

# Social Sciences

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## The Specter of a “Revolutionary Situation”: Protest Actions and Protest Sentiments in Russia Today<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract.* Based on a nationwide survey conducted by the RAS Institute of Sociology in monitoring mode, the odds are assessed of a “revolutionary situation” arising in modern Russia, i.e., a growth of mass grassroots protests. Analysis of the results of a survey carried out in early spring of 2016 and their comparison with the previous “waves” of the survey show that in the near term (the next year or two) a “revolutionary situation” in Russia will remain only a distant menace and mass protest actions will be only a potential threat, not a tangible reality. This conclusion is bolstered by the fact that 2015 saw only a moderate level of personal participation in various protest actions. Besides, current protest actions are prompted mainly by economic factors as people protest against loss of jobs, price growth, etc., not against the government. A paradox is observed: While many protest against the current socioeconomic “rules of the game,” their protest is not consolidated; protest against existing political institutions has its “leaders” (the liberal opposition), but this protest has a far narrower base. At the same time, a dangerous phenomenon is the high volatility of protest activities as Russian citizens, when provoked by “irritating” developments, are prone to instantly switching their sociopolitical allegiances.

*Keywords:* social protest, protest actions, social deviancy, opinion polls, “revolutionary situation.”

A legitimate question that arises in analyzing the development of Russian society is: How ready are Russians for political actions to influence their country’s destiny and uphold their rights and interests? In particular, one should pay

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attention to *protest activity*, meaning public protests against the actions or inaction of central or local authorities involving criticism and demands addressed to officials and institutions.

### **Current Russian Protest Discourse**

The past 30 years have seen an almost total reversal of attitude to mass protest actions. In the USSR they liked to quote Karl Marx to the effect that "revolutions are the locomotives of history,"<sup>2</sup> to eulogize "ardent revolutionaries" of all times and nations (including bourgeois revolutionaries) and to recall that the Soviet state itself was born of a revolution. In contemporary Russia, on the contrary, it is fashionable to accuse *all* revolutionaries of betraying the national interests and of immorality; the expression "color revolution" is associated with "enemy intrigues"; and the fact that the modern Russian state was itself born of mass protests (during the attempted 1991 coup by the *GKChP*, or State Committee on the State of Emergency) is shuffled under the rug. The negative attitude toward revolutions is shared not only by conservative "statists" but by many opposition liberals.<sup>3</sup> There are embers of the "revolutionary spirit" among the few non-parliamentary left-wing radicals and some liberals. All others feel themselves to be not passengers, but rather potential victims of the "locomotive of history."

The prevalence of such "counter-revolutionary" mentality in modern Russian discourse can be explained in the following way. On the one hand, any stable political regime seeks to neutralize those who demand radical change, especially if the members of the opposition to a certain degree enjoy support from the foreign opponents of the ruling regime. That is why Vladimir Putin's oft-quoted words at a meeting of the RF Security Council on November 20, 2014 ("We see the tragic consequences of the wave of so-called color revolutions, and we will do everything to make sure that it never happens in Russia") are consonant with the aphorism uttered more than 100 years ago by the Tsarist Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin ("They need great upheavals, and we need a Great Russia").

The demand for this approach to modern mass protest actions has in the last decade generated tons of literature which in many ways is propaganda rather than science.<sup>4</sup> The question of the similarity of "color revolutions" to the events of 1991 which gave birth to modern Russia is taboo, otherwise one would either have to admit that spontaneous mass protests may be useful, or that the modern Russian state is illegitimate.

On the other hand, there is the typical Russian effect of "frustrated hopes" after the events in the first half of the 1990s, from which an overwhelming majority of Russians at best gained nothing. The majority of Russians came to perceive "revolutionaries" either as "irresponsible windbags" or as people with a self-serving hidden agenda. Russian citizens shared a God-forbid-us-to-live-in-a time-of-change attitude and by and large expressed their readiness to support/tolerate the existing "vertical power structure" so as "not to rock the boat."

Disenchantment with the results of mass protests was already noticeable in 1993 when the stand-off between the President and the Supreme Soviet took place against the background of passivity of the citizens who sympathized rather with the populist Ruslan Khasbulatov than with the liberal Boris Yeltsin, but were reluctant to protest for fear of falling “out of the frying pan into the fire.” When the present political regime accuses its political opponents of getting outside financial support (think of the TV film “Anatomy of Protest” shown in 2012) these accusations—whether true or not—chimed in with the “plague on both your houses” popular mood.<sup>5</sup>

All the above causes created a sort of public “demand for stagnation.” After the succession of revolutions in the 20th century modern Russians treat radical political change as a disaster: “Stormy petrel, stop circling around us like a shadow of suffering and trouble. You won’t lure us into a revolution, stop giving us this rubbish,” goes a hit by Oleg Gazmanov. The paradox is that a significant (perhaps overwhelming) part of those who feel that way are aware that the moment is not so “fair” and that it can’t be made to “linger.” However, society has neither the strength to actively “wish change” nor an idea of what kind of change is desirable (other than the very general ideas of bridging the gaping chasm between incomes and the fight against corruption), nor authoritative organized communities prepared to politically lead the revolutionary protest.

The situation in Russia in the 2000s—2010s is in some ways reminiscent of the Restoration regimes (in Britain after Cromwell and in France after Napoleon) when the majority of the nation, the upper crust and the lower crust, agreed to “forget” the bloody revolutions and “just live,” improve their own and national welfare. This kind of informal social contract aimed at healing national traumas may last a long time if the conservative-centrist political elite offers an effective trade-off of some political freedoms for economic growth (as in China after the death of Mao Zedong).

Thus the attitude to mass revolutionary protest actions in modern Russia is ambivalent not only among “ordinary people” but also among social scientists. The critical attitude to the current political regime goes hand-in-hand with a legitimate fear of the “meaningless and ruthless Russian mutiny.” For the liberal opposition which seeks to lead the opposition forces, the answer in the early 2010s seemed to be mass *non-violent* protest actions modeled on “color revolutions” abroad. However, the developments in Ukraine in 2014 robbed this model of much of its appeal: “Color revolutions” came to be perceived primarily as the result of selfish manipulations by foreign forces and not as expressions of genuine “popular wrath”; besides, non-violence among the protesters was, to put it mildly, not always consistent. As a result protest popular activity is perceived rather as a threat to national security than as a “locomotive” of development. Even so, protest activity among Russian citizens has not disappeared, and it can be looked at from two angles:

1) protest manifestations, i.e., *real* (recent) personal participation of citizens in various protest actions; and

2) protest potential, i.e., *potential readiness* of citizens to take part (in the future) in various protest actions.<sup>6</sup>

To characterize these social phenomena we use data obtained during the course of nationwide surveys of a representative sample conducted by the RAS Institute of Sociology in recent years.

### **Protests That Have Actually Taken Place**

The answers of respondents during the RAS IS surveys concerning their personal participation in specific types of civic activities to press their demands show that the actual proportion of participants in protest actions over the past 15 years has hovered around 2-4% (about 3-5 million nationwide). The general picture of dynamic change of protest manifestations in Russia in the 21st century is as follows.

Before the 2008-2009 crisis, at the tail end of the “fat” years of economic upturn, the level was about 2-3%, which means that at least one in 50 adults took part in some protest actions at least once a year. In the early 2010s, when the “fat” years gave way to “lean” years of slow growth, protest activities increased—as manifested in the 2011-2013 movement against election rigging. Judging from the results of the survey in 2013, during the “hot” years, about 4% of citizens, that is, one in 25, took part in protest actions.<sup>7</sup> Then followed a decline in participation in protest actions as Russians, in spite of the economic crisis that broke out in 2014, on the whole definitely supported the government’s actions in connection with events in Ukraine and became less active. However, the effect of patriotic uplift gradually began to fade, people began to express their anger about the hardship caused by the crisis, and the old problems (corruption, inefficient governance, income gap) were still there.

A comparison (Table 1) of responses to the same questions in 2013 and 2016 suggests that the level of protest action participation during these years was roughly the same.

*Table 1*

**Personal Attitude to Those Who Take Part in Protest Actions, Rallies, Demonstrations, etc. (in %)**

<b>Attitude:</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2016</b>
Approve, take part in them myself	4	4
Approve, though don't take part in them	35	30
Disapprove	14	16
Don't care one way or the other	47	51

At the same time Russians today have become a little less well-disposed toward protest actions than they were three years ago: there are slightly more respondents who don't care or disapprove of the participants in such actions and slightly fewer of those who have participated themselves or approve of those who have. It has to be remembered that in 2013 protest activity was already on the wane: "marches of millions" were a thing of the past, the last mass actions having taken place in the spring and summer of 2013 in support of those arrested in the Bolotnaya case and opposition leaders as dissidents, in line with the Russian tradition, switched from protecting the rights of citizens to protecting the rights of rights activists.

Who, then, are the Russians who made up the 4% of respondents who said in early 2016 that they personally took part in earlier protest actions? The popular idea of a typical modern "rebel" is that of a "pale youth with burning eyes" who lives in a big city and is haunted by the contradiction between the lofty ambitions of the creative class and the low actual social status of the precariat. Perhaps such individuals do form the nucleus of modern non-conformists. However, the survey shows that on the whole the social breakdown of the "rebels" is not much different from the social breakdown of Russians in general. Men of course outnumber women among the participants in protest actions (56% as against 47% in the sample as a whole), but the share of young people aged 18-30 is low (20%—compared to 26% in the sample as a whole). However, there is a higher share of those living in regional centers (37% versus 31%) and those who described their material status as satisfactory (25% versus 18%).

The reason for this may be that in recent years protest actions have mainly been prompted by economic factors; and because a worsening of the material position in time of crisis affects *all* social groups, the social profile of a "rebel" turned out to be very similar to that of an average Russian (adjusted for the generally higher social activity of men and well-to-do people). The participants in protest actions revealed during the survey are for the most part anything but self-proclaimed rebels who constantly protest against "corrupt authorities" in the company of like-thinking people, but rather people confronted with specific socioeconomic problems unconnected with "high politics" or the activities of the non-parliamentary opposition.

The above data characterize those who have really (if only occasionally) joined the ranks of "champions of the people's cause." However, as historical experience shows, the key factor in launching a mass movement is involving the "periphery," the ordinary people, those who are still "silent" but are nursing a grudge against the establishment and are ready to give vent to their anger when poverty and misery worsen.

### **Protest Potential**

Predictably, during the course of all the nationwide surveys, when asked what remedies they would resort to if necessary, most respondents chose non-committal answers such as "I'll look for additional sources of earning" (35-45%) and "I'll do something though I haven't yet decided what" (30-40%). However, sometimes they said they would act more (armed resistance) or less (rallies, demonstrations, etc.) radically.

During the 2016 survey respondents were asked the question: “If your rights are infringed upon, what type of remedy would you personally be prepared to use?” Then they choose one or several out of a proposed list of political actions ranging from taking part in elections and having recourse to the mass media or a law court to seeking help from criminal groups or taking up arms. As expected, the prevalent type of answer was “calm,” with varying degrees of optimism: “taking the problem to the law court” (29%), “none, because there is no effective way to influence the authorities today” (27%), “none, because I am used to dealing with my problems myself” (26%), “petition the authorities”(19%) and “go to the media”(17%). Drastic actions—demonstrations, civil disobedience, armed resistance—were mentioned less frequently, by only 15% of respondents.

A look at the dynamics of respondents’ answers in 2003-2016 to questions about possible participation in various forms of radical protests (see Table 2) readily reveals two characteristics.

*Table 2*

**Dynamics of Respondents’ Answers to Questions about Possible Participation in Various Types of Protest Activities to Uphold Their Rights (in %)**

<b>Proposed answers</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>
Will take part in demos, rallies, etc.	5	5	6	10	6	11
Will take part in civil disobedience actions (not paying taxes, utility rates, etc.)	—	—	—	—	—	9
Will take up arms	6	3	3	3	4	2

First, the number of those who would be ready to resort to radical protest actions involving violence (armed resistance) is usually less than that of those who are prepared to take part in more peaceful forms of protest (rallies, demonstrations, not paying taxes, etc.). The only exception—data for 2003 (when those prepared for armed resistance slightly outnumbered those prepared for peaceful protest actions)—can be attributed to the legacy of the “thuggish” 1990s when the “might is right” principle was foisted on people and to the intensity of the fight against terror (terrorist attacks by North Caucasus “freedom fighters” peaked in 2002-2004). Secondly, between 2008 and 2014 the share of those ready to use violence was remarkably stable hovering around 3%. This is roughly equal to the share of people with mental deviations.

However, in 2015-2016 the index of potential readiness among Russians to resort to radical forms of protest began to change in a rather strange way. In a March 2015 poll, when asked how they would react to a significant worsening of their living conditions, a surprising 4.3% of respondents said they would be ready to take up arms, the highest indicator in the last ten years. Only several months earlier,

during a poll taken in October–November 2014, this answer was chosen by only 3.3%. Such a spike is all the more puzzling because the share of those prepared to use peaceful protest means dropped sharply from 10.0% in 2014 to 6.2% in 2015.

The answer lies on the surface, I think. Boris Nemtsov, a leader of the anti-establishment opposition, was killed in Moscow in late February 2015 just several weeks before the poll. This high-profile event triggered a leap in sociopolitical tensions and many “hotheads” said they were ready “to meet force with force.” When passions subsided, by March 2016 the share of those ready to take up arms dropped to 2.0%, the lowest indicator in RAS Institute of Sociology polls this century. Thus, mass armed resistance to the authorities is very unlikely today in the absence of high-profile events.

At the same time the share of those prepared to take part in peaceful protest actions rose sharply (to 10.9%, by more than one-and-a-half times) by the beginning of 2016 after a dip in 2015. This can be interpreted as a rebound to the 2014 level. In March 2016 more than one in ten Russians said that if their rights were infringed upon (and that could include being fired from a job, a hike of utilities tariffs), they would be ready to join rallies and demos, refuse to pay taxes, etc. That should give more pause than the 1/50 of those who say they are ready to take up arms. The experience of “color revolutions” has shown that if tens and hundreds of thousands of disgruntled citizens turn up for anti-government demonstrations, a few hundred gunmen can stage a government coup by piggy-backing on peaceful demonstrators. So the current situation should be seen as relatively dangerous: the probability of a mass armed uprising is low, but that of peaceful mass protest actions has increased markedly.

We may recall for the sake of comparison that the nationwide *VTSIOM* survey in January–February 2015 yielded much (four times) higher indicators of the protest potential of Russians than the RAS IS poll [14]. According to *VTSIOM* data 24% felt it was necessary to resort to protest actions to overcome the current problems, 16% thought protest actions would be useful in some cases and 8% of respondents declared that the acute problems in their native city/village could not be solved without rallies and demos. In the same poll 23% said protest actions were a normal way of resolving problems that had come to a head, and were manifestation of democracy, and 16% said that if mass protest actions took place in their native city/village they would probably take part in them [13]. The difference between the more worrisome *VTSIOM* findings (24% in favor of protest actions and 16% ready to personally take part in them in January–February 2015) and the rather more comforting data of the RAS IS poll (6% ready to take part in March 2015) may be partly due to the fact that the two polls were taken with an interval of a month and a half during which the sociopolitical situation in the country substantially improved.<sup>8</sup> It has to be noted that *VTSIOM* polls in the 2000s–2010s invariably put the readiness to take part in mass protest actions within the range of 15–25% [3], which is most probably due to the “provocative” way in which the question is couched.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth noting that among those who boldly declared during an RAS IS poll that they were ready to resort to radical protest forms to uphold their violated rights only one in ten had actually taken part in protest actions. By contrast, among those who had such experience, more than half showed no desire to do so in the future. This reflects the usual picture of circulation of members of the protest community: some people lose the desire to protest (because the local aims of the protest have been achieved, or the life goals have changed, or because they have lost faith in the efficacy of the protest) while others, who had not previously taken part in protest actions begin to wish to take part in them. The nucleus of the protest community—those who have protested before and are ready to protest in future—turns out to be very small (1.6%).

Let us now look at the social profile of the few Russians who made up the 2% of those who said they were ready to take up arms in early 2016. A sample of 4,000 is sufficient to draw such a portrait. *A priori* one would imagine that they are the type of people of whom Aleksandr Pushkin said two hundred years ago: “Those who are plotting all sorts of impossible coups are either young and do not know our people, or are people with cruel hearts who don’t give a tinker’s curse for other people’s lives or their own, for that matter” [9, p. 410]. As regards their youth, he hit the nail on the head: people aged 18 to 30 (44% compared with 26% in the sample as a whole) and 31-40 (38% versus 21%) predominate among the 2%. “Cruel-heartedness” is hard to gauge, but not giving much for their own lives can be attributed to the low living standard: there is a higher share of materially disadvantaged people among those who favor taking up arms (33% compared with 22% in the sample as a whole). Other characteristics—the prevalence of maleness (74% of men versus 47% in the sample as a whole) and a large proportion of those who live in provincial centers (42% against 31% in the sample as a whole)—tally with the characteristics of protesters described above.

Thus a typical Russian inclined (at least in words) to take up arms to defend his rights turns out to be a young, poor male living in a provincial center (such communities are the worst off economically).<sup>10</sup> Revolutions are known to happen mainly in megalopolises. Such people are unlikely to become actors in a revolutionary situation. But they may well become a new edition of “Primorye partisans.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Revolutionary Situation: A Looming Specter**

Poaching images from Karl Marx and the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky we can say that a specter of a revolutionary situation has been stalking post-Soviet Russia for a quarter century, now receding, now “looming again at a distance.” Shortly after the start of radical economic reforms in 1992 many crystal-ball gazers warned that the regime was “hanging in the air” and was about to collapse in a new revolution. The events in 1993, which were crowned by tanks shooting at the parliament building, indeed just missed developing into a full-blown revolutionary situation: although most Russians watched the stand-off between the President and Parliament more as spectators than participants, the upper crust was in crisis and poverty and hardship had reached a higher-than-usual level. Subsequently violent civil conflicts moved

first to the North Caucasus and in the first half of the 2000s started to die down. The mid-2000s were the “golden years:” citizens fully approved of the strengthening of the “vertical power structure” in exchange for rapid economic growth. The fact that growth was based on windfall oil revenues with all the negative consequences that entailed could be conveniently ignored for a while.

However, the slowdown of socioeconomic development in the late 2000s brought back the specter of a revolutionary situation. The events of 2011-2013 marked an attempt of the liberal opposition to unite all those who were unhappy about government actions. But the authorities managed to outplay its opponents and marginalize the anti-establishment opposition by declaring its members to be “foreign agents.” Although the authorities had won a clear victory, the “marches of millions” in 2011-2012 remained an invisible factor of political life ever since. The political elite knows that the people are not always “silent” and that mass protests may resume if “irritants” appear. The non-parliamentary opposition also remembers that an apt slogan/pretext for protest can unite against the government tens/hundreds of thousands of Russians of various political views.

Although in 2013-2016 the non-parliamentary opposition saw its authority plummet and “hunkered down,” it is sure to “arise from its slumber” in the coming years. The prospect of “brisk” economic growth (like in 2000s) is highly dubious. The centenary of the February and October Revolutions is more than a suitable opportunity for protest “reminiscences about the future.”

In fact it can already be predicted what protest slogans would attract more Russians in the near future. In descending order of importance the causes of mass protest actions can be arranged as follows (see Table 3): first, as expected, is the protection

*Table 3*

**Readiness to Take Part in Mass Protests Actions in the Near Future If They Take Place Where the Respondents Live (in %)**

Causes (slogans) of possible mass protests	Ready		Not ready	
	Definitely yes	Most probably yes	Most probably not	Definitely not
In defense of citizens' economic and social rights	7	22	34	37
In protest against law violations by local authorities and law-enforcement bodies	8	19	32	41
In defense of local citizens, against the influx of migrants	7	14	35	43
In defense of democratic rights and freedoms (freedom of speech, assembly, processions, etc.)	4	13	41	42
In support of opposition parties and movements	2	5	40	53

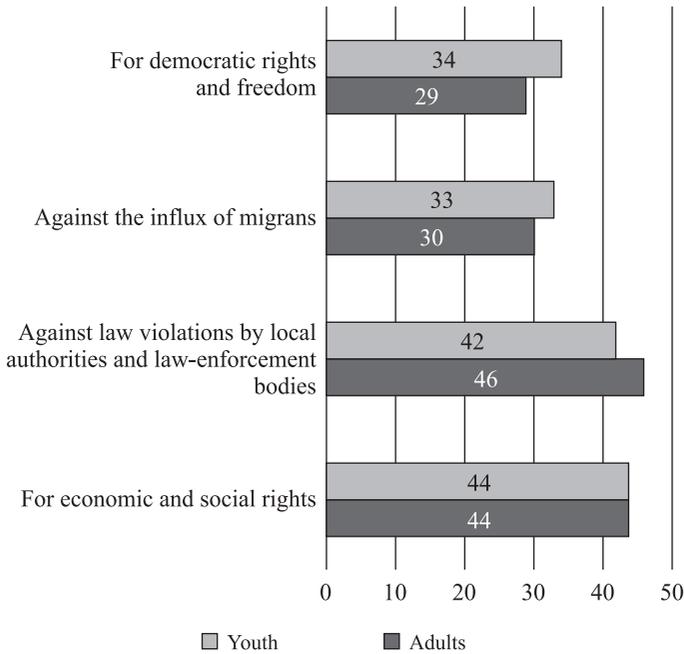


Fig. 1. Respondents’ readiness to take part in mass actions under various slogans (2012, %)

of the social and economic rights of citizens: 29%, that is, nearly a third of Russians are ready to “battle” for them. It is worth recalling that the February 1917 Revolution also started with purely economic protests by Petrograd workers against lay-offs and rising bread prices which developed into anti-government rallies and disarming of the city police because of the inept actions of the authorities.

A comparison of the current situation with the period of mass protest actions four years ago (see Fig. 1, 2) shows clearly the abiding trend of dominance of readiness to uphold socioeconomic rights over readiness to uphold political rights. The gap is less pronounced among young people than among adults; however, young people too are concerned above all about “economic and social rights.” Besides, in spite of the economic crisis the readiness of Russians today to stand up for their rights is less (by about a third) than in the time of the “Bolotnaya case.”

Regarding the methods of protest actions, revolutionaries in various countries had concluded way back in the 19th century that the tactic of brute force—the weapons of protesters against the weapons of the government—is most often doomed to failure: the government defenders are more numerous and better armed (unless the government has lost the support of the army and security structures), while shooting in the streets is likely to scare away ordinary citizens rather than bring them to the barricades.

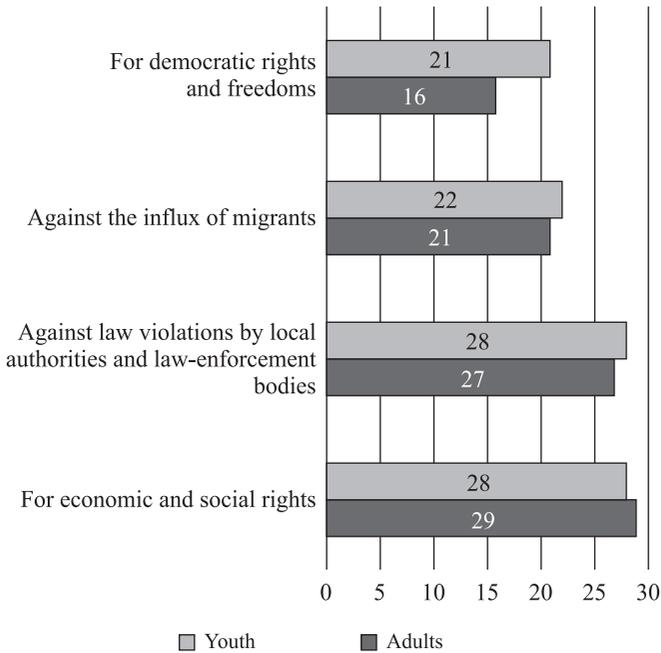


Fig. 2. Respondents' readiness to take part in mass actions under various slogans (2016, %)

A more effective tactic is that of “color revolutions”: mass protest demonstrations paralyze the authorities allowing the radical opposition to replace the old authorities without clashes with police and troops; if the authorities use force against the demonstrators the angry crowd will rally around the protesting radicals (as happened, for example, in Kiev in January-February 2014). Although the first “color revolution” is thought to be the “revolution of carnations” in Portugal in 1975 this model of political protest has a much more venerable age: this was how the February 1917 revolution unfolded in Russia and the Great French Revolution in 1789.

It is important to note that the protest tactics of mass non-violent actions give some leeway to the authorities as well. This was brilliantly demonstrated in Russia in 2012: If the authorities manage to “save face” and handle the opposition by cleverly meeting some of its demands while discrediting the opposition leaders, protests are likely to “run out of steam.” If the protesters themselves resort to violence (even in response to an obvious provocation) the authorities get a free hand to use selective repressive measures against those who violate public order, a move that meets with approval and understanding of the majority of citizens.

As a result the stand-off between the opposition and the authorities turns into a “war of nerves”: he who first resorts to violence and thus breaks the

constitutional “rules of the game” is the loser. The scenario under which each side to the conflict minimizes violence is objectively good for society as a whole because it makes it possible either to find a consensus acceptable to the majority or to identify and take out the least decent actor in the political fray. This is not to say that the new (“revolutionary”) regime will prove to be more effective than the old one: those who can make a convincing case against others are not always good at getting things done themselves. A non-violent revolution is useful as an instrument for *revealing* able political leaders, providing citizens with experience of active involvement in politics while the desired optimum political regime may be hit upon after several tries (France had to go through nearly a dozen revolutions and counter-revolutions between 1789 and 1871 before it got rid of the monarchy).

To assess the prospects of peaceful scenarios of future protest actions it is critical to determine what methods of political struggle the citizens consider to be acceptable. “Color revolution” scenarios under current conditions can only be effective if the bulk of the citizenry rejects the notion that the end justifies the means. Present-day Russian dissenters believe that the ideas of non-violence have sunk in to the population and therefore, according to Vladislav Inozemtsev, one of the liberal opposition ideologists, “the task of all the forces interested in seeing change is to spread the idea that the imminent and inevitable Russian revolution will not be encumbered by the majority of the shortcomings and vices of previous revolutionary events” [12]. And yet is that really the case?

During the course of a nationwide survey in March 2016 respondents were asked what methods of upholding their interests they considered to be acceptable. The list of methods ranged by degree of approval (see Table 4) demonstrates that in modern Russia conditions generally exist for political conflicts that take the form of a “color revolution” and not of violent clashes.

Of course there is no flat rejection in Russia of the violation of formal legal methods of defending one’s interest (“this cannot be done because the law forbids it”). More than 2/5 of Russians (43%) consider acceptable unauthorized rallies/demos/strikes and 1/3 (33%) would accept the blocking of roads (like in Pikalevo in 2009). However, when it comes to violence, even in a symbolic form (throwing eggs/tomatoes, public insults) the share of those who consider such actions admissible plummets to 1/7 (14-16%). Even calls for a “revolutionary” (i.e., violent) change of government are thought to be admissible by less than 1/5 (18%) of respondents, which is added proof that revolutionary rhetoric in Russia has been discredited.

Somewhat alarming is the relatively large share of those who consider admissible the seizure of administrative buildings (14%), forming fighting units (14%), violence against the police (12%) and beating up opponents (10%). Still, people who do not understand the danger of patently extremist

Table 4

Answers to the Question What Methods Are Acceptable in Upholding Their Interests (in %)

Methods of upholding their interests	Admissible	Admissible in extreme cases	Inadmissible under any circumstances
<i>Highly admissible methods</i> (acceptable at least in extreme cases by at least 1/3 of respondents)			
Hunger strikes	8	36	55
Unauthorized rallies, demos and strikes	9	34	57
Blocking highways and railroads	5	29	67
<i>Less admissible methods</i> (accepted at least in extreme cases by less than 1/5 of respondents)			
Calls for a revolutionary change of government in the country	3	15	82
Pouring juice, throwing tomatoes, eggs, pies etc. at the opponent	4	12	84
Spreading slanderous allegations, public insults	4	10	87
Seizing and occupying administrative buildings, company and bank offices	2	12	86
Forming fighting units	2	12	86
Violence with regard to government and law enforcement officials	2	10	89
Fights, beating up opponents	2	8	90
<i>Practically inadmissible methods</i> (acceptable even in extreme cases by less than 1/20 of respondents)			
Murder	1	2	98

actions form a small minority in Russia. As for those who consider admissible (even only in extreme cases) political assassinations, they make up a little over 2%.

Thus, if the specter of a revolutionary situation begins to materialize again in a year or two (if the current trends are anything to go by) we will be looking at scenarios of *peaceful* struggle. At least initially. After all, the First Russian Revolution was triggered by a peaceful procession of Petersburg citizens on January 9, 1905.

### Waiting for another Crisis

What are the prospects for the development of protest actions and the protest potential in modern Russia? First, *the past year saw a somewhat increased, but moderate level of personal participation in various mass protests,*

with about 2%-4% of Russians taking part in various protest actions. That is definitely less than in the “hot” 2011–2012. Most importantly, *present-day protest actions are mainly over economic issues*: people protest against layoffs, rising prices, etc. and not against the government. If the economic crisis turns around, the growth of the number of protesters will be reversed.

Secondly, *the share of those who are potentially ready for radical forms of protest is three times that of those who have already been in the ranks of “fighters” before*. Although fewer people are ready to take up arms (2%) than in the previous 15 years, the share of people prepared to join peaceful protest actions (11%), on the contrary, is higher than in the preceding 15 years. Most probably we see a usual reproduction of the protest community and not its expansion. Among those who say they are ready to take part in protest actions “soon”, those who are ready to come out for their social and economic rights outnumber those who are ready to uphold their political rights.

Third, the bulk of the population (more than 80%) disapproves not only of violent protests, but even of calls for “a revolutionary change of government.” *Most Russians today consider admissible only non-violent methods of protest*. At the same time legal nihilism is widespread—unauthorized rallies/demos/strikes are considered admissible (even with the reservation “only in extreme case”) by more than 40% of respondents. Therefore there may be a repeat of the 2011–2012 scenarios (gradual shift from lawful mass actions to unauthorized actions).

Fourth, one should bear in mind the phenomenon of *relatively high volatility of characteristics of protest activities*. The term volatility is more often than not used by specialists on financial markets to denote sudden fluctuations of an indicator even though the average level does not change. Our study has revealed two such cases: the first was when *VTSIOM* and *RAS IS* in early 2015 registered, within an interval of a couple of months, shares of Russians ready to take part in protest actions changing by about three times (18% and 6%); the second were the leaps of *RAS IS* data on the readiness for various protest actions (in less than half a year between October–November 2014 and March 2015 the share of those ready to take up arms spiked from 3% to 4% and the number of those prepared for non-violent forms of protest dropped from 10% to 6%). It has been suggested that these “flip-flops” are linked to fluctuations of the ruble and the murder of Nemtsov. In any case it has to be noted that Russians, in response to “irritants,” can change their sociopolitical preferences overnight.

Fifth, there is *disconnect between changes of the real and potential participation of Russians in protest actions and the integral indicator of the social sentiment* (sociopsychological state) of the population<sup>12</sup> (see Table 5). The logic of these changes was clear in the 2000s: improved social sentiment led to a decline of participation in protest actions and readiness to take part in them in future. In the early 2010s the social sentiment was improving against the background of mounting protest actions and feelings (this can be attributed

Table 5

**Dynamics of Respondents' Answers on Participation in Protest Actions and Integral Indicator of Social Sentiment**

Characteristics	2003	2008	2010	2013	2015	2016
Share of respondents who took part in at least one type of protest action (in %)	3.3	2.0	6.1	4.1	1.6	3.5 or 2,4*
Share of potential participants in future protest actions (who said they were ready to take part in at least one type of action (in %)	10.7	7.9	–	8.3	9.9	17.3
Integral indicator of the sociopsychological state of the population, points	33 (2002)	53 (2009)		63	49-50	48
* 3.5% chose the answer “approve, take part in them myself” when asked how they personally felt about the people who took part in protest actions, rallies, demos, etc.; 2.4% chose the answer “took part in sociopolitical actions (rallies, demos, etc. )” in answer to the question: “Did you take part in political life during the past 12 to 18 months?”						

to the effect of the 2011-2013 protest actions prompted by strictly political events). During the 2014-2016 crisis the social sentiment deteriorated in parallel with expected substantial growth of readiness to take part in protest actions, but actual participation in such actions was declining. This discrepancy impedes forecasting changes in protest activities of Russians.

The overall conclusion is this: in the near term (the next year or two) a revolutionary situation<sup>13</sup> for Russia will be merely a distant menace. *Mass protests like the Ukrainian Maidan or even the events in 2011-2013 are likely to remain a potential threat*, but not a tangible reality, especially if Russia finally starts to extricate itself from the economic crisis. But the late 2010s may be a dangerous time if the imminent world economic crisis is combined with the pent-up discontent with the performance of the Russian government which in the past 15-plus years has failed to come up with an effective model of national socioeconomic development. Under these conditions the volatility of Russian public consciousness, which is prone to quickly “catch fire,” may turn out to be a highly dangerous factor.

The paradox of modern Russia is that many are unhappy about the current socioeconomic rules of the game, but their protest is not consolidated; protest against existing political institutions has its “leaders” (the liberal opposition), but this protest is far less massive. As long as there are “commanders without troops” and “troops without commanders” the current regime is not in any real danger. The probability of consolidation of disgruntled citizens and opposition politicians will grow/diminish as social discontent grows/diminishes and the prospects of national socioeconomic development worsen/improve.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article is written as a part of the work on the project “Dynamics of Social Transformation of Modern Russia in the Socioeconomic, Political, Sociocultural and Ethnoreligious Contexts” carried out at the RAS Institute of Sociology and financed by a grant from the Russian Science Foundation (Project No. 14-28-00218, supervised by Mikhail Gorshkov).

- <sup>2</sup> This famous dictum comes from an 1850 article by Karl Marx titled “Class Struggle in France from 1848 to 1850” [6].
- <sup>3</sup> Liberal political scientist Aleksandr Obolonsky describes this as a “deeply ingrained negative-repressive attitude of the authorities to any social activism unless it is sanctioned ‘from above,’ and especially, though not exclusively, toward political activity, with regard to which restrictive and punitive measures have always been particularly ruthless” [7, p. 109].
- <sup>4</sup> Examples are [1; 2; 5; 8; 11]. Opposite examples—stressing the usefulness of mass non-violent protests—are few and far between, one example being [12]. It is symptomatic that responses to this article in the social networks use the expression “rehabilitation of the concept of ‘revolution’”; rehabilitation implies that revolution has previously been condemned.
- <sup>5</sup> Even at the peak of the popularity of the radical liberal opposition which criticized the regime for authoritarianism and corruption, public involvement in the conflict between the authorities and radical opposition was limited. This was revealed, for example, in 2013 when the RAS Institute of Sociology conducted another in its series of nationwide surveys and deliberately put this question into the questionnaire: “*Of late opposition political forces have more and more often lashed out against the authorities, calling on people to come out into the streets and take part in mass protest actions. In this case would you rather support the authorities or the opposition?*” The results of the poll showed that those who sided with the opposition had a slight edge on those who supported the authorities, however, both these groups were vastly outnumbered: only 17% ticked the box “*I would rather support the authorities*” and only 21% said they “*would rather support the opposition*.” An overwhelming majority—almost two-thirds of respondents (61.9%)—said they “*would support neither*.” The social base of anti-establishment protests shrank even further in the years that followed.
- <sup>6</sup> “Protest potential” is a term used in the literature to denote orientation of social actors to openly (publicly) express their discontent through mass protest actions [3, p. 21].
- <sup>7</sup> There may have been many more because in 2013 and 2016 surveys among the respondents who disapproved of or were indifferent to protest actions there were certainly some who had taken part in such actions before but then became disenchanted or chose to be on the safe side and give a ‘socially approved answer.’
- <sup>8</sup> February–April 2015 saw a rise of world oil prices which generated an illusion that the crisis of the Russian economy was over, but then the downward trend of oil prices resumed and continued until January 2016, devaluing the ruble.
- <sup>9</sup> This was how the question was put in a *VTSIOM* questionnaire in 2015: “If mass actions of protest against falling living standards, unfair official actions take place in your city/rural area will you or will you not take part in them personally?” [3, p. 28]. When ordinary persons are asked if they are ready to oppose injustice and uphold their rights they may take it as a “cowardice test” and express (in words) much greater readiness to protest than they actually have. To avoid this, RAS IS questionnaires simply ask about readiness to take part in protest actions without prompting to the respondent against what the protests are directed.
- <sup>10</sup> It has to be stressed that data of nationwide surveys are by definition unfit for revealing and studying the milieu of real political radicals who are organized and ready to use violence. The total number of such radicals (radical nationalists, antifascists, radical Islamists, etc.) is estimated at several tens (or at most one or two hundreds) of thousands of people, which is fractions of a percentage point on the national scale. So, they hardly ever are represented among respondents in polls, and if they are, they are unlikely to open up to interviewers whom they do not know. The respondents who declare they are ready to take up arms are more often than not “sympathizers” on the remote periphery of the radical anti-establishment opposition.

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- <sup>11</sup> “Primorye partisans” was the expression used by the media to refer to a group of young men close to skinhead nationalists who lived in a poor village in the Primorye (Maritime) Province who in 2010 attacked policemen in protest against “police abuses.”
- <sup>12</sup> This indicator, proposed by Natalya Latova, shows the ratios of respondents who assess their sociopsychological state positively or negatively during a nationwide survey on a scale from 0 (all respondents assess their state as negative) to 100 (all assess their state positively) [10, pp. 19-21].
- <sup>13</sup> I am referring to the classical definition of the revolutionary situation proposed by Vladimir Lenin as a political crisis leading to a change of power when “the bottoms don’t want and the tops cannot live in the old way.” A revolution can only be victorious if the “bottoms do not want to live in the old way and the “tops” cannot live in the old way” [4].

*Translated by Yevgeny Filippov*