

# Protest Genie Is Out of the Bottle

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Supporters of the ruling regime interpreted the results of the March presidential election as a victory for the once-conservative, loyal provinces over the protest-ridden capital. But some regions have joined Moscow's battle.

Astrakhan has led the pack by holding a hunger strike and protests in support of Oleg Shein, who claims that his victory in the city's March mayoral race was stolen in favor of the United Russia candidate. But Yaroslavl, Kaluga and the republic of Bashkortostan have also joined the battle, albeit in a less dramatic form.

The opposition is jubilant, convinced that the provinces have finally awakened and will now continue the work begun by the earlier protests in the country's major cities. But the situation is more complicated.

The authorities have hammered home the message that if the opposition were to come to power, this would lead to a repeat of neoliberal reforms and the deterioration of education, health care and other social services. In response, opposition leaders co-opted several left-

wing activists into their movement to try to show that they have formed a "broad democratic bloc."

Against such a backdrop, it is not surprising that even many voters who are critical of President-elect Vladimir Putin's policies still preferred him to the unknown. But as soon as the election ended, rulers resumed the same course that had frightened voters earlier — something they had undoubtedly planned to do long before the election was held. The large protests forced leaders to delay implementing some of their more unpopular measures, but the conservative voters, who most fear such measures, have made it possible for the regime to pursue them.

But they needn't blame themselves for this. If they had voted differently or if billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov or even someone from the street opposition had come to power, the result would have been exactly the same. It turns out that Russia's brand of capitalism cannot function normally without making a sweeping attack on workers' rights or taking away the remnants of the social safety net for the sake of "reducing business expenses."

The situation will not improve even if the authorities fulfill the social-spending obligations they promised during the election campaign. The resulting drain on federal and local budgets will only force leaders to further cut back on social services.

Now that election is over, the assault on the education system has resumed at full force. In addition, Russian Railways is planning to raise prices, and the government-controlled utilities companies are preparing to wring more money from Russians than ever before.

By provoking the wrath of the lower classes against the liberals, the authorities hoped to use popular discontent to their own advantage, without bothering to think about how they would channel it later. Now they have no idea how to put the genie back in the bottle and cannot imagine how powerful that force really is.

This discontent will inevitably be directed against the government itself as soon as it implements its programs. This time, however, the street protesters will not be educated middle-class citizens carrying iPads and smartphones, but a very different group of people.

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