

**“A Good Restaurant is No Longer Enough: Political Demand and Moscow’s Middle Class  
Opposition”<sup>1</sup>**

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On December 5, 2011, something that had been virtually unthinkable just a few weeks earlier occurred in Moscow. Thousands of what had long been considered a politically apathetic population, lulled into passivity by the stability, prosperity and gentle repression of the Putin regime, took to the streets to express their outrage at the apparently stolen the Duma elections. It was an insult added to the injury that was Putin’s announcement in September that he and Medvedev would switch offices—a move that became known as the *rokirovka*, after the Russian term for castling in chess. Approximately 5,000 people attended the impromptu rally at Chisty Prudy on December 5. In the protests in leading up to the March 2012 presidential elections, the numbers kept growing: between 25,000 (according to the police) and 85,000 (according to the organizers of the protest) people flocked to Bolotnaya Ploshchad’ on December 10; an estimated 80,000 appeared on Prospekt Sakharov on December 24; over 100,000 congregated at Bolotnaya Ploshchad’ on February 4.<sup>2</sup> Each of these protests was, successively, the largest demonstration Russia had seen since the early 1990s, shocking the Kremlin and the international community, but also the protest organizers and the protest participants.

Opposition<sup>3</sup> activists had regularly organized rallies for years, but in the face of widespread political apathy, generally negative opinions about opposition leaders, and harassment from the authorities, they have been poorly attended. What made the 2011-2012 electoral cycle protests different? The large crowds the protests drew were in part the result of the emergence of a new set of organizers—a group of young, media-savvy, well-connected hipsters. These young people, themselves becoming actively involved in public political life for the first time, were able to employ social networking, their personal reputations and professional networks to organize and publicize the rallies. Out of necessity, they worked with established opposition figures, first from the liberal-democratic political group

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<sup>1</sup> This version: April 13, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates of protest attendance vary widely, as the organizers seem to have overstated attendance (120,000 at Prospekt Sakharova) and the police have drastically understated (28,000). The Moscow Times estimated that the December 10 rally at Bolotnaya Ploshchad attracted between 30,000 and 60,000, and the December 24 event at Prospekt Sakharova, 80,000, based on observation. RIA Novosti (<http://ria.ru/infografika/20111223/524373513.html>) estimated approximately 55,000 people attended on December 24 based on the area of the protest and crowd density, though this figuring does not account for dynamics of early departures and late arrivals. The February 4 rally had an estimated attendance of 38,000 (police estimates) to 160,000 (protest organizers’ estimates). RIA Novosti (<http://ria.ru/infografika/20120203/555809005.html>) figured that at maximum crowd density, Bolotnaya can hold about 100,000 people.

<sup>3</sup> Russia’s political system has been described as consisting of the dominant party (United Russia), the in-system opposition (opposition parties that cooperate with the regime and hold seats in the Duma), and unofficial opposition (smaller parties that hold no Duma seats, some of which are not officially registered as political parties). For the purposes of this paper, opposition refers to the unofficial opposition.

Solidarity (Solidarnost'), then from the Left Front, to organize the rallies; most importantly, the opposition groups were experienced in working with the city administration to obtain permissions for the rallies. By the December 10 protest, an unlikely coalition had formed, later to be formalized in the establishment of the organizational committee, For Fair Elections, which would coordinate the protests on December 24 and February 4. It consisted of hard-leftists from the Left Front, liberal democrats from Solidarity and Union of Right Forces, and members of the media industry, including the initial group of young hipsters, who had no interest in the political platforms of the opposition groups with which they had partnered.

The first part of this paper will trace the formation of this coalition by looking closely at the organization of the December 5 and December 10 rallies. Using information drawn from interviews with key actors as well as published accounts of their actions, this part will examine how new political actors began to work with established opposition leaders, whose politics they did not support and who had not been successful at attracting an audience to their rallies. It will highlight systemic factors that could have led to the cooperation of the liberal and left groups. It will conclude with a brief summary of the establishment of the For Fair Elections in mid-December.

The second part of this paper will use statistical data gathered at the December 24 and February 4 demonstrations to establish that the participants of the protest were members of the professional urban middle class. In an attempt to elucidate the motivations for thousands of formerly apolitical people attended rallies held by oppositionists they did not support, this section will assess the political efficacy and significance of the Russia's increasingly isolated middle class.

## **Part I: Early Adopters**

### **The *Rokirovka***

The evolution of the protest organizing committee, from a well-connected group of friends outraged at the election results to a formal coalition that included virtually every major figure in opposition politics, is fundamental to the future of the opposition. The most significant protests of early December were not organized by the familiar faces of Russian activism, but by a small, close-knit network of culturally elite hipsters, who employed personal reputation and social networks to attract a new and far larger audience to these protests.

Of an informal group of approximately ten organizers, most worked in the culture industry, as journalists or political commentators at non-state news organization like Rain TV (Dozhd') or Slon.ru, or as editors of leading magazines, like *Afisha* and *Bolsnoi Gorod*. Most were in their early to mid-twenties. They were firmly upper-middle class, and hailed from the Moscow media intelligentsia. Their relationships were thus longstanding and intimate, with some of the organizers having met during university or through small professional networks. Other relationships were familial, some the result of marriages and romantic relationships within Moscow's insular liberal media circle. Though they held common political views and did not support Putin, most had not been politically active, before the December 2011 protests; though some journalists had written political commentary, they generally respected journalistic ethics. What they began in a private, informal conversation on Facebook grew to a

broad and complex coalition, encompassing virtually all major—and several newly minted—political activists from across the political spectrum.

On September 24, Putin announced that he would run for a third presidential term, with Medvedev to be his prime minister. The switch, or *rokirovka* as it became known, was not particularly shocking or even disagreeable to Russians who support Putin, both enthusiastically and passively: 31% of people approved of the switch, but, significantly, 41% reported having no special feelings about it, indicating passive support, which might be easily lost.<sup>4</sup> Though the *rokirovka* itself might not have been surprising, the tone of the announcement, which effectively conferred the title of president upon Putin months before the election, gave rise to shockwaves of discontent, which were particularly strong in Moscow, where Putin was not popular. On social networking sites, young people expressed resentment that the decision for Putin to return to the presidency had been made in secret, without even the semblance of democratic debate, and without consulting them.<sup>5</sup> It particularly offended a group of technologically savvy and professionally successful young Muscovites, who had identified with Medvedev and his modernization program, and had hopes for his reelection, specifically the staffs of the online TV channel Rain TV (Dozhd') and the news site Slon.ru, which would later cover the opposition movement in depth, and whose owners are rumored to be close friends of Medvedev.<sup>6</sup> A report from the Center for Strategic Research in Moscow suggests that the *rokirovka* had strong negative effects on support for Putin, Medvedev and United Russia, because Putin and Medvedev's respective brands appeal to increasingly divergent poles of social influence.<sup>7</sup> Medvedev's brand, which emphasized modernization, rule of law and comparatively liberal values, collapsed when the announcement of the *rokirovka* him revealed to be fully dependent on Putin. His former supporters could not be expected to shift their support to Putin, as Putin's brand is fundamentally different and unappealing to the adherents of the modernization brand.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the *rokirovka* precipitated the creation of a large group who supported neither Putin nor Medvedev; two months after the announcement, 26% of people wanted both figures in the tandem replaced.<sup>9</sup>

The negative attention to the March presidential election led to increased scrutiny of the December 4 Duma election. Supported by opposition political groups, activist Alexey Navalny called for citizens to vote for any party other than United Russia, which he described as 'the party of crooks and thieves,' rather than boycotting the election. In this atmosphere, people from diverse backgrounds organized to work as election observers, and many people voted for the first time.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, they witnessed numerous violations, from carousel voting to the stuffing of ballot boxes, all of which well

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<sup>4</sup> Press-vypuski: Vladimir Putin i ego tretii srok, Levada-Tsentr, 7 October 2011, 30 April 2012  
<<http://www.levada.ru/07-10-2011/vladimir-putin-i-ego-tretii-srok>>

<sup>5</sup> Adam Federman, "Protests Sweep Russia as Blogger Alexey Navalny Is Arrested," The Nation, 8 December 2011, 25 April 2012, <<http://www.thenation.com/article/165060/protests-sweep-russia-blogger-alexey-navalny-arrested>>

<sup>6</sup> Michael Idov, "The New Decembrists," New York Magazine, 22 January 2012, 15 April 2012  
<<http://nymag.com/news/features/russian-revolutionaries-2012-1/>>

<sup>7</sup> Sergei Belanovsky, Mikhail Dmitriev, Svetlana Misikhina and Tatyana Omelchuk, Socio-Economic Change and Political Transformation in Russia, Center for Strategic Research and Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Moscow, 7 November 2011.

<[http://csis.org/files/attachments/111107\\_CSR\\_Report\\_November\\_2011.pdf](http://csis.org/files/attachments/111107_CSR_Report_November_2011.pdf)> 6

<sup>8</sup> Belanovsky, 7.

<sup>9</sup> FOM Survey, November 20, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Masha Gessen, The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin, (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2012), 274-5.

documented via cell phone cameras and posted online to dramatically demonstrate that the election had been rigged. These videos became available early on the day of the election in Moscow, as voting progressed across Russia's many time zones. When United Russia was victorious in Moscow, carrying 46.5% of the vote, people had a palpable feeling that their democratic rights had been violated.

## December 5: Chisty Prudy

Though street actions had been organized on the night of the Duma elections, the first mass demonstration was held at Chisty Prudy on December 5. Chisty Prudy was coordinated in large part by Ilya Faybisovich, a 24-year old recent graduate of the London School of Economics, who was not affiliated with a political party. On December 4, Faybisovich had attempted to work as an election monitor in the Basmannyi Raion of Moscow on behalf of the Communist Party, which was allowed to have election monitors at polling places as an officially registered party.<sup>11</sup> He was removed from the premises by security, who claimed a Communist Party monitor was already present, though they could not point out who it was.<sup>12</sup>

With the sense that an injustice had been committed against him, Faybisovich felt a protest was necessary to express public outrage. Faybisovich wrote an incendiary post to his Facebook page and tagged 250 of his highest profile friends from the media industry in it, arguing that it was time to take action if Russia was to be a democracy.<sup>13</sup> He learned from his mother, Varvara Gornostayeva, that Solidarity, a liberal-democratic coalition group, had a permit for a small protest at Chisty Prudy on December 5.<sup>14</sup> Gornostayeva, a politically engaged editor, was made aware of the event by its organizer, Roman Dobrokhotov, a leader of the democratic movement We (Myi), who at the time was employed by the news site Slon.ru. Dobrokhotov was a young but established activist, who had worked with established liberal opposition leaders like Ilya Yashin and Boris Nemtsov for years, beginning with the youth politics trend in the mid-2000s. Dobrokhotov held the protest permit for Chisty Prudy, but was promoting it using the then-standard strategy for promoting protests—personally, directly asking people to attend, generally without the help of the internet. When Faybisovich saw that the event had not been promoted on Facebook, he called Dobrokhotov and offered to help with publicity. Dobrokhotov told him further promotion was not necessary, because Solidarity had invited 2,000 people on Facebook and that was enough for a successful gathering.<sup>15</sup>

The Facebook event was moderated by Denis Bilunov, an activist who has worked with Garry Kasparov since the 1990s and more recently with Evgenia Chirikova of Defend Khimki Forest; Bilunov made Faybisovich an event administrator (in charge of regulating the online face of the event and extending invitations) at his request. Aware that 2,000 invites and 120 positive responses would produce virtually no turn-out, Faybisovich personally called every prominent figure he knew in social media, mainly political journalists from leading publications to ask them to promote the Facebook event.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, he reached out to well-known corruption fighter Alexey Navalny, whom he met in 2005

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<sup>11</sup> "Feisbuk dlya nuzhd vevolyutsii" [Lenta.ru](http://lenta.ru/articles/2012/04/09/faibisovich/), 9 April 2012, 30 April 2012  
<<http://lenta.ru/articles/2012/04/09/faibisovich/>>

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Ilya Faybisovich.

<sup>13</sup> "Feisbuk dlya nuzhd vevolyutsii"

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Faybisovich.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Faybisovich.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Faybisovich.

while a member of a political debate club at MGU, of which several other organizers had also been part.<sup>17</sup> Navalny had heard of the Chisty Prudy rally, but did not expect it to be well-attended and did not plan on going, until it became clear that people were outraged at the election fraud, at which point he heavily featured the event on his LiveJournal and Twitter.<sup>18</sup> Echo of Moscow radio station was the only major news outlet to mention the event.<sup>19</sup> Feeling that this work was too important to delegate to oppositionists of dubious social networking skills, Faybisovich took December 5 off of work and promoted the event with the help of several friends. By the evening, 25,000 people had been invited on Facebook, and 2,700 had confirmed attendance. 5,000 showed up, more than could fit within the cordons erected by the police, and more than could hear the speeches Navalny and opposition politicians delivered. Later in the night, 253 participants (and a few innocent bystanders) were arrested when an enthusiastic faction broke off and marched towards the Central Election Commission; Navalny, Yashin and prominent leftist Sergei Udaltsov were also arrested.<sup>20</sup>

The young organizers of this rally were not interested in working with the established opposition; in their conception of the demonstration, it was not political. Faybisovich and his friends seemed to have envisioned it as an expression of shared individual frustrations and sense of insult they had suffered from the state. They did not have any demands, nor did they have any party affiliations. They were disinterested in and dismissive of opposition figures, including those they had worked with to promote the event, whom they viewed as out of touch.<sup>21</sup> Their aversion to the established opposition was mirrored by many of the participants. One woman who attended the rally on December 5, interviewed by Lenta.ru, said that she was amazed that she was surrounded by average people, who were “not marginal and not freaks,” as she had viewed the kind of people who went to protests.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, the rally did give voice to political sentiment, in the form of popular expression of negative feelings towards the state, and support for democratic ideals and fair elections. Chisty Prudy was a watershed moment in that it began to erode the boundary between political actor and average citizen. Yekaterina Krongauz, who was an editor at *Bolshoi Gorod* and whose husband, the editor of *Afisha*, would become heavily involved in organizing subsequent protests, wrote online afterward that the best part of the event was not that people had gotten up from their computers, but that they had first familiarized themselves with the relevant laws and gone out to monitor the elections.<sup>23</sup> They did not expect activists like Navalny to solve their problems; rather, by knowing the laws and acting on their beliefs, “ordinary people have repeated the success of Alexey Navalny.” Indeed, this is precisely what Faybisovich had called for in his Facebook post, when he suggested that average people begin organizing, instead of leaving everything to Navalny.<sup>24</sup> Notably, Navalny is not a political leader in the sense that he does not promote a party. His position can best be described as anti-United Russia, and though it is also well

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Faybisovich; Interview with Tonia Samsonova.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Alexey Navalny.

<sup>19</sup> Idov.

<sup>20</sup> Grigorii Okhotin, “Aresti v Moskve,” *Bolshoi Gorod*, 6 December 2011, 5 May 2012 <<http://www.bg.ru/news/9730>>

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Faybisovich; Interview with Tikhon Dzyadko.

<sup>22</sup> “Strakha ne bilo,” *Lenta.ru* 9 April 2012, 4 May 2012, <<http://lenta.ru/articles/2012/04/09/young/>>

<sup>23</sup> Ekaterina Krongauz, “Miting isporchennikh botinok,” *Bolshoi Gorod*, 7 December 2011, 3 May 2012 <<http://www.bg.ru/opinion/9735/>>

<sup>24</sup> “Feisbuk dlya nuzhd vevolyutsii”

known that he has nationalist leanings, he does not promote a political platform related to them.<sup>25</sup> Neither Krongauz nor Faybisovich bothered to mention the leaders of any political parties, officially sanctioned or not, in their notes, because they are not seen as effective or relevant in terms of electoral impact or mass appeal.

Considering the established opposition's perceived lack of relevance and popularity, how and why did Faybisovich and his friends join forces with them? Faybisovich was compelled to reach out to them because he needed a permit for the rally. In some respects, this unlikely alliance was precipitated by legislation governing freedom of assembly. The freedom of assembly is guaranteed by Article 31 of the Constitution, and regulated by federal law No.54-FL "On Meetings, Rallies, Demonstrations, Marches and Pickets". Under the federal legislation, the organizers spontaneous and pre-planned gatherings of more than one person must submit an application—in the case of Moscow, to the Mayor's Office— notifying the government of the time, place and expected attendance; the authorized body then has the prerogative to accept, reject, or demand changes to the application.<sup>26</sup> Access to certain sites, including areas surrounding the residences of the President and historical and cultural monuments, can be restricted; significantly, the President has the right to authorize public events on the territory of the Kremlin (Article 8.2; 8.4). The application must also include contact information about the individual organizer and the individuals that the organizer has authorized to fill specific operational roles, in part because they will ultimately be held liable for violating the terms of the permit, in fines or via administrative arrest (Article 20.2). Under federal law, organizers must submit the application 10-15 days before the public event will occur (Article 7.1). Federal legislation also allows for additional local or regional legislation concerning the organization and conduct of these public events. In Moscow, legislation requires a written permit to hold a public event, and it is not uncommon for the Mayor's Office to insist on a change of venue, if the location requested is judged too prominent.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the police are authorized to disband protests that exceed the capacity of their permits and to arrest participants who violate the terms of the permit, for which they can hold organizers responsible via fines. In Moscow, they often do so. They also erect barriers enclosing the protest area, with metal detectors to scan each participant for weapons.

These permits can be challenging to obtain and frequently lead to conflicts with the Mayor's Office. One organizer from Solidarity described working with the Mayor's office as "like talking to a wall...absolutely hopeless."<sup>28</sup> Given the difficulty of the process, oppositionists regularly apply for permits for small gatherings around significant dates—in this case, the Duma elections—just in case they or another opposition group want to hold a political event.<sup>29</sup> As occurred with the organization of the protest on December 10, as described below, multiple parties might apply as organizers for the same permit, though they might lack any political common ground beyond opposition to the ruling party.

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<sup>25</sup> Navalny would later be presented in Western and Russian media as the mastermind behind the rally, for example by Ellen Barry in the *New York Times*, December 9, 2011; one man interviewed described Navalny as "the only man who can take all the common hipsters and make them go onto the street."

<sup>26</sup> "Russian Federation Freedom of Assembly," Legislation Online, June 2006, 27 April 2012  
<<http://legislationline.org/topics/country/7/topic/15>>

<sup>27</sup> Igor Vyuzhny "Russian protests against State Duma elections reveal persuasive show of people power," Russia Now, Telegraph UK 29 December 2011, 5 May 2012,  
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/russianow/politics/8982387/Russian-protests-people-power.html>>

<sup>28</sup> "Ya, navernoje, plokhoi politik," Lenta.ru, 9 April 2012, 27 April 2012,  
<<http://lenta.ru/articles/2012/04/09/mityushkina/>>

<sup>29</sup> Idov.

Boris Nemtsov would later describe the protests as “the first time in Russian history over the past 20 years that there was a spontaneous association of opposition politicians and citizens.”<sup>30</sup> Though it is unclear to what extent the protest participants felt connection with the established political figures (including Nemtsov, who was booed on December 24), it is clear that a small group of citizens were forced to spontaneously associate with the opposition to obtain a protest permit, effectively adding a political dimension to a rally without a real political orientation. The difficulty of securing a permit and conducting a demonstration without violations or mass arrests would become a major concern for the December 10 protest, which would ultimately be held at Bolotnaya Ploshchad’.

## December 10: Bolotnaya Ploshchad’

In an immediate effort to capitalize on the success of the December 5 rally, another sanctioned demonstration was planned for December 10, though smaller illegal rallies continued through the week. Earlier in December, Nadezhda Mityushkina, who coordinated demonstration permits for liberal-democratic group Solidarity surrounding the Duma election, submitted applications for permits for December 5-7 on Ploshchad’ Revolutsii. She also put submitted an application for December 10 at the request of Sergei Udaltsov, though Udaltsov is the leader of the Left Front. The names listed on the permits were two members of Solidarity (Mityushkina and Sergei Davidus) and two members of the Left Front (Udaltsov and Anastasya Udaltsova). Mityushkina, Davidus, Udaltsov and Udaltsova filed for the December 10 permit as a back-up, without discussing what event it would be used for. Mityushkina anticipated an attendance of 300 people.<sup>31</sup> According to Sergei Parkhomenko, a well-respected political journalist at Echo of Moscow and *Vokrug Tsveta* who became involved as an organizer (and is also Faybisovich’s stepfather), the view that a 300-person turnout was reasonable persisted in the liberal democratic-leftist coalition who—as demonstrated by the paltry marketing Solidarity did for the December 5 rally—did not take advantage of new media marketing techniques to expand their attendance beyond their average audience.<sup>32</sup>

While the opposition was bickering with the city, the young organizers were feverishly working to generate interest in the rally. Following Chisty Prudy, a private Facebook chat was set up to coordinate subsequent protests. The 10-12 members of this conversation were all male and mainly worked in the media, with professional politicians deliberately excluded.<sup>33</sup> They were also close, trusted friends and coworkers, and several were related by marriage or blood. Motivated by the conviction that these protests were too important to entrust to anyone but themselves, this group exchanged over 11,000 messages over the next weeks.<sup>35</sup> They would select the dates of the subsequent larger rallies, and set up hotlines for arrestees, secured copyright waivers from photographers covering the event and promoted

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<sup>30</sup> “Orgkomitet bil konfliktnim,” [Lenta.ru](http://lenta.ru) 9 April 2012, 23 April 2012, <<http://lenta.ru/articles/2012/04/09/nemtsov/>>

<sup>31</sup> “Ya, navernoje”

<sup>32</sup> “Raznie idiotic nadeyalis’ ustroit’ budu” [Lenta.ru](http://lenta.ru) 9 April 2012, 23 April 2012 <<http://lenta.ru/articles/2012/04/09/parkhomenko/>>

<sup>33</sup> The participants and messages exchanged in this chat remain closely guarded, but were entirely confidential at the time, as the prospect of government intervention was a real threat/

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Faybisovich.

<sup>35</sup> Finding reliable and complete information about the composition of the original organizing committee and its later forms was challenging, as planning first occurred in private communications among friends, then became increasingly complex quite quickly. This section represents my best attempt at approximating what occurred.

the rallies on their publications' websites.<sup>36</sup> They also add new modes of protests to the public repertoire, like the Big White Circle protest on the Garden Ring Road, held in late February.<sup>37</sup> They drafted the demands of the protest: the cancellation of the results of the Duma election, the resignation of the head of the Central Election Commission, the relaxation of registration requirements for political parties, and fair and open elections.<sup>38</sup> This group was the first incarnation of the committee that would become the organizing committee For Fair Elections.

The one member of this group who was relatively unknown to the other organizers before December 5 was Ilya Klishin, who initiated the Facebook event for the December 10 protests independently. He did not hail from the media sector, but was the founder of the website EpicHero.ru, a site that lets users donate to charity over their cell phones. At an illegal rally on December 6, Klishin heard about a December 10 protest, but could not find details about it online. He and a mutual twitter follower, who was not affiliated with a political party, decided to create a Facebook event for the protest, using what details they could find in the news.<sup>39</sup> Using strategies similar to those Faybisovich employed, Klishin garnered ten thousand RSVPs overnight. Faybisovich later joined him as an event administrator and invited him to join the private Facebook chat.<sup>40</sup> Interest in the event was so high that it produced a glitch in the page, wherein they could not add additional administrators, which was essential in managing an event for thousands of people.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, they connected with Facebook's representative in Russia, who sent links of specific profile pages to Facebook's headquarters in California, to be manually added as event administrators. Though Klishin created the Facebook event on December 6, Solidarity and the Left Front only joined his online organizing efforts on December 8, when his event already had 20,000 RSVPs and two days remained until the rally. At that time, the Facebook event became all the more essential for communicating with participants, as the venue of the protest was in doubt.

On December 8, a faction of liberal-democratic organizers not affiliated with Solidarity realized that the protest could not be held on Ploshchad' Revolutsii without massive arrests, considering the attendance expected and the fact that the permit only allowed 300 participants.<sup>42</sup> Things became even more complex when Eduard Limonov, the controversial and divisive head of the National Bolshevik Party, planned to join the rally. According to Parkhomenko, who was also a member of the Facebook chat, he, Nemtsov, and Vladimir Ryzhkov, a member of Other Russia who served in former Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov's cabinet, signaled to the Mayor's Office that a move would be required, but because none of them had applied for the assembly permit, they could not formally negotiate it.<sup>43</sup> To demonstrate the necessity of the move, Parkhomenko showed the Facebook event to the authorities, who noted the high expected attendance and recognized that a new venue was essential.<sup>44</sup> Negotiations were begun at the behest of the city between Deputy Mayor Alexander Gorbenko, Solidarity's Mityushkina and Left Front's Udaltsova, who were adamantly opposed to changing the venue, arguing

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<sup>36</sup> Idov; interview with Dzyadko.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Dzyadko.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> "Feisbuk est' privodnoi remen' revolyutsii" [Lenta.ru](http://lenta.ru/articles/2012/04/09/klishin/) 9 April 2012, 23 April 2012, <<http://lenta.ru/articles/2012/04/09/klishin/>>

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Faybisovich.

<sup>41</sup> "Feisbuk est' privodnoi remen' revolyutsii"

<sup>42</sup> Some of the organizing journalists had contacts in the Mayor's office as well as in the offices of Putin and Medvedev, who corroborated the necessity of the move from Ploshchad' Revolutsii (Interview with Ilya Krasilshchik).

<sup>43</sup> "Raznie idiotic nadeyalis' ustroit' budu"

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Faybisovich; Interview with Dzyadko.



that Ploshchad' Revolutsii was closer to the Kremlin than Bolotnaya Ploshchad' and near the Central Election Commission, and that two days was insufficient time to move the rally, which would lead to erstwhile crowds on Ploshchad' Revolutsii. They also bluffed unconvincingly that they would cancel the rally, which the Mayor's Office, having already negotiated with Nemtsov's group, likely knew to be false.<sup>45</sup>

Although all the oppositionists were ostensibly working together, they were also undermining each other regularly and risking the event as a whole, since reaching an agreement with the Mayor's Office was essential to the safety of the participants; large numbers of arrests or violence would undermine future protest participation. Figures from within the opposition had instigated the change, but others perceived it as an attack by the city administration, designed to divide attendance at the rally. Ultimately, Parkhomenko, Nemtsov and Ryzhkov worked out a deal with Gorbenko so controversial that other organizers would call it treasonous: they would move the rally to Bolotnaya, but its capacity would increase to 30,000 and it would be four hours instead of two.<sup>46</sup> In doing so, they shook the participation of Limonov's National Bolshevik Party, but they also aggravated the Left Front, who had almost all opposed the move.<sup>47</sup> Communist and Duma deputy Ilya Ponomarev, who became involved with the negotiations, told *Lenta* that he felt Nemtsov's actions were orchestrated to flex his political and media muscle—to prove that he and the liberals could force the move, and still attract a crowd.

Ultimately, the existence of the ever-more popular Facebook event promoting the protest was essential in facilitating the change of venue, as it efficiently conveyed the change and the majority of RSVPs only came in after the new venue had been announced.<sup>48</sup> The administrators were also able to convey to the public that the protest would be safe, as long as Ploshchad' Revolutsii was avoided. This issue was of such concern that all individuals affiliated with the protests who were prominent on social networking sites made a serious effort to publicize the change and affirm that participation was safe.<sup>49</sup> This information was successfully conveyed because the online identities of these individuals, for example Navalny, were trusted by the public, who believed that the change of location was legitimate, and not a state plot to undermine the event. Ultimately, the Bolotnaya rally was a massive success, attracting tens of thousands of people, all of whom avoided arrest.

The logistics of the venue change again illustrate the complimentary skills of the two groups of organizers, who at that time were not formally cooperating. While the young media-savvy hipsters could easily harness the internet to promote a huge event at last minute—and spoke derisively of the old guard's inability to do so—they may not have been capable of the complex negotiations required to secure the permit and plan for the rally.

The opposition, on the other hand, was clearly unprepared for thousands of people to join their neglected protests. In light of how many people attended the December 10 rally, the original 300-person permit might have seemed inadequate, and it may have seemed reasonable to expect a higher turnout. Yet opposition groups had historically had low attendance at their protests, so the 300-person projection

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<sup>45</sup> “Ya, navernoje”

<sup>46</sup> “Raznie idiotic nadeyalis' ustroit' budu”

<sup>47</sup> “Mediinyi resurs bil v rukakh liberalov,” *Lenta.ru*, 9 April 2012, 23 April 2012  
<<http://lenta.ru/articles/2012/04/09/ponomarev3/>>

<sup>48</sup> “Ya, navernoje”

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Ilya Krasilshchik.

was in line with earlier gatherings, particularly considering that the Duma elections were already a week away and it was the middle of winter. Indeed, established opposition groups struggled to take advantage of the sudden interest in political activism. They failed to create any type of internet presence and promotion, even when it became apparent that numbers would be higher than usual. Still, their political know-how, experience and connections was a major contributing factor in the event's success, in that they were able to negotiate (at some cost to their interpersonal relations) a larger venue, longer timeframe, and even the safety of protestors who mistakenly went to Ploshchad' Revolutsii—all of which were essential on the day of the event.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, it would also appear that the complexities of applying for a protest permit, and, more systemically, the limitations of the political sphere in Russia as a whole, forced a liberal-left coalition together where one might not have otherwise formed. It is telling that the names listed as organizers on the December 10 permit include two liberal democrats from Solidarity and two hard-left activists. Further, both Solidarity and the Left Front are themselves umbrella groups. Solidarity's membership includes former members of Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces, with factions from the Democratic Party of Russia, Civil Force, Pravoe Delo and civil society groups.<sup>51</sup> The Left Front includes several communist organizations that are more extreme than the Communist Party. The members of these organizations, particularly the democrats, often struggle to cooperate, many of them holding long-standing grudges against others, as demonstrated by the conflict they experienced working with the Mayor's Office. So too do the leaders of these organizations make unlikely partners; one might be surprised to see, for example, Boris Nemtsov, who worked in Yeltsin's administration and is a divisive figure in the democratic movement, working alongside a hard-left activist like Sergei Udaltsov.

Naturally every political party—left, right and nationalist—would want to take advantage of the wave of political awakening sweeping the city and nation, but the December 10 permit was filed at a time when the idea of a protest with a thousand people was still a dream, indicating that inter-party cooperation was established long before the Duma elections in early December. In fact, it is Putin's reforms of the party registration regulations that are responsible for this unlikely pairing.

It is well known that the size of Russia's political sphere has decreased over the last decade and a half, with the United Russia's rise to dominance.<sup>52</sup> As recently as 2003, 40 parties were registered with the Ministry of Justice, but by 2012, only seven parties remained.<sup>53</sup> These seven parties were the "parties of power" United Russia and Pravoye Delo, so-called "loyal opposition" parties LDPR and Spravedlivaya Rossiya, and "sanctioned opposition" parties KPRF, Yabloko and the marginal Patriots of Russia.<sup>54</sup> In

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<sup>50</sup> Parkhomenko reported receiving specific warnings on the use of police violence: they were willing to have the rally in Bolotnaya without incident, or the rally in Ploshchad' Revolutsii, but could not tolerate protestors decrying Putin in Red Square, situated relatively between them, thus, protestors would have safe passage between the venues as long as they kept quiet. ("Raznie idiotic nadeyalis' ustroit' budu")

<sup>51</sup> Erin Decker and Josh Wilson, "Solidarity: An Umbrella for Russia's Opposition", School of Russian and Asian Studies Newsletter, 3 May 2010, 28 April 2012 <[http://www.sras.org/solidarity\\_russian\\_opposition](http://www.sras.org/solidarity_russian_opposition)>

<sup>52</sup> Vladimir Gelman, "From 'feckless pluralism' to 'dominant power politics'? The transformation of Russia's party system," Democratization, vol. 13.4, 2006. 545-561.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas F. Remington, Politics in Russia, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Glenview IL: Pearson Education, 2012) 172; Spisok zaregistrirrovannikh politicheskikh partii, Ministerstvo Yustitsii Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 5 May 2012, <<http://www.minjust.ru/nko/gosreg/partii/spisok>>

<sup>54</sup> Henry E. Hale, "Russia's Political Parties and their Substitutes," Developments in Russian Politics 7, eds. Stephen White, Richard Sakwa, Henry Hale, 81-98 . 86.

December 2011, of the seven registered parties, only United Russia, KPRF, Spravedlivaya Rossiya and LDPR managed to clear the 7% threshold to win Duma seats.<sup>55</sup>

Vladimir Gelman has described the decline from an overwhelming 40 parties to an underwhelming seven as a pendulum swing from feckless pluralism of the 1990s, wherein a highly fragmented party system over-supplied the electoral market, resulting in electoral volatility, to the monopolistic dominance of the party of power, United Russia, where electoral competition has been virtually eradicated.<sup>56</sup> Legislation that Putin pushed through in the early-mid 2000s was designed, in part, to decrease fragmentation and consolidate the party system, which could have led to greater stability, enhanced party loyalty, and contributed to a competitive electoral market. Thus, the boundaries for entering the electoral market were toughened: parties were required to have 50,000 formal members in two-thirds of Russia's regions, the formation of coalitions was disallowed, single member district seats eliminated, and the threshold for Duma representation was raised from 5% to 7% of the vote, among other changes.<sup>57</sup> The effect of Putin's legislation was a drastic reduction in the electoral market. When parties re-registered in 2007, just 19 of the 35 that applied were successful.<sup>58</sup> The significant challenges small parties face in meeting the requirements have facilitated the dominance of United Russia, as it has become significantly more challenging for smaller parties to meet the requirements, and officials have numerous opportunities to exclude alternative parties from elections.<sup>59</sup>

Putin's reforms are not the only culprit in Russia's underdeveloped electoral market. Even in 2003, when the threshold for Duma seats was still 5%, both Yabloko and Nemtsov's Union of Right Forces failed to make the cut. In general, even informal entry barriers have been high; for example, parties that developed in the earliest days of Russian democracy have always had an advantage with voters.<sup>60</sup> Only two new parties have succeeded in winning seats in the Duma for the first time after 1993—United Russia and Spravedlivaya Rossiya—and both had heavy backing from the state. Even the launch and promotion of United Russia came at huge cost to the Kremlin, though its utility over time and the cost of alternative options made it a worthwhile investment.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, similar efforts to create new parties by the Kremlin, even with financial backing, have not produced meaningful results. These challenges might, however, work to the opposition's advantage, if United Russia seeks to significantly reconfigure its public image following its poor showing in the Duma election. To repeat the massive branding campaign that was conducted when United Russia was established would be extremely expensive and time-consuming, and could lead to a drop in support, at least temporarily.

Complicating the issue of party development is that United Russia takes very broad, moderate positions on most issues. United Russia's policies have converged in the center of virtually every ideological axis.<sup>62</sup> This moderate ideology has had the effect of splitting opposition parties to the ideological far left or far right, in order to differentiate themselves from United Russia. Parties on the left

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<sup>55</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> State Duma election results, RIA NOVOSTI Infographics, 2011, 26 April 2012, <<http://en.rian.ru/infographics/20111212/170192512.html>>

<sup>56</sup> Gelman, 545-6.

<sup>57</sup> Remington, 172.

<sup>58</sup> William Burns, 06MOSCOW12143, [Wikileaks](http://wikileaks.org), 1 November 2006, 2 May 2012, <<http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=06MOSCOW12143>>

<sup>59</sup> Hale, 94.

<sup>60</sup> Hale, 84.

<sup>61</sup> Gelman, 553.

<sup>62</sup> Gelman, 554.

and the right struggle to overcome the ideological distance between their views. This problem (in addition to legal limitations) obstructs the formation of coalitions or a more broadly appealing, unified opposition party. Typically, all the parties can agree on is simple opposition to the regime, which offers little ideological or policy appeal.<sup>63</sup>

Further, small parties can exist at the far left and far right of the political spectrum, but United Russia already claims the support of the majority of voters. Only a small fraction of voters willing to support the opposition remains. Compared to the Russian electoral market in general, a large number of parties vie for the support of a small group of oppositional voters. For these voters, the electoral market is over-supplied. As a result, competition among opposition parties is high, because they must compete for resources and voter support, which further reduces inter-party cooperation.

Because of this competition, even where partnerships among opposition groups might be logical, for instance among left or right parties, they have not been successful. For example, in the liberal-democratic camp, Yabloko has resisted the formation of an alliance with other democratic parties that might compromise its platform and its formerly dominant role among liberal parties, leading to the “persistent fragmentation of the democratic camp,” even to the point that the parties undermine each other’s efforts.<sup>64</sup> In the 2006 regional elections, smaller Western-looking democratic parties had agreed to share their limited resources to maximize impact. Yabloko had agreed to obtain signatures in Astrakhan for a candidate from Vladimir Ryzhkov’s Republican Party of Russia, yet according to RPR’s Political Council, virtually all their signatures were found to be suspicious and invalid, leading to RPR’s defeat.<sup>65</sup> Currently, there is no legitimate, liberal democratic party in Russia, both because they have struggled to cooperate and because it is unlikely that they would be allowed to register on principle by the Kremlin—which, in a way, renders moot their need to cooperate in the first place. Even a group like Solidarity, a coalition of excluded liberal democratic parties formed in December 2008, which includes ex-members of Yabloko, is not politically viable because it refuses to register as a party and frequently experiences infighting

Obstacles to political collaboration are high, but as these protests demonstrated, cooperation and the sharing of resources is not impossible.<sup>66</sup> Though they clearly had their differences and long-harbored grudges, these politicians were able to pull together to take advantage of a critical moment. Not only that, the Left Front and Solidarity joint application for protest permits indicates that this collaboration predates the protests. This suggests that although the state of party politics has driven the opposition into obscurity, it has also forced it together. Conditions of limited available resources and a high number of obstacles to political survival created unlikely but workable, and in some cases very strong, alliances across the political spectrum.

This pre-existence of this cooperative network meant that when Faybisovich and his friends begrudgingly reached out in need of a political good—the permit—they tapped into a broader network than they had anticipated, which was able to quickly rally around their most powerfully held shared political value—opposition to Putin. Despite their perceived irrelevance, the established opposition made

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Remington, 174.

<sup>65</sup> Burns.

<sup>66</sup> In fact, Gelman specifically notes the improbability of a communist-social market-liberal coalition, yet this is exactly the cooperative partnership—not quite a coalition—that this rally proved was possible (554).

the rallies in December possible, and their ability to work together was developed under Putin's restrictive party system. Once a faction of the public was ready to meet them halfway, large-scale demonstrations were possible.

As the protests proceeded, the balance between new and old organizers changed. At the December 10 rally, popular crime novelist Boris Akunin called for the formal establishment of an organizing committee to facilitate the next protest, which formalized the collaboration between some of the young organizers and the established opposition. The official organizing committee For Fair Elections (*Za Chestniye Vybory*) experienced many growing pains and controversies, but would organize the next several protests with the guiding principle that the demonstration participants were not activists and were likely not affiliated with a party, but cared about the fate of the country.<sup>67</sup> For Fair Elections would expand to include dozens of new members, like Akunin, intellectual Dmitri Bykov, journalist and activist Olga Romanova and her husband businessman Aleksei Kozlov, Yuri Saprykin, a major figure at *Afisha* and Rambler.ru and others.<sup>68</sup> Significantly, as the protests grew in size and were scheduled further apart, the new organizers engaged more frequently in negotiations with the city for permits and other permissions. In its next two protests, this sprawling, diverse group would manage to get over 100,000 people on the streets. Though unlikely to become a political party, this group and the partnerships that preceded it have had a major and sudden impact on the political landscape in Russia.

## II: Mass Participation

The partnership between the young organizers and the opposition influenced how the protests unfolded, but it does not explain their success, particularly in Russia's apathetic political climate. The second half of this paper explores who attended the protests, establishes participants as members of the emergent professional middle class, and explores possible motives for their political activism.

### December 24 and February 4: Prospekt Sakharova and Bolotnaya Ploshchad'

In the Western press, the protest participants were regularly described as young and newly wealthy, the kind of people who owned iPads in addition to iPhones, motored around Moscow on Vespas, and had accepted Putin's curtailment of civil rights in exchange for increased prosperity.<sup>69</sup> They were said to have reaped the rewards of Putin's regime, then suddenly turned against him, crowding Moscow's squares to express their dismay in a carnivalesque atmosphere.

This assessment is accurate in some respects and flawed in others. The vast majority of the protest participants in Moscow could be considered middle class, as established by Levada Center polls at

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<sup>67</sup> "Orgkomitet bil konfliktnim"

<sup>68</sup> "Orgkomitet bil konfliktnim"; Idov

<sup>69</sup> Ellen Barry, "Young and Connected, 'Office Plankton' Protesters Surprise Russia," *New York Times*, 23 December 2011, 20 April 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/24/world/europe/young-and-connected-office-plankton-protesters-stir-russia.html?pagewanted=all>>

the December 24 and February 4 events commissioned by the organizing team.<sup>70</sup> It is not quite true that the middle class had been well-served by Putin. In fact, the years since Putin's ascent to power has seen both the growth and increasing marginalization of the urban middle class, as the gulf between traditionalist and modernist values widens. The middle class has plenty to complain about, as Medvedev's unceremonious exit from the electoral market has left them without a candidate to support, and rising corruption has impacted their lives.

It is first necessary to define the Russian middle class, drawing on research summarized in a report issued by the Center for Strategic Research in Moscow in March 2011 and updated in November 2011. The last two decades of sociological research on Russia's middle class has identified the group using vocational, educational and economic criteria along with self-assessments.<sup>71</sup> To summarize, members of the middle class exhibited at least two of the following criteria: worked at non-physical, managerial, specialist or entrepreneurial positions; had higher degrees; owned property, purchased consumer durables, used financial services, or earned a monthly income of a certain level; described their social status as middle class. Membership in this group has changed dramatically in the new millennium. The nascent middle class that had developed in the late Soviet period collapsed in the 1990s, as the transition and the 1998 crisis had a strong negative impact on earnings.<sup>72</sup> In 1998, only 9.4-12.5% of Russian families could be considered middle class.<sup>73</sup> Yet in the 2000s, middle class grew rapidly, buoyed by the successful economy and rising standards of living. A study conducted by Natalya Tikhonova and Svetlana Mareeva published 2009 indicated that 26% of the population was now middle class, including 50% of people living in national and regional capitals.<sup>74</sup>

Based on their vocational and educational backgrounds, participants in the December 24 and February 4 demonstrations can indeed be considered middle class. 71% of participants on December 24 and 59% on February 4 identified as specialists, managers or business-owners. Participants had overwhelmingly obtained higher degrees. At the December 24 rally, 62% of participants had a higher degree, 8% had two, and 13% had an incomplete higher degree. On February 4, 63% had a higher degree, 7% had two, and 11% had an incomplete degree.. For both rallies, these figures total to approximately 81-82% of participants who had or were pursuing a higher degree. The implications of education will be discussed in greater detail below.

#### Graph 1.1: Vocational background of participants in December 24 and February 4 demonstrations

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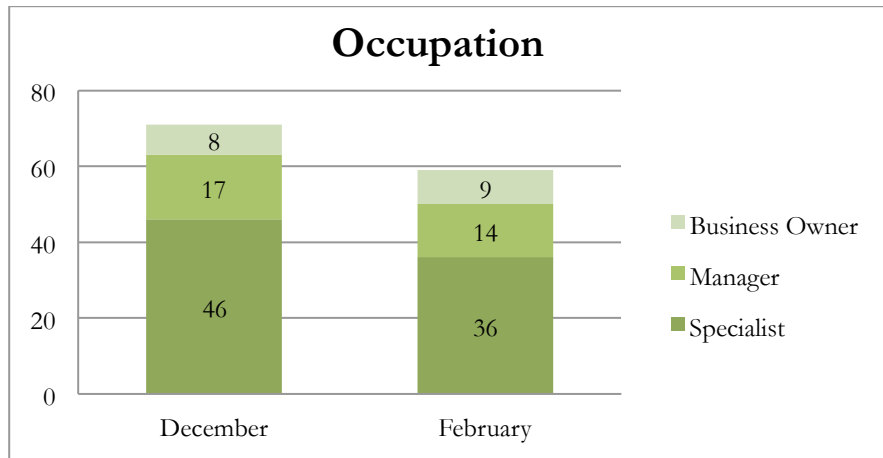
<sup>70</sup> This and following statistical data on protest composition from Press-vipuski: Opros na mitinge 4 fevralya, Levada-Tsentr, 13 February 2011, 15 April 2012 < <http://www.levada.ru/13-02-2012/opros-na-mitinge-4-fevralya>>

<sup>71</sup> Belanovsky, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Belanovsky, 26.

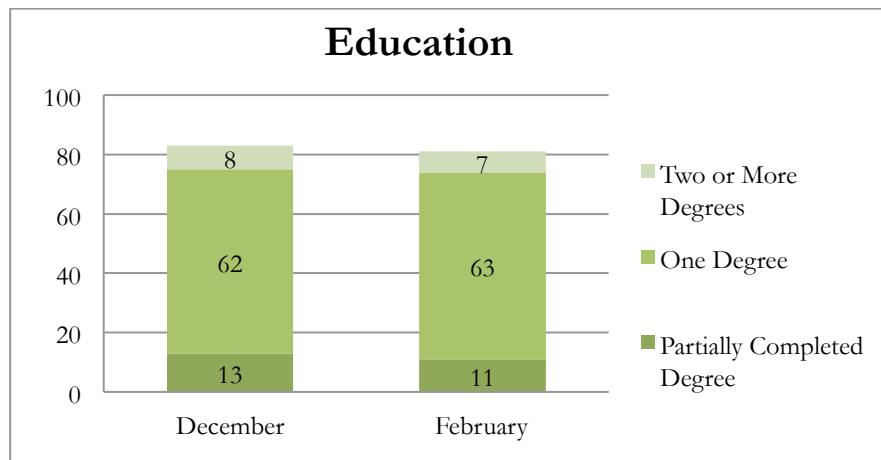
<sup>73</sup> Studies conducted by Lyudmila Belyaeva, "V poiskakh srednego klassa v Rossii", *Sotsiologicheskie isledovania*, 1999 no. 7; Elena Avraamova, Institute for Social and Economic Problems of the Population of the Russian Academy of Sciences, quoted in Belanovsky, 27.

<sup>74</sup> Belanovsky, 28, 30.



Source: Levada < <http://www.levada.ru/13-02-2012/opros-na-mitinge-4-fevralya> >

Graph 1.2: Level of education of participants in December 24 and February 4 demonstrations



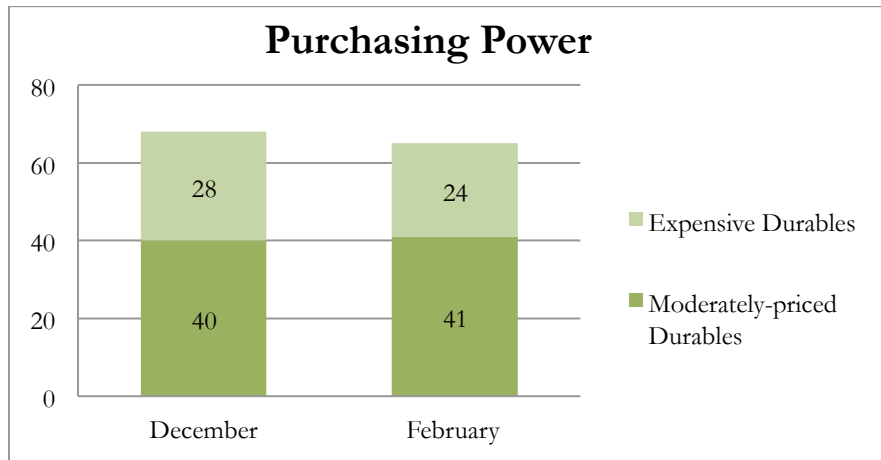
Source: Levada < <http://www.levada.ru/13-02-2012/opros-na-mitinge-4-fevralya> >

Economic data was the weakest indicator of middle class membership. Typically, ability to purchase consumer durables provides the strongest gauge of middle class status. For example, car sales are often tracked as a correlate of growth of the middle class.<sup>75</sup> The majority of protest participants were not able to purchase a car; 28% on December 24 and 24% on February 4 said they could manage to own a car. The largest share of the participants were able to buy moderately priced consumer durables (television set or refrigerator), with 40% and 41% identifying in this group for the respective protests. 21% and 25% said they had enough money for essential items (food and clothes), but not enough for durables.<sup>76</sup>

Graph 1.3: Purchasing Power of participants in December 24 and February 4 demonstrations

<sup>75</sup> Belanovsky, 25.

<sup>76</sup> Levada, Opros na mitingye.



Source: Levada < <http://www.levada.ru/13-02-2012/opros-na-mitinge-4-fevralya> >

These results indicate that the middle class encompasses considerable variation in financial stability. That variation is significant because financial success and stability has been touted as one of the major benefits to the middle class that Putin's regime has provided. If the economic background of the middle class is in fact fairly diverse, then that benefit might not be so great after all, and could contribute to greater discontent depending on how the economy develops during Putin's new term in office. When compared with national data on voting behavior in the Presidential election across income groups, these results are again slightly different from what one might expect. Nationally, the bulk of respondents (51%) identified as having enough money for essentials but not for durables; thus the sample from the protests skewed towards greater wealth than the rest of the population. However, in the nation as a whole, greater wealth corresponded to lower support for Putin. 52% of people who could afford consumer durables of medium expense, but not of high expense, supported Putin nationally; only 33% of people who could afford a car did. One would thus expect that in the cohort from the Moscow protests, the best-represented group would be those who can afford expensive durables, yet this was not the case. This suggests that financial stability has only provided incentive for regime support among the wealthiest segment of society, and raises the prospect of protest sentiment spreading to those with lower income levels.

Finally, data suggests that this group can exert a social and economic influence much greater than its size. The middle class comprises the best educated people in the country. They reside in the major urban centers, working in industries that are central to the modernization of the economy. They are very well connected in terms of ability to use personal relationships to solve problems, as compared with non-middle class members.<sup>77</sup> Their use of computers and the internet, which is significantly higher than that of the non-middle class, also implies that they are well connected to each other.<sup>78</sup> The organization of the rallies, which depended almost entirely on personal connections, demonstrates this, as does the marketing of the events. On December 24, 56% of participants heard of the demonstration through an online publication, and 33% through a social networking site, which is to be expected considering the online marketing, but 33% heard through friends, family and neighbors, indicating that real-life interpersonal networks that can be mobilized for political aims.<sup>79</sup> This group is well positioned to exert

<sup>77</sup> Belanovsky, 33.

<sup>78</sup> Belanovsky, 34, 35.

<sup>79</sup> Levada, Opros na mitingye.



political influence, though until the Duma elections of December 2011 it had not chosen to do so. What made those elections different?

### Modernist Middle Class Values

Over the last decade, the Russian middle class has cohered around a set of politically significant values. Tikhonova and Mareeva's study showed that middle class membership was highly correlated with modernist values, as opposed with traditionalist values. Modernist values, as revealed by the study, were individualism, personal merit-based success, toleration for pluralism, democracy, rationalism, rule of law and prioritizing self-actualization in employment over financial gain.<sup>80</sup> Nearly 80% of middle class members supported these values. Contrastingly, traditionalists exhibit "preference for stability over risk, the priority of collective over personal interests, lack of interest in personal achievement, low confidence in business, and low demand for rule of law."<sup>81</sup> These values were exhibited in 70% of the non-middle class.<sup>82</sup> Importantly, these poles have become increasingly distant; between 2006 and 2008, core middle class support for modernist values increased by 10% and support for traditionalist values decreased 20%.<sup>83</sup>

The decade-long trend toward a larger middle class with modernist values means that the political demands of the population have changed substantially since Putin entered Presidential office. At that time, the middle class was smaller and unstable, and the electorate was dominated by low-income traditionalists.<sup>84</sup> The unipolar electorate was a contributing factor in the creation of an essentially one-party system, in that United Russia needed to appeal to just one group.<sup>85</sup> Putin's image has always been strongly traditionalist, as he has tackled the oligarchs, touted stability, and cultivated an every-man image, but this brand does not appeal to modernist values. The continued dominance of the traditionalist political values has ignored the growth of the economically and socially important modernist middle class, resulting in conditions wherein the political weight of the middle class is out of proportion with its actual influence.<sup>86</sup> Essentially, the middle class has been politically ignored, while it has accrued social and economic power and become increasingly opposed to traditionalism. Thus, by the end of the 2000s Putin, United Russia and the government were faced with pleasing two very different yet important groups at once.

Medvedev's modernization brand was designed to defuse this issue by appealing to the highly-educated, specialist, urban cohort. This group saw him as a workable alternative to Putin, or the lesser of two evils. As discussed above in regard to the politicization of the protest organizers, when the *rokirovka* was announced, support for Medvedev's brand collapsed. The alternative brand, Putin's, was not able to capture the support that Medvedev had lost, particularly with the traditionalist rhetoric about stability that he promoted in the run-up to the election. Putin's thuggish, strong-man persona is diametrically opposed to Medvedev's scholarly, techie, rule-of-law-pandering image. Putin's is not a brand that could appeal to Medvedev's former supporters.

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<sup>80</sup> Belanovsky, 37.

<sup>81</sup> Belanovsky, 29.

<sup>82</sup> Belanovsky, 37.

<sup>83</sup> Belanovsky, 38.

<sup>84</sup> Belanovsky, 29.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

The educational data for the protest participants demonstrates this polarization. Putin strongly appeals to those with lower levels of education, weighted toward the lowest end of the spectrum; of those with lower than secondary levels of education, 71% support Putin.<sup>87</sup> If for the sake of argument, we assume that the protest participants were formerly Medvedev supporters, then Medvedev apparently appealed to an extraordinarily well-educated sector of society; as mentioned earlier, 81-82% had or was pursuing one or more higher degrees. Given how closely educational background can be related to class, vocation, economic security, sense of self and values, it is unreasonable to think that Medvedev's highly educated audience could easily see themselves joining in with Putin's less-educated supporters.

As a result, rather than an increase in support for Putin, the *rokirovka* essentially created a vacuum—the rise of an anti-electorate of highly educated, former-Medvedev supporters who felt strongly negative about both tandem members. When focusing on educational background as a key indicator of middle class status and attitudes, it is important to remember that Russia's population is very highly educated. OECD data indicates that 54% of Russia's population aged 25-64 has an associate's degree or higher, making Russia the world leader in tertiary education completion.<sup>88</sup> Naturally, holding a tertiary degree does not guarantee participation in the anti-electorate, but the prevalence of higher degrees has laid the groundwork for the growth of the middle class, which is expected to comprise 60-70% of urban adults by 2019.<sup>89</sup> Considering the politicization of those with higher degrees in Moscow, and Putin's increasingly traditionalist persona that does not appeal to the educated class, the political attitudes and activity of the educated class across the country should be important to watch over the course of Putin's presidency.

## Critical Mass

Finally, the December 24 and February 4 protests featured much larger attendance than the previous events, and drastically higher attendance than opposition protests of the preceding months and years. In light of the motivations for political involvement described above, it is also worth considering at what point these people began to publicly express criticism of the state. Unsurprisingly, it seems that December 24 and February 4 introduced many participants to demonstrating for the first time. On Prospekt Sakharov on December 24, 37% of people had not participated in an earlier protest, which, as these were the most popular protests Moscow had seen in two decades, makes it very unlikely that they had attended any protest in the past; on February 4 on Bolotnaya, 21% of people were likely first-timers. Using an average estimate of 100,000 participants at each protest, these two events saw 58,000 people publicly expressing disapproval of the state for the first time. Once they had attended one protest, participants tended to continue. At the February 4 rally, 10% of attendees had participated on December 4; 24% on December 5; 57% on December 10; and 61% on December 24. This data is consistent with the same question asked at the December 24 rally.<sup>90</sup> A rough analysis of these numbers suggest that once someone began attending protests, they tended to attend all of them, up until February 4, following which attendance sharply fell to around 25,000 or less at each gathering. Thus, not only did these protests

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<sup>87</sup> Press-tsentr: Vybory prezidenta: kak rolosovali sotsial'nye gruppi, Levada-Tsentr, 27 March 2012, 30 April 2012 <<http://www.levada.ru/27-03-2012/vybory-prezidenta-kak-golosovali-sotsialnye-gruppy>>

<sup>88</sup> "Countries with the Most College Graduates," *The Huffington Post*, 25 May 2011, 7 May 2012, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/22/countries-with-the-most-c\\_n\\_655393.html#s117378&title=Russian\\_Federation\\_54](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/22/countries-with-the-most-c_n_655393.html#s117378&title=Russian_Federation_54)>

<sup>89</sup> Belanovsky, 50.

<sup>90</sup> Levada, Opros na mitingye..

allow many people to voice oppositional sentiment for the first time, they also encouraged people to continue doing so, though the durability of this sentiment remains to be seen.

Though many of the protest participants may have lost support for the regime when the *rokirovka* was announced, they did not publicly express their dismay until these protests began. Why? The early protests likely created a critical mass condition that removed many of the barriers to publicly expressing non-majority opinions. As Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has argued, when someone harbors a minority opinion that he knows will be controversial or unpopular, he does not publicly express it, but may look for others who hold the same opinion.<sup>91</sup> As the support grows for the minority opinion, those who hold it may connect with one another, build support and eventually speak publicly. These early leaders are typically educated people, members of a higher socio-economic class, or members of an ideological group. As open support grows for the minority opinion, individuals feel more comfortable expressing it. Ultimately a critical mass of supporters is reached, where the safety of numbers encourages more timid supporters to go public, and the social/moral rewards of participation incentivize acting against the state. As support grows, a snowball effect occurs, and even those who had not held the minority opinion previously may become supporters.

This theory parallels very closely how popularity of the protest took shape. In Moscow, a sense of others' discontent with the government was growing at a rate higher than the rest of the country; in 2010, 46% of people believed that public discontent was increasing.<sup>92</sup> Most likely to report a sense of public discontent were males of the higher income levels (55% at the highest income level) and particularly of the 18-34 age group.<sup>93</sup> Men would eventually comprise 60-65% of protest participants—in part because of concerns among families that if both parents participated, they risked leaving their children parentless in the event of mass arrests or violence.

Following the announcement of the *rokirovka*, discontent, frustration and anger began simmering among people who had supported Medvedev. The stolen Duma election agitated them further, as it not only affirmed their lack of political voice, it also violated many of their values—democracy, rule of law and individual expression. Discontent was felt by a significant proportion of the urban middle class group, who, sensing that others shared their minority view, expressed themselves. The night of December 4, intelligentsia and hipster hangouts witnessed a notable increase in political discussions and complaints launched against the state. A tipping point of sorts had been reached.

Moved to act, a small group of educated, well-off cultural leaders joined with ideological leaders to host a protest that publicly demonstrated that a large number of people held opposition views. The following protest, in which no arrests occurred, attracted thousands more participants, affirming the safety of publicly criticizing the state. The idea that the protests were safe and would be attended in large numbers was supported by the Facebook group “We Were on Bolotnaya – We Will Return,” which became a trusted information source and whose administrators, Klishin and Faybisovich, prioritized retention of participants.<sup>94</sup> The final two protests before the presidential election saw a massive audience with a large percentage of first-time joiners.

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<sup>91</sup> Belanovsky, 19.

<sup>92</sup> Belanovsky, 40.

<sup>93</sup> Belanovsky, 41.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Faybisovich.

Over the course of the electoral cycle, attending the protests acquired a high social reward. Rather than tired opposition figures, these protests featured authors and actresses that the public wanted to see. They were organized in part by the editors of high profile magazines with a high cultural impact. Participants ran into friends and discovered that acquaintances held similar political beliefs; there was talk that the protests were a good place to meet a boyfriend or girlfriend. Attending was perceived as so cool that some organizers began to worry that they were organizing “protestainment” events and political relevance would suffer.<sup>95</sup>

Though turnout at the protests following February 4 declined, it is extremely likely that the middle class modernists who participated in the protests will stay politically active. Their political activity may have emerged suddenly, but the foundations had been laid over the preceding decade, during which they accrued social and economic influence, without accompanying political weight. When Medvedev, whose brand resonated with them, suddenly exited the electoral market, an anti-electorate was created that cannot be won over to Putin’s side—certainly not now. Rather than fading away, the opposition might likely spread from Moscow’s middle class to that of the other urban centers, particularly as the large-scale expression of minority ideas at the protest weakened the barriers for the expression of those ideas, likely leading to an increase in opposition opinions.

## Conclusions

This paper asks why the 2011-2012 electoral cycle protests were significantly better attended, higher profile and generally more successful than past gatherings supporting opposition politics. The first section tracks the organization of the, from the efforts of a small group of the young media elite to a broader organizing group that also included most major opposition groups. The media elites, who were becoming politically active for the first time, were able to employ new skills, particularly related to communication technologies, and large personal networks, to draw a vast new crowd to the protests. The planning and orchestration of these protests also highlighted resource sharing and cooperation amongst opposition groups who have little in common ideologically, but who face similar systemic problems in a repressive political climate. The second section focuses on the protest participants, demonstrating that they came from the apparently apathetic middle class. With the exit of Medvedev from the political playing field with the *rokirovka*, the rising urban middle class was left without a fig leaf of political representation. As the protests grew, they had a cascading effect, with each successful event encouraging more people to express negative views about the regime.

Although this paper does not cover events up to the present, at the time of this writing, this new opposition has not yet formulated a political platform or established itself as a party. Doing so would be extremely challenging, given the great diversity of views represented by the protest organizers, but there is a great opportunity. If the opposition can recognize that it resonated with a specific class profile in these protests, and move to develop their appeal to that class, a viable movement could be possible. Members of the emerging middle class have a fairly specific set of interests, are remarkably cohesive, comprise a growing share of the population. Ultimately, they will need political representation. It may be challenging for the opposition to act on that, as many of them—as well as many participants—harbor the hope that this will become a mass movement, when, in reality, if it does, other social groups will have different demands. They will also have to overcome a dismissive attitude toward the middle class—that it is too small and apathetic, not important, not really Russian.

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<sup>95</sup> Idov.

For the time being, a vacuum still exists on the electoral market for a politician or party that appeals to the modernist middle class. No one from United Russia is likely to win them over and they will probably be very skeptical of a repeat of the Right Cause scenario, where a party was manufactured to appeal to the interests of businessmen. New political figures need to come forward. This has already happened in small ways in Moscow, where several first-time candidates joined the city council, and hopefully this strategy can continue to develop new faces. How the process will take shape on the national stage is less clear. Other, national-level figures might eventually emerge, as the elites plan for Putin's possible departure from power after this six-year presidential term. Finally, it will also be interesting to watch the careers of the young organizers who were behind the first two protests. They have attained a level of prominence, supported by their public positions in the culture industry, and they are firmly with the opposition, without being tainted by opposition politics. They may have the perfect pedigree to appeal to the new middle class, if they can overcome their own skepticism of politicians.