party” (United Russia) and the resignation of the regional Governor, Guergui Boos. As economic difficulties increase in most regions, with water rates increasing, the cost of gas and electricity becoming prohibitive for most people, the demonstrations of several thousand people have taken place in many different cities (Angarsk, Irkutsk, Arkhangelsk, etc.). They have been mainly aimed at local and regional authorities, nepotism and corruption, as well as the “vertical powerhouse” introduced by Vladimir Putin, and aimed at making local power even more inaccessible to the population at large. The feeling of discontent with laws and behaviour of civil servants and the political elite who show no respect for people has progressively been aimed at the Prime Minister ex-President Putin.

So when the opposition coalition in Kaliningrad announced a mass meeting planned for March 20th, several networks and social movements relayed the slogan to hold other actions all over Russia in solidarity with them.

Contrary to what most of the media stated, there was no liberal right-wing “Solidarnost” movement behind the “Call of the 20th of March” for “A day of anger”, but networks that are more or less well-known, such as the Russian Drivers’ Federation, the Movement of Active Citizens of Russia (TIGR) or the Union of Co-ordinating Soviets of Russia (SKS). Whatever the case, the call to action led to huge mobilisation: all sorts of demonstrations took place on March 20th in almost 50 different cities. And, most importantly, they were jointly organised by broad local coalitions that brought together dozens of different associations, local social movements and the opposition political parties.

Of course the figures for the demonstrations may appear to be low: about 4000 people in Kalinigrad, 3000 in Irkutsk, 2000 in Vladivostok, 1500 in Saint Petersburg, 1000 in Ijevsk and around 500 in many other cities (Astrakhan, Moscow, Penza, Tiumen, etc.). But the geographical scope of the mobilisation of citizens proves that grass-roots citizens’ movements are joining together and trying to make their voices heard at federal level. And the unity in the slogans “Citizens should have control” “No to the political monopoly of United Russia” “Let’s take back control of our city” show that a shared political culture is growing. Even if the protests are aimed primarily against local authorities (starting with regional governors), as well as at Putin, in his capacity as federal head. “Putin resign!” was written on most of the banners and placards.

Massive arrests in Moscow

In the capital, the organising committee of the “Day of Anger” (neighbourhood committees, movements for the defence of the Khimki forest, joint investors who had been led up the garden path, inhabitants of homes, Left Front, “Soldiarnost” and others) all decided to ignore the ban on demonstrating in the city centre, and on Saturday at 3pm almost 500 people turned up to

demonstrate at Pushkin Square, prepared to defend their right to demonstrate. (The main slogan in Moscow was "Loujkov, Mayor if Moscow, out!"). The Square was taken over by the armed police and people were arrested very quickly, once the first speeches started. The demonstrators did hold out for almost an hour, playing cat and mouse with the police and they even managed to demonstrate on some of the other large streets. The outcome was however that at least 70 people were arrested, some of them in brutal manner. The Constitution, that one neighbourhood committee activist was waving in the air did not help her: she was carried away just like the others.

Mandarine demonstration in Kaliningrad

In Kaliningrad, the westernmost city in Russia, where the wave of mobilisation started, the demonstration had been forbidden by the local authorities. This created a lot of waves and tension in the local opposition coalition. Anonymous calls to meet in the Central Square (where an agricultural fair was scheduled to be held) with mandarines (the symbol of the Governor, G. Boos) led to people turning up as if by magic on the 20th of March. And as if "by pure coincidence" almost 4000 people showed up at the designate time, between 1 and 2 pm, waving mandarines. The police did not intervene - after all, what action could they take against mandarines? And the demonstrators dispersed, pleased to have made fun of the authorities.

Vladivostok: The opposition united against « United Russia »

In Vladivostok (in the Far East), where the first demonstrations of the Dan-y of Anger took place, over 2000 people congregated in the Central Square, that they managed to occupy after a long struggle in negotiations with a broad coalition that included the Communist Party, the Active Citizens Movement (TIGR) Labloko, the Drivers' Association as well as a local political movement "Freedom and Local People's Power". The anger, similar to the other demonstrations, could be read on the placards waved by the demonstrators. "Down with arbitrary power!" "Do away with corrupt civil services!" "Russia is a vast country: no wonder we are not heard!" At the end of the demonstration, the organisers passed on the symbolic flame to the other towns: "Novosibirsk, Saint Petersburg, Kaliningrad, Yes! Yes! Yes! Power, No! No! No!"

Irkutsk: the preservation of the Baikal

The main theme of the demonstration in Irkutsk was to preserve the Baikal area and the local population's right to self-determination concerning the methods for developing the region. This mobilisation had been spearheaded by groups of local ecologists for several months, mobilising and uniting opposition forces against to reopening of a paper manufacturing plant that releases its effluent into Lake Baikal. This included the Drivers' movement and the local inhabitants in favour of self-management of "Narodny Kontrol". Over three thousand people turned out to demonstrate, essentially against Vladimir Putin, who initiated and defends the reopening of the plant. But many other issues were also raised, particularly those of low pensions and the dilapidation of housing conditions.

It was also in Irkutsk that there were the greatest fears of an attempt by the liberal right to recuperate the citizen's mobilisation. Boris Nemtsov, leader of the "Solidarnost" movement (and ex-minister under Boris Eltsin in the 1990s) had come on a special trip to speak during the demonstration.

Saint Petersburg: forum of the local social fora

The Communist Party had decided to hold a separate demonstration in Saint Petersburg (in which around 400 people took part). The demonstration organised by the social movements included 33

groups, committees, networks, including a strong movement against the construction of the “Gazprom” building, and brought out over 1500 inhabitants. The good-natured atmosphere and camaraderie during the demonstration led to a unanimous decision to strengthen the co-ordination between movements and create a co-ordination centre for social movements and local inhabitants.

Slogans were similar to those in the other cities, against the monopoly of the “political power of the ruling party”, against the confiscation of power by bureaucrats, for a city that belongs to the citizens, and calling for the resignation of the regional governor, Valentia Matvienko.

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P.S.

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