

Protest Movement Inspires a Flood of Anti-Kremlin Art

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An oppositionist kicking a riot police officer during the March of Millions on Bolotnaya Ploschad on May 6, 2012. **Igor Tabakov**

"Do you dare come to the square where the regiments are waiting ... between the Senate and Synod?"

These lines, though written by Russian poet Alexander Galich in 1968 about the Decembrist revolt of 1825 on St. Petersburg's Senatskaya Ploshchad, express the spirit of the art inspired by Russia's unprecedented protest movement that began in December 2011.

The poem became the motto of a photo exhibition held in March, devoted to the clashes between protesters and the police on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on May 6, 2012.

One photo of a little boy riding a bicycle in front of the riot police seemed to symbolize the contrast between the huge military machine of the state and Russia's fragile, fledgling

civil society. Several pictures of numerous ranks of heavily armed police and large trucks blocking off access to the Kremlin reflected the tensions that ran high at the rally. The exhibition also featured photos of police officers beating up demonstrators.

Photography is not the only field affected by the protest movement, which has also sparked a row of anti-Kremlin songs. Bands focusing on political issues include Rabfak, whose scathing satire "Our Madhouse Votes for Putin" went viral in October 2011, and Pussy Riot, two of whose members were jailed last year for performing an anti-Putin song in the Christ the Savior Cathedral.

Desant Svobody (Airborne Freedom), a group of airborne force veterans, and Stilyagi, who draw inspiration from the 1950s anti-Soviet cultural movement, have also recorded several songs aimed against President Vladimir Putin and United Russia.

"Until a certain moment I hadn't been interested in politics a lot, but then a moment comes when you can't just write about snow, parting lovers and the Neva, when developments around you literally make your brain boil," Sergei Shiryayev, leader of Stilyagi, told The Moscow Times.

He said the group recorded several anti-Kremlin songs after its keyboardist Nikita Tikhonov's "savage and meaningless" arrest at a protest in December 2011. Tikhonov had been indifferent to politics but as a result of his two-week detention he started to hate the ruling regime, Shiryayev added.

The upsurge in protest activities coincided with the revival of the Mayakovsky poetry readings, named after the 1917 revolution's most prominent poet, in 2009-2012. The readings were originally held in the 1950-1960s on Mayakovskaya Ploshchad, now known as Triumfalnaya, as a veiled form of protest, with art becoming a substitute for politics in a totalitarian country.

"This winter changed the way our streets look, it changed us," Matvei Krylov, an opposition activist, wrote in April 2012 in an announcement about the Mayakovsky readings. "Many have been overwhelmed by the wave of protests, and they still sense its tension and euphoria. Poetry will be the aftertaste."

"We're launching a poetic guerilla war in the streets of Russian cities," Krylov went on.

In May 2012, another opposition poetry reading was held in Moscow at the height of the Russian Occupy movement. One of the poets present, Vladislav Tushnin, derided Putin for allegedly fearing people and for blocking off access to his motorcade's route during his inauguration.

Theater has also been influenced by the protest movement. In May 2012 Moscow's Teatr.doc staged "Berlusputin," also known as the "Two-Headed Animal," outdoors at the Occupy Abai opposition camp on Chistoprudny Bulvar. The play, in which the main character is a hybrid with Putin's body and former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's brain, fit in well with the protesters' mood.

Natalia Pelevine, a Russian-born British playwright and stage director, became famous after

she wrote "In Your Hands," a play devoted to the 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis and critical of the authorities' handling of the terrorist attack. It was banned in Russia in 2008.

She said the protest movement that began in December 2011 had also had a major impact on her work and that she was writing a new political play. She added, however, that many cultural figures were reluctant to take part in protest-related activities because they were afraid of repressions or unwilling to be expelled from state-controlled television.

"They don't want any risks," Pelevine said.

Another unique form of art inspired by the opposition movement is creative posters and slogans used at rallies. One of the posters at the Dec. 10, 2011 rally was "we are 14.6%," a parody of the Occupy movement's "we are the 99%" slogan and a reference to a chart on state television that tallied up the votes in one region to a total of 14.6%.

The demonstration also featured a picture of a monkey titled United Guinea, a spoof on United Russia's bear logo, and a poster that read "I didn't vote for these bastards, I voted for other bastards."

At the Dec. 24, 2011 protest, one demonstrator held a placard reading, "Hillary, where is my money?" — a reference to the Kremlin's accusations that the opposition is financed by the U.S. Department of State. Another poster referred to Putin's decision to run for a third term, "We know that you want us for a third time, but we have a headache."

The March of Millions held on Sept. 15, 2012 creatively exploited the theme of Putin's hang-gliding stunt with Siberian cranes. One of the protesters held a helicopter model reading "Give Russia hope, fly away forever," while another poster read, "Abandon all hope, thou who flyest here" — a paraphrase of a famous line by Dante.

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