

The pseudo-left Russian Socialist Movement and the dead end of the anti-Putin protests

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The disintegration of the Russian protest movement of 2011-2012 and its reorientation around the right-wing candidacy of Alexei Navalny in Moscow's recent mayoral race has exposed the rotten politics of the pseudo-left Russian Socialist Movement (RSM).

Since the outset of the anti-Putin protests, which it supported and hailed as the "democratic movement," the RSM has worked to provide them with a "left" cover. The organization has sought to obscure the political significance of the fact that the protests did not have a broad base in the working class and were dominated by right-wing, free-market forces. The RSM's aim in this was to block the emergence of a socialist challenge from the working class to Russia's official opposition.

After an initial wave of mass anti-Putin protests in 2011-2012, Russia's "white ribbon" movement, as it came to be known, has largely petered out. What remained of it was diverted into the election bid of Alexei Navalny in September's Moscow mayoral race. Fueled by corporate money and media fanfare, his campaign purportedly drew in many new volunteers.

Navalny was the official candidate of the opposition and ran on an openly pro-business platform, winning the backing of 37 corporations. A vocal proponent of further opening up Russia's economy to overseas capital, he advocates a more pro-US orientation in foreign policy. While he was promoted in the Western media as a democrat, Navalny is a Russian chauvinist known for bigoted anti-immigrant views.

In an effort to lend the Moscow elections a veneer of legitimacy and keep discontent within safe channels, the Kremlin ordered Navalny's release on bail after his conviction on corruption charges earlier this year, so that he could run in the race. On a turnout of just over 30 percent, Navalny won only 27 percent of the vote. His sentence has been suspended for five years.

A conflict has since erupted within the RSM over the significance of Navalny's campaign and what to do in its aftermath. A leading section of the RSM has hailed the dead end of the Navalny campaign outright, as an achievement for the "democratic movement."

"As we all recall," wrote Ivan Ovsiannikov of the organization's St. Petersburg branch on September 11, "the main slogan of the winter protests of 2011-2012 was for 'fair elections.' And we have achieved this."

Noting that Navalny was able "to mobilize a significant portion of the capital's middle class, youth, and liberal intelligentsia" on the basis of populist anti-Putin slogans and "respectable bourgeois virtues," Ovsiannikov then proclaims: "We socialists are proud that we walked in lockstep with this movement over the course of its path, penning some of its brightest pages."

Laying out what the RSM hopes to accomplish, Ovsiannikov states, "If the Kremlin's new course of adaptation with the right-wing opposition is not suddenly curtailed, we can say that the minimum goals of [the protest movement] have been achieved. The door to public politics has been opened slightly. ... Now, we leftists have to use this, albeit relatively ugly,

bureaucratic liberalization in order to rebuild our ranks and consolidate ourselves as an independent, uncompromising party of workers and the indigent."

In short, this faction of the RSM regards the dead end of the protest movement as a success, as it has created a climate of "ugly, bureaucratic liberalization" that opens "the door to public politics" inside the state for groups like the RSM.

The leader of the RSM's Moscow branch arrives at essentially the same conclusions, albeit by a different route. In his commentary on the election outcome, Ilya Budraitskis insists that the Moscow elections were a total defeat for the left. He concludes that the RSM must break out of its isolation by developing closer ties with right-wing forces driving the "democratic movement" and the well-off Muscovites that staffed Navalny's campaign.

Calling for "a decisive reconsideration of our tactics in relation to the protest movement, and our form of political organization," Budraitskis writes: "In place of an essentially small group of co-thinkers, isolated from the strivings of tens of thousands for political participation, we have to create a workers' activists network capable of including people from the street who are prepared, not by word but by deed, to fight for changing the existing state of things."

Ilya Matveev, also of the RSM's Moscow branch, added, "We must become more tech-savvy and result-oriented, and not just conform to abstract principles. ...The 'machine' that Navalny spoke about has to become the political machine of the left, uniting concrete social demands with ? general political agenda in the form of a social movement in politics or a politicized movement in society." This is simply a proposal to do anything with anyone, so long as one can gain access to the resources, human and otherwise, currently in the hands of the official opposition.

These forces within the RSM wish to throw overboard even any pretense of an affiliation with socialism, which they regard as the cause of their political isolation. They completely reject the possibility that the Russian working class can be won to socialist principles. In contrast to what they deride as "socialism for socialists," this faction advocates a "global idea: a society built on democratic foundations and rooted in a humanist and all-human left project."

The call by the RSM's Moscow members for the organization to liquidate itself into the "democratic movement" provoked opposition from a group of RSM members in the industrial centers of Kaluga and Perm. The primary concern of this faction is that the RSM's embrace of the liberal opposition and orientation to affluent social layers will interfere with their relationship with the Russian Communist Party (KPRF) and their efforts to gain influence within the union bureaucracy.

The KPRF attempts to portray itself as the "left-wing" of the official opposition by obscuring its support for Putin's right-wing policies and covering up its role in the restoration of capitalism in the USSR. Similarly, sections of the union bureaucracy try to present themselves as critics of the corporatist politics of the Russian unions. Inasmuch as the

RSM turns ever more openly to the right, it loses the “left” credentials that have made it an attractive partner for the KPRF and these so-called “independent” unions.

The Kaluga/Perm faction of the RSM is worried that this will mean that these organizations will cut the RSM out of the scramble for positions and influence. They describe Navalny’s campaign as a petty bourgeois opposition, warning that this social layer has “formed the basis of the fascist movement and its ideology more than once in history.”

Their purported concern about Navalny’s ties to the far-right is entirely hollow. The KPRF, which the RSM has continuously supported in electoral campaigns and through various “left” alliances, is ferociously nationalist, promotes the historical legacy of Stalinism, and espouses a right-wing ideology that shares a great deal with that of Russia’s fascists. The KPRF, like the RSM, protested alongside these forces at several anti-Putin demonstrations. They did not view the presence of neo-Nazis at the marches as an impediment to their participation.

Regardless of the differences between the factions of the RSM, what unites them is their opposition to an independent movement of the working class.

The RSM rejects any defense of the socialist legacy of the Russian Revolution or the struggle led by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International against the nationalist, bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet state. Rather, by orienting to the KPRF and the right-wing liberal opposition, the RSM makes clear that it endorses those who led the restoration of capitalism in the USSR, the looting of the country’s nationalized property, and the enrichment of a narrow elite at the expense of the masses. Through its affiliation with France’s New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), the RSM allies itself with those forces internationally who lauded Gorbachev’s market reforms during the 1980s and today explicitly renounce Trotskyism.

In its political and social outlook, the RSM represents the convergence of two tendencies: late-Soviet, pro-capitalist and anti-working class propaganda that developed inside the USSR during the 1980s, and the petty-bourgeois ideology of the Western pseudo-left that hailed the restoration of the market.

A June article by the RSM’s Ivan Ovsianikov entitled, “The interests of my class,” embodies these politics. Dripping with hostility towards Russia’s “manual laborers,” the RSM leader extols the virtues of Russia’s intelligentsia, portraying it as the most far-sighted layer in society. He insists that Russia’s “creative class” is “more capable of adopting a critical attitude towards the prevailing ideology than the traditional proletariat” and “comes to political conclusions and actions sooner.”

Ignoring the contradictions in his argument, Ovsianikov then writes that these supposedly more “critical” professionals are typically devotees of capitalism, noting the “large quantity of liberals among poorly paid layers of higher educators or ‘office plankton.’” He adds later on that many within the post-Soviet intelligentsia “feel atavistic superiority towards those who work physically.”

Ovsianikov tries to discount the significance of these points by insisting that support within the intelligentsia for free-market politics is simply a product of intellectuals’ commitment to “political democracy,” which he admiringly describes as their “romantic liberalism.”

Ovsianikov attempts to cover up the RSM’s orientation to Russia’s petty bourgeoisie by using the nebulous term “creative class” to lump more affluent layers of the middle class together with sections of service workers. In his June statement, for example, he conflates the demands of poorly paid schoolteachers, nurses, secretaries, and public employees with the frustrations of aspiring, well-paid professionals irritated at the lack of adequate opportunities for social advancement.

He then claims that the “democratic movement” is the struggle of this “creative class,” implying that the interests of this social layer are uniform

and progressive. The aim is to give working class credentials to a protest movement of a disparate social composition that attracted substantial support from Russia’s better-off layers and was dominated by a right-wing leadership.

At some of the demonstrations, pro-fascist forces had a substantial presence, with news reports describing columns of black shirts marching down thoroughfares.

In contrast to the mass demonstrations that brought down the regime of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the protests were not accompanied by widespread strikes and labor actions in the country’s industrial heartland. By and large, the working class stayed away from the anti-Putin protests. This was not an accident, but reflected the program and political character of the “white ribbon” movement.

It did not advance demands for jobs, better wages and living standards, or for a return of the social guarantees that existed in the USSR, which increasingly large sections of the working population view with regret—let alone the revolutionary overthrow of the corrupt post-Soviet oligarchy by the working class.

Rather, the demands that dominated the anti-Putin protests were “free and fair elections,” the removal of Putin as head of state, and an end to corruption. This program, which would simply open up positions of influence inside the Russian state to a somewhat broader layer of political operatives, offers nothing to the workers. Rather, it speaks to the interests of disaffected sections of Russia’s affluent middle classes.

This layer has benefited handsomely from the country’s oil-fueled economic boom of the last decade, but not nearly as much as it feels it should have. It is jealous of the vast wealth of Russia’s top oligarchs, and of the economic and political power of Russia’s state bureaucracy, which it sees as a brake on its enrichment. By obtaining higher positions and more influence, they hope to obtain a greater share of the profits derived from exploiting the working class.

In his summing-up of the anti-Putin protests, Ovsianikov blames the failure of the protests not on the right-wing character of the forces that came to dominate them, but on the working class. He writes: “The democratic movement did not grow into a social revolution not because it turned out to be inadequately left-wing and not because the social layers that supported it were somehow hostile or foreign to the working class. The fundamental reason for the defeat was relative economic stability, as a result of which neither a rift within the elite nor a mass drawing into protest activity of manual laborers occurred.”

Ovsianikov’s claim that the Russian working class did not protest because it is satisfied with its social situation is absurd. Over a third of Russia’s household wealth is owned by just 110 people. The working class, large sections of which live in devastated former industrial towns, faces widespread poverty and deprivation.

The Russian working class has not joined the “democratic movement” because it sees it as representing social layers divorced from broader sections of the population and, above all, led by forces hostile to workers and dedicated to their own self-advancement. To the extent that people attended anti-Putin protests to express their opposition to inequality, poverty, the gutting of social programs, and attacks on public education and health care, they represent a different class tendency from the “democratic movement,” including the RSM.

In his June statement, Ovsianikov revealed some of the social appetites for which the RSM speaks. “A peculiarity of modern Russia is that in comparison with ‘normal’ capitalist countries, the elite pretensions of intellectuals practically do not have any real foundations here. They are not needed by the state apparatus, which is formed on the basis of blood and clan ties, nor by big business, which for the most part is parasitic,” he writes.

Ovsianikov’s claim that Russia is abnormal, because in “normal” capitalist countries the middle class’ “elite pretensions” have a firmer

foundation, reveals the RSM's real concerns. They want a firmer political foundation for the material wealth and privileges that go along with their "elite pretensions."

The RSM's adoration of the intelligentsia follows a well-worn, reactionary path. This outlook, which is entirely alien to Marxism, has its roots in late Soviet, pro-capitalist propaganda.

As Gorbachev began his pro-market reforms, the state worked to create a social base for the restoration of capitalism by whipping up resentment among "intellectual laborers" towards the working class. Due to their excessive pay, workers were demonized as having unfairly gained at the expense of "intellectual laborers," and being a brake on society's development. The country's future progress required the economic and political elevation of its intelligentsia.

When Ovsyannikov writes that in Russia, "In contrast to many nations, the intelligentsia has never been part of the social elite," he is lying.

Perestroika and the restoration of capitalism in the USSR depended critically on the growth of a layer of pro-capitalist intellectuals with influence inside the Kremlin. They not only elaborated an intellectual justification for capitalist policies, but actually helped craft the "perestroika" reforms. In the absence of a Trotskyist opposition to capitalist restoration based in the working class, the bureaucracy was able to work with these forces to restore capitalism, dissolve the USSR, and loot the Soviet economy.

The head of the Soviet Sociological Association, Tatiana Zaslavskaya, for example, served as a key advisor to Gorbachev. Seen as a center-left intellectual, she ardently promoted pro-market policies, claiming that they constituted a "second socialist revolution." This was the same line championed at the time by the Pabloite movement outside the USSR.

In an effort to explain growing popular hostility towards the implementation of market-based policies, writing in 1990, she gave vent to the anti-working class sentiment that was part and parcel of late Soviet, pro-capitalist propaganda.

"The bulk of the working class do not yet have a deep understanding of the concept of *perestroika*; they have not yet grasped how its measures interrelate, or how much it supports their own basic interests. This is hardly surprising; along with cadre workers, the working class comprises many people who are poorly educated, badly trained, and limited in their social and political outlook," she wrote.

When Ovsyannikov laments that "a young teacher at a university receives 15,000 rubles a month, whereas his contemporary in the factory gets 30-40,000," he is implying that factory workers are unjustly better off than their intellectual counterparts. These are the very same anti-working class frustrations that underlay the propaganda of perestroika.

The pro-perestroika intelligentsia of the late Soviet era sought to hide the character of its politics by insisting that market-based reforms would bring more "socialist justice" to the Soviet masses. Similarly, the RSM today tries to give its quest for an alliance with pro-business, free-market forces a "left," even at times socialistic coloration.

Notwithstanding all promises to the contrary, the restoration of capitalism had catastrophic consequences for masses of people. Industrial workers, as well as the vast majority of the country's "intellectual laborers"—most of whom worked in lower-paid positions in public services such as education, health care, the arts and culture, and scientific research—saw living standards collapse.

Others, however, within the upper echelons of the former Soviet intelligentsia profited from the restoration of capitalism and the new opportunities created by the market economy. Within this layer, some feel that they have yet to realize everything they were promised. The opening up of political life demanded by the anti-government protest movement reflects the long frustrated desires of these layers for a "real meritocracy," in which the supposedly more deserving, accomplished, and intelligent will rule and enjoy the economic spoils of holding power.

When the Russian working class enters into open struggle against post-Soviet capitalism, it will find itself in direct conflict with pseudo-left parties like the RSM and all those forces leading the so-called "democratic movement."



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