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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Reflections from a Political Scientist

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Protest in Putin's Russia, by Mischa Gabowitsch, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2017, $72.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780745696256, $26.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780745696263

In *Protest in Putin's Russia*, Mischa Gabowitsch has written an authoritative and erudite book that will stand the test of time as one of the best commentaries on the protest wave which shook Russia from 2011–2013. It is truly "an historical book" (12), both in the sense of one that chronicles contemporary events and one to which scholars and analysts will refer for a long time. The book

> takes seriously the experiences and perceptions of its participants (as well as the whole range of research on them across disciplines) and goes beyond reductionist and misleading narratives about a confrontation between regime and opposition, civil and uncivil society, cosmopolitan Moscow and apathetic provincial Russia, or a conservative majority and a liberal urban middle class. (12)

Using an impressive array of data, including his own PEPS (Protest Events, Photos and Slogans) database, as well as interviews, photographs. video material, and field observations, Gabowitsch brings out the variety of experiences that constituted the 2011–2013 protests. The book helps us understand this wave of protests, their implications for the future, and in a manner that has implications for the study of protest across social science disciplines.

First, Gabowitsch's work will surely become one of (if not the) most authoritative works on the protests that reverberated across Russia in the early 21st century for the understanding of such events that they generate. Taking aim at the narrative that depicted the protests as "middle class," the author goes beyond the stylized representations in newspapers, which were predominantly concentrated on Moscow, and brings out the richness of the experience across the other Russian regions as well. The analytical framework he uses to do so is the sociological notion of "regimes of engagement" (21), each of which constitutes a social and political grammar that allows certain claims to be expressed while selecting against others. The three regimes or grammars in his work are the "liberal grammar," the "grammar of personal affinity," and "the regime of exploration" (21–26). These grammars roughly translate to whether claims are made presupposing abstract general values on which rational beings would agree, particular emotional attachments to specific objects, or a present-oriented approach that is based on excitement. Using his extensive experience in Russia as well as intricate knowledge of the culture, Gabowitsch uses these analytical tools to differentiate the causes that brought protestors onto the streets to protest in the manner that they did.

Nothing before 2011 had triggered such mass protests, but the vote-rigging drew the ire of the "many people in Russia who were no longer prepared to sacrifice status-independent rules and respect for individuals in return for a questionable stability" (104). Yet far from all people who came out to join the protests did so for the sake of those liberal values, and Gabowitsch himself identifies many cases where—especially in the Russian regions—the grammar of personal attachment was in evidence as people came out to protest local concerns. It was in the crucible of activism that the

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priority of concerns, the "hierarchy of values," was determined, which allowed anarchists to break bread with the ultranationalists who guarded the camps or provided security at rallies. Whereas many analysts might miss altogether the complexity and variety of causes that motivated people to join "mitings" of the kind we saw in the protests—and assumed the "middle-class" nature of these motives- thanks to this book we have solid data to demonstrate this is not necessarily the case. Those who later come to wonder whether the protests of 2011–2013 heralded some popular sentiment agitating for political change would thus be well-advised to read this book carefully.

Another great example of how this increases our understanding of the protests—as well as the nature of the political regime's reaction—is how it highlights the importance of spaces of protest. Indeed, Gabowitsch states that "many participants in the demonstrations described the mere fact of stepping into a common space or suddenly meeting previously unknown people—whom they perceived as like-minded or at least prepared to engage in dialogue—as an epiphany" (199). Common spaces provide a place in which concerns otherwise kept private can be aired and the variety of citizen grievances against the government or local authorities could be aired. It is partly for this reason that, since 2013, the regime has sought to control public spaces so tightly, creating permitted sites of protest far away from city centers, or what the author calls "protest ghettos" (219). Understanding the process of the protests and the array of causes that brought people out onto the streets makes intelligible this element of the regime's reaction to the 2011–2013 protests.

Although Gabowitsch is less concerned with the question of what the protests signified, one implication is that something approaching a civil society was very much one result of the protests. People coming onto the streets and finding others who had causes that, if they did not share explicitly, were those at least with which they could sympathize, seems to bear some of the characteristics of civil society in miniature. Putin's power, in part, rests on "a culture of cynicism that had been developing throughout the Soviet period and was now flourishing" (64). One way the protests chipped away at this pillar of the Putinite state was to remind people that they were not alone and isolated, but that many of their fellow citizens shared—in part or in whole—similar or perhaps the same concern. Perhaps a moment of "thickened history" (Beissinger 2002), the effects of the 2011–2013 protests showed cracks in the Putin edifice in a short space of time and arguably helped to re-open civic debate in the Russian polity.

Such insights are especially important given recent developments in the Russian polity, namely the seemingly more cohesive protests that broke out in March 2017 and were repeated in June 2017. The precipitating event for the March 2017 protests—this time not eyewitness reports of electoral vote-tampering—was the circulation online of a video by Alexey Navalny that documented the (alleged) wealth of the Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The March protests and their counterparts later in June seemed much more organized and centralized around a specific agenda than did the 2011–2013 protests. Further, the video produced by Navalny featured a prominent role for the oligarch Alisher Usmanov, who subsequently released his own online video rebutting some of the charges and telling Navalny that "I spit on you." *The Moscow Times* declared their exchange to be "arguably the first real political debate between Russia's rulers and the opposition in the last 15 years" (Fishman 2017). Undoubtedly, the liberating experience of the protests contributed to the atmosphere in Russia, which made this renewal of political debate possible, although exact causation is hard to specify. Gabowitsch's book encourages nuanced reflection on the events leading up to this moment.

But it also potentially offers more theoretical insights about the nature of protests in general, although his book "is not primarily an exercise in theory" (26). For this discussion, I will limit myself to three. First, all too often protests and other similar political phenomena are defined in general terms, so the illumination of the procedures in which such a variety of people representing different causes came together was novel. Theorizing Durkheimian "collective effervescence" (13) is a fascinating prospect. By opening the "black box of protest" to the outside viewer, Gabowitsch allows us to see the variety of causes and the playful, almost joyous, ways in which Russians gathered to celebrate them. Similarly, while there were surface similarities with other protests around the world in the wake of the financial crisis, the Russian protests—and the causes that brought people onto the streets in such numbers—were unique in their own way.

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Second, one wonders whether the liberal grammar was ever a complete and sufficient (which appears to be the rather difficult standard to which the author holds the "middle class" narrative) explanation of any protest movement in history. Was it really ever the case that opinions in any protest were as univocal they would have to be for the liberal grammar to hold true? That is, was there ever a completely middle-class revolution? At times, it seems that this is the implication of the tools that Gabowitsch uses to dissect the Russian protests, although we are never actually provided with evidence of this. Anyone who has ever been on a reasonably large protest will be aware that such causes have a tendency to bring out a host of ideological hangers-on (including issues with which one may not agree), such that there is difficulty in ascribing one single and exclusive motive to those protesting. It would thus perhaps be useful to know what degree of ideological coherence there would have to be for the author to accept any singular narrative (including, of course, the middle-class narrative).

Yet this question has implications for the central argument, opposing the designation of the Russian protests as "middle class." One could, for instance, imagine a situation where previous protests in history were described as middle class more on account of their effects than of the actual motivations of protestors. Perhaps observers described the Russian protests as middle class simply because they looked like scenes from a play that had been read before. Indeed, as Gabowitsch notes, the moniker itself originated in the public press, rather than academia:

> … the career of this [middle-class] designation is in itself remarkable. Used by few academic researchers who studied the protests empirically, it became ubiquitous in journalistic writing about them (both in Russia and abroad) since the very first days, and was also taken up by some theorists and outside observers whose main concern was with fitting the Russian case into a common narrative about global protest. (27)

If the "middle class" description is only true when seen from the rear-view mirror, then it would be an interesting finding with profound theoretical implications.

My third point concerns the numerous social science concepts and methodological considerations the author inserts into the text. Throughout the book I kept finding myself smiling at the terminology introduced to name considerations, which if I had thought about consciously before I could not readily name. For instance, Gabowitsch mentions "Nasreddin's fallacy" (32) when discussing his rationale for looking outside of Moscow. Also known as the "streetlight effect" or the "drunkard's search … it is named after the holy fool of Central Asian and Ottoman folklore who famously searched for his keys not where he lost them but where the light was better" (32). The discussion of these methodological considerations in Gabowitsch's work makes reading (and re-reading) the book illuminating not only in terms of substance and themes, but also regarding the methodological considerations he names and to which he gives voice.

In conclusion, then, Gabowitsch's book will stand as one of the most thorough, original, and innovative accounts of the Russian protest wave of 2011–2013. It is a fascinating and deep work that shows the result of innumerable hours of research and study. It is also very well written, with apposite vignettes from the March of Millions being given at the start of each chapter that illustrate well the points the author wishes to make. It is truly "an historical book" (12) and one that I encourage everyone who cares about Russia or protest to read and enjoy.

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