Thousands protest against Kremlin regime

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Thousands of people joined protests on Saturday in cities across Russia in the largest antigovernment demonstrations in nearly two decades.

In Moscow, a crowd estimated at around 50,000 descended on Bolotnaia Square, expressing outrage over widespread allegations of electoral fraud in parliamentary elections held December 4. Another 10,000 demonstrated in Russia's second major city, St. Petersburg. Protests were also held in Sochi, Murmansk, Chita, Vladivostok, Kazan, Nizhni Novgorod, Omsk and dozens of other cities across seven time zones.

Saturday's events followed a number of smaller demonstrations over the past week, during which hundreds of people were arrested. Despite the presence of upwards of 50,000 police and paramilitary forces at Bolotnaia Square this weekend, no one was detained. The Kremlin reportedly instructed the police not to crack down on the demonstrators lest they provoke an even broader outpouring of popular anger. In St. Petersburg, a handful of people were arrested.

The government of President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is facing a deep crisis, with the demonstrations and recent elections exposing the fragility of a regime long touted as stable and backed by a docile populace.

Support for the ruling United Russia (UR) party fell dramatically in the December 4 elections. Its candidates won only 238 out of 450 parliamentary seats, compared to 315 in 2007. Even with vote rigging—in the city of Rostov, for example, 140 percent of the registered electorate cast ballots—United Russia saw its support drop by over 14 percentage points to 49.5 percent.

Protests mounted in the immediate aftermath of the election, sparked by widespread reports of electoral fraud. The liberal opposition has predominantly led the demonstrations, with the Communist Party, the Just Russia party and various other forces lending their support once the scope of popular anger became clear. Garry Kasparov's Solidarnost party, which embraces a pro-US and pro-market agenda, played a central role in organizing the event in Moscow over the weekend.

At Saturday's demonstration in the capital, the demands put forward by the organizers focused exclusively on political rights, in no way raising opposition to the intolerable living conditions facing the majority of the country's population or the Kremlin's defense of the super-rich.

The resolutions passed at Bolotnaia Square included the demand for the nullification of the parliamentary election results, the holding of new elections, the resignation of Central Election Commission Chairman Vladimir Churov, the official registration of opposition parties and the immediate release of all political prisoners. Another protest has been called for December 24, with organizers insisting that the government has two weeks to meet its demands.

A number of personalities addressed the crowd in Moscow on Saturday, including representatives of the official parliamentary opposition, well known writers and journalists, and various top politicians from liberal parties. News reports noted the attendance of far-right figures such as Eduard Limonov of the ultranationalist National Bolshevik Party, as well as "leftists," all of whom indicated support for the political demands put forward by the demonstration's organizers.

The Russian Socialist Movement, which is affiliated with the French Pabloites' New Anti-Capitalist Party, issued a statement on its web site uncritically extolling the liberals' positions, mentioning the need to bring "socialist" demands into the struggle as an afterthought.

Both at the demonstration and in the international press, the slogan coined by liberal blogger Alexei Navalny—that United Russia is a party of "swindlers and thieves"—was widely promoted. It resonates with many people's experience of official Russian politics.

However, while he is a critic of the Kremlin, Navalny courts the far right and holds an aggressively anti-immigrant stance, having appeared before crowds of neo-Nazis at recent public events. According to the *New York Times*, which ran a long profile of Navalny over the

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weekend, he "once starred in a video that compares dark-skinned Caucasus militants to cockroaches."

Press reports indicate that many of those who came out in protest on Saturday were unaffiliated with any of the political forces leading the events, with support having been built through social networking sites. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, many news agencies noted that the crowds appeared to come largely from the middle class, with people primarily driven by deep discontent over the repressive character of the Kremlin regime.

At the same time, there were indications of profound alienation from the entire political process. The newspaper *Kommersant* reported that one of the slogans held aloft at the demonstration in Moscow read, "We Didn't Vote for These Bastards. We Voted for Other Bastards. We Demand a Recount."

Despite the fact that thus far the demonstrations have mostly attracted layers of the urban middle class, the ruling elite is aware that similar levels of discontent exist broadly within the working class, where disgust with the Kremlin's corrupt rule combines with intense anger over deteriorating living standards and high levels of social inequality.

Skyrocketing prices for food and basic utilities have hit the working class hard over the past two years, with over 2 million more people officially entering the ranks of the poor from 2010 to 2011. The collapse in support for United Russia in the parliamentary elections was indicative of the disillusionment of society as a whole.

The Putin regime fears that a situation could develop in Russia similar to that which unfolded in Egypt in January, when the workers' entrance into struggle transformed a protest by the official opposition into the overthrow of the Mubarak regime.

In a sign of the Kremlin's nervousness that the demonstrations could grow, the school day on Saturday was extended into the afternoon, preventing youth from attending the beginning of the protests. In addition, the protest was moved from its original planned location to Bolotnaia Square, whose layout made it easier for the authorities to monitor the crowd.

On Sunday, President Medvedev announced that he had ordered a probe into the allegations of electoral fraud. The investigation is intended to try to assuage popular anger in an effort to prevent the demonstrations from expanding.

The Kremlin's concerns are shared by all of the "opposition" forces arrayed against it. Russia's liberal establishment is deeply hostile to the working class, with many of its leading figures having played a central role in crafting and implementing the right-wing, pro-market policies of the Yeltsin administration. One of their main criticisms of Putin is that he has not gone far enough in cutting social programs.

The Communist Party, which presents itself as sympathetic to working people, is also entirely committed to Russian capitalism. It represents those sections of the former Stalinist bureaucracy that were less successful in the plundering of state resources after the bureaucracy liquidated the Soviet Union. It bases its nationalist appeal to a large extent on promoting anti-Muslim or anti-Semitic prejudices.

The Communist Party has consistently supported the Kremlin's budgetary policies, which have resulted in the degrading of the remains of the welfare state and essential public infrastructure.

Prime Minister Putin accused the United States of fomenting the demonstrations after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for an investigation into the allegations of vote rigging. While many of the liberal parties are avowedly pro-American and have close ties to the US State Department, and Washington is seeking to manipulate the protests to further its own strategic interests, the sentiments of many attending the protests reflect genuine and widely felt social discontent in Russia.

The decision of broader sections of the population not to participate immediately in the largely middle-class protests stems in large part from the bitter experience of the 1991 dissolution of the USSR, when talk of a democratic revolution became a cover for the plundering of state industry and a massive assault on jobs, social protections and working-class living standards. The result has been a vast economic polarization presided over by a mafia-like financial oligarchy.

However, as the conflict within the political establishment intensifies, the working class will inevitably be drawn into struggle against the Putin regime. Once this occurs, the workers will quickly find themselves in conflict with the official opposition, including the proxies of Western imperialism in Russia.

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