

Pro-market opposition holds Moscow rally

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On Saturday, tens of thousands of people gathered in Moscow to protest the rigged Russian parliamentary elections of December 4. The election outcome was a setback for the ruling United Russia party which, despite its ballot-rigging, only received 49.5 percent of the vote.

With estimates of the number of people attending ranging from 30,000 to 120,000, the rally on December 24 on Sakharov prospect gathered only a few thousand people more than the demonstration on Bolotnaya Square two weeks ago. Minor protests took place in St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk and some other cities.

The rally was prepared by a campaign of the free-market liberal opposition, including numerous articles, commentaries by intellectuals and artists, videos, and features in major newspapers. The Kremlin, for its part, took various measures during the past two weeks to appeal to the liberal opposition and appease the protests, whose right-wing character has become quite apparent.

The rally was organized by a committee drawn from liberal, pro-Western parties, such as *Parnas*, *Yabloko* and *Solidarnost'*, as well as social activists and journalists. Like the Bolotnaya Square protest, this recent protest was overwhelmingly drawn from the urban upper middle class. A reporter of the free-market daily *Kommersant* described the protesters as people “with higher education and a position in society”.

Another journalist noted that they largely did not speak of politics, but chatted about the weather and every-day topics. The rally only lasted about four hours; the crowd began to disperse before the demonstration officially ended.

Former Finance Minister Alexey Kudrin and billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov attended the protest as outspoken supporters. After Prime Minister Vladimir Putin dismissed the protests on national television, President Dmitry Medvedev promised to reintroduce elections to the post of governor, and to facilitate registration for political parties. These announcements were hailed as “major reforms” by the liberal daily *Kommersant*'.

Kudrin also spoke at the rally stating, “We are entering a period of crisis, we need a functioning government. But we do need new elections!” He penned a column in

Kommersant calling for the formation of a new, mass free-market party.

Another speaker was Ksenya Sobchak, a TV presenter and the daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg in the 1990s whom many regard as Vladimir Putin's political mentor. Proposing to form a new party, she called on the protesters to “fight to pressure the Kremlin”.

The protesters booed the openly pro-Kremlin speeches of both Sobchak and Kudrin. However, the fact that both were invited underscores the organizers' attempts to divert the movement into a right-wing direction.

The speaker who reportedly earned the most cheers was Alexey Navalny, a right-wing blogger and demagogue, who became famous by exposing government corruption. He took part in this year's Russian March, an event organized annually by neo-fascists and ultra-nationalists, demanding that the Kremlin “stop feeding the Caucasus.”

In his speech for the December 24 protest, he stressed their peaceful character, while claiming that he would “storm the Kremlin” if the government did not make concessions.

The organizers of the protests carefully avoided raising political issues, limiting themselves to empty demands for “transparency” and “honesty”. This policy aims to keep the hands of the organizers as free as possible—while concealing somewhat the fact that Kudrin, Prokhorov, as well as Boris Nemtsov and Navalny have a right-wing political agenda.

The protest organizers scheduled the next rally for February, leaving the Kremlin time to pursue some of the pro-market reforms it has hinted at in response to the protests.

This decision underscores the fact that the “opposition” parties and the social layers they speak for, no less than the Kremlin, are trying to avoid a political confrontation that could draw in wider layers of the population. They are highly conscious that the working class could come into conflict with the Putin regime. Under these conditions, they are seeking to avoid the outbreak of revolutionary struggles and, instead, seek to stitch up a right-wing deal with the Kremlin at the expense of the working class.

Instead, the Kremlin has pushed to make minor concessions to the privileged social layers active in the

election protests. The amendments to the registration law for political parties and the nomination of candidates proposed by Medvedev were immediately submitted to the Duma on Friday. They will come into force in 2013.

Also on Friday, the Kremlin's human rights committee appointed by President Medvedev to investigate the allegations of electoral fraud, proposed holding new elections and dismissing the head of the Central Election Commission, Vladimir Churov. Both points are key demands of the protesters.

The Kremlin is also exploiting the protests to push for social cuts. As finance minister, Kudrin earned a reputation for supporting fiscal "stability", i.e. austerity. His "opposition" to the Kremlin is based on right-wing critiques of policies he considers "irresponsible"—Putin and Medvedev want to avoid fuelling popular opposition before next year's presidential election and, therefore, to postpone decisions on social cuts. Liberals like Kudrin and Prokhorov urge instead a speedy increase of the pension age, and introducing a 60-hour work week.

In an interview with the *Ekho Moskvy* radio station on December 13, Kudrin stated that the registered parties that stood for election, including Putin's "United Russia", were "too far to the left". He also suggested that the recently approved 2012-14 budget, which provides for a deep cut in social spending and doubles military expenses, had to be "worked over" in the likely case of a global recession. He then criticized the Kremlin for planning to raise taxes and reduce social expenses, instead of simply cutting social programs straight away.

Significantly, two days later, Prime Minister Putin cautiously signaled that the government was planning to increase the retirement age, adding, however, that it was "too early to talk about this". He also stressed that he and Kudrin had only tactical differences.

Such comments underscore the fact that the ruling elites are trying to use the mobilization of sections of the urban middle classes and the liberal opposition to prepare an assault on the working class.

Moreover, the liberals' demands for "transparency" only camouflage the fact that Putin's corrupt, authoritarian regime is the outcome of the restoration of capitalism in the 1990s that was inherently incompatible with democracy—as massive amounts of state property were doled out among competing oligarchs and factions. For the liberal opposition, the slogan of "transparency" effectively means to gain a greater share of this loot.

The Western media generally welcomed the protests. A *Wall Street Journal* editorial called for Medvedev to pursue a reform policy, arguing that the protest movement was a good means to pressure the Kremlin.

New York Times, right-wing historian the Robert Service hailed the protests as a possible "Next Russian Revolution". While after the collapse of the Soviet Union, "the Russian people ... preferred to watch politicians on television rather than become active participants in the country's transformation", Service wrote, Russians now have awakened "to the idea that if they want democracy and social justice, they need to engage in active struggle."

No less enthusiastic about the protests are the various pseudo-left groups—France's New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), its Russian counterpart, the RSM, the Left Front and others. In a statement titled "The Russia of the Indignados", the NPA claimed that the protests were "absolutely spontaneous", ignoring the role Navalny, the businessman Boris Nemtsov and other right-figures have played.

Claiming that "no party, no movement, be it social or political, can claim to organize, let alone represent, this current movement of anger," the NPA praised "an atmosphere of democracy" it saw spreading across the streets.

In its statement on the December 24 rally, the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM) cheered the speech of Sergey Udaltsov, a member of the group Left Front, in which he had called for a National Salvation Committee. This body was to include liberals and various oppositionists, as well as human rights and left activists.

Ilya Budraitskis, a leading figure in the RSM, said in a recent interview that the protest movement had to remain "peaceful" in order to attract broader sections of the population.

These petty bourgeois ex-radicals provide a left-fig leaf to a thoroughly reactionary political agenda, essentially reiterating the demands of the liberals and decorating them with empty "left" phrases. It is noteworthy that many of them, such as Budraitskis, endorsed the US-backed "Orange Revolution" in the Ukraine in 2004.

In their eyes, the goal of the protest movement consists in reaching a negotiated settlement with the ruling elites. However, this would lead to a disaster for the working class, which, as a result, would be confronted with ferocious social cuts.



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