

Using Taoism and Writers to Fight the Regime

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Riot police broke up a sanctioned protest rally on May 6. After that, police detained Moscow pedestrians carrying white ribbons — the symbol of the protest movement. They also stopped "suspicious individuals" carrying no ribbons at all. That is why writer Boris Akunin proposed a truly Taoist form of protest: a walk along Moscow's central streets on Sunday.

The idea was for Akunin and fellow writers Dmitry Bykov, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Lev Rubinshtein and yours truly to walk from the Pushkin monument on Pushkin Square to the Griboyedov monument at Chistiye Prudy, with an open invitation for readers to join them. I can't say exactly how many people actually turned out, but it was clear that the number was close to 15,000.

On Sunday, I arrived at the Pushkin monument by noon and tried unsuccessfully to locate Bykov or Akunin. Before I could take another step, I was mobbed by people proffering books for me to sign.

I at last struggled free to look for Bykov on the steps of the nearby movie theater, but he

wasn't there. People once again came running from everywhere asking me to sign their books. One even held out a copy of "Atlas Shrugged" — the novel written by U.S. objectivist writer Ayn Rand who was persecuted in Russia by the Bolsheviks — and said, "Well, you're a second Rand, so sign it."

The only other writers I found in the crowd were Bykov and Akunin — each of them for only an instant — because the moment I would stop to speak to one of them, a crowd of people would instantly crystallize around me, sticking together like grains of sand and thrusting forward copies of books written by myself and others that they wanted signed.

This whole facet of the crowd's spontaneous behavior was terribly fascinating. The people who were ostensibly supposed to lead the walk — Ulitskaya, Bykov, Akunin and musician Andrei Makarevich — were unable to walk together or speak to one another because the moment any two of them spotted each other and briefly stopped walking, each was immediately encircled by this crystallizing mob. Despite the lack of organization, the whole group of us walked from Pushkin to Griboyedov without any problems whatsoever.

After this successful, large protest walk, it is fairly obvious that the authorities will soon pass legislation banning protest rallies altogether. But Akunin has come up with an ingenious solution: We will simply go for a walk whenever the occasion demands.

The most important new development is that now, whatever decision the authorities make, it will work against them. It is bad for them if they break up sit-ins or tent camps at Chistiye Prudy and bad if they don't. And the reverse is also true: Everything that happens will have the effect of benefiting the opposition.

It was good that the riot police did not disperse or block the writer's walk, but if they had, it would have only strengthened the protesters' resolve and stripped the authorities of legitimacy.

For the first time in the past 12 years, every tactic the authorities might try will only work to their detriment, while every tactic the opposition can use will only hasten its ultimate victory.

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