

**Protest Movements and the Culture of Democratic Liberty:
The Example of Street Mobilization in Russia, 2011–2012**

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Abstract: Success of popular political mobilizations is often measured in terms of regime change, institutional change, or, at least, policy change. But these aren't the only possible consequences of mass mobilizations. This article depicts anti-Putin protests in Russian in 2011–2012 as an expression of the burgeoning culture of democratic liberty, which, according to Alexis de Tocqueville, is imperative for stability of liberal democratic polities, and, simultaneously, as a venue of its formation and maturation. On the theoretical level, my goal is to understand how the mores of democratic liberty that Tocqueville wrote about in *Democracy in America*—habits and practices of self-government, democratic political culture, as we would call it today—emerge and change. While Tocqueville was skeptical of popular uprisings, I argue that in the absence of other mechanisms for its emergence, the political culture of democratic liberty, as the Russian protests illustrate, can emerge out of mass street mobilizations.

Keywords: political culture; democratic liberty; self-government; Alexis de Tocqueville; Russian protests; anti-Putinism

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The problem of democratic political culture has been an important research question for scholars of Russia since the country's departure from state socialism in late 1980s–early 1990s. The return of authoritarianism, whether it happened since the start of Vladimir Putin's first presidential term in 2000 or before that, is often connected to Russian citizens' political apathy and civic indifference. For example, political scientist Danielle N. Lussier writes, "If we pare prevailing explanations for Russia's failed democratization down to their micro-foundations, they are generally connected by the same mechanism—mass political participation.... Russian citizens failed to sustain the participatory behaviors that serve to constrain political elites" (2011:294). But Lussier's own analysis reveals that Russians don't entirely lack civic skills. While political activity other than voting significantly declined, until very recently, since its peak in the late Soviet period, Russian citizens are pretty adept at contacting officials, in person or in writing. However, they rarely translate these civic skills into other, more collective forms of political participation (cf. Greene 2014:219). Trying to explain this disconnect between personal civic skills, on the one hand, and lack of collective political action, on the other, much of contemporary scholarship on political culture in Russia comes to a common conclusion: It links (lack of) political participation to the socializing effect under the previous—socialist—regime (that disallowed independent political actions) and to the scarcity of institutionalized avenues to participate. This scheme, however, suffers from at least two flaws: it fails to account for the

spike of political activism during the last five years of the Soviet Union (1986–1991) and implicitly rules out the possibility of development of the democratic political culture in the future embracing, intentionally or not, the idea of path dependence.

This trend is not confined to study of Russia but manifests itself in research on political culture (and related topics of public sphere, civil society, civic engagement, social capital, civic culture, etc.) elsewhere, including in the West.¹ For example, Jeffrey C. Goldfarb convincingly argues that this scholarship often constructs political culture as “too static” and culture in general—as “an inheritance that predicts political outcomes” (2012:37, 25). In other words, scholars of political culture habitually examine it through the lens of political institutions and policy outcomes that it supposedly produces; for them political culture is an explanatory variable, not something that itself needs to be explained (Formisano 2001:402). If any of this scholarship addresses the question of *change* in political culture at all, it still draws unsatisfying conclusions: as critics have noted (Lemann quoted in Jackman and Miller 1998:57), scholars of political culture often contradict each other (or even themselves) insisting that civic mores/culture/capital change both very quickly (as in, for examples, Robert Putnam’s study of American political culture in *Bowling Alone*) and almost never (Putnam’s study of political culture in Italy, *Making Democracy Work*), without sufficiently theorizing or even reflecting on these contradictory assumptions about political culture.

These contradictions and inconsistencies emerge from two related issues in the study of political culture: how it is conceptualized and how it is assessed or measured.

¹ Somers (1995), Berezin (1997), Jackman and Miller (1998), Sullivan and Transue (1999), Formisano (2001), Fung (2003), and Lichterman and Cefāi (2006) provide overviews of this research and literature from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

But if a democratic political culture—civic culture, civic engagement, social capital, public sphere, or however else we conceptualize it—is necessary for “accountable and competent democracy” (Rose-Ackerman 2005:3), how does it emerge, where does it come from? Is Russia doomed to endure everlasting despotism and servitude of the sort that Alexis de Tocqueville famously described nearly two hundred years ago, juxtaposing America and Russia and anticipating future rivalry between the two countries?

The American does battle with the obstacles that nature has placed before him; the Russian grapples with men.... To achieve his goal, the American relies on personal interests and allows individuals to exercise their strength and reason without guidance. The Russian in a sense concentrates all the power of society in one man. The American’s principal means of action is liberty; the Russian’s, servitude. Their points of departure are different, their ways diverse. Yet each seems called by a secret design of Providence some day to sway the destinies of half the globe. (Tocqueville 2004:475–476)²

Liberty as the art of democracy

Despite this fateful ending of his first major volume, it was not Russia that Tocqueville, a forebear of scholarship on political culture, kept comparing the United States to. The driving force behind *Democracy in America* and his other writings is to understand “how is it that in America an order based on equal human freedom leads ... to prosperity and stability, while in [Tocqueville’s native France and Europe generally] even the first steps on the road to such an

² Elsewhere, Tocqueville expounded the comparison describing Russians as “a people still held in the swaddling clothes of servitude and of communal property while at the same time partially enjoying the institutions ... of our democratic and civilized times.... [At] the lower reaches of Russian society ... everything is so perfectly uniform—in the ideas, the laws, the customs, and the least details of the external appearance of material objects. It gives the impression of an America without enlightenment and liberty. A democratic society to frighten you” (quoted in Malia 2000:185).

order end ... civil war, continual instability, reactionary regression and constant fear of revolutionary uprising by the popular masses?" (Offe 2005:12). In other words, what makes America democratic, free, and stable, while postaristocratic France oscillates between despotism and anarchy? What is this democratic liberty that Tocqueville observed in America and where does it come from?

In the realm of politics, democracy to Tocqueville means not how a polity is governed, but who constitutes it: in democratic societies political rights and duties are equally distributed among all: "no one was born with the privilege of legislative authority, all were equally free to determine the content of the laws" (Offe 2005:10, 11). However, democracy, for Tocqueville, is a much more comprehensive notion, one that is just as salient, if not more so, outside of politics. Democracy is the equality of condition and the absence of the privilege of birth more generally, which manifests in and has consequences for all aspects of life—from economic activity to culture, from religion to manners, as well as for politics and government.

In Tocqueville's view, equality of condition has several inherent dangers, most acute of which are individualism and materialism. Individualism is a direct product of the equality of condition: in aristocracies, people were bound to each other by the tradition of duty and patronage, but the new democratic condition "disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures, and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself" (Tocqueville [1945] 1990b:98). Being responsible only for themselves and their immediate private circle makes the "democratic men" believe that their success is not intertwined with the fates of those outside of their primary group: "They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man" (99). Therefore, modern individualism described by

Tocqueville “refers to democracy’s central thrust toward civil apathy, withdrawal and self-imposed powerlessness,” which in political sphere translates into “a voluntary abdication of citizenship, the loss of a will to power and to participation” (Drescher 2006:34–35).

The “love of material well-being,” a separate trait of democratic societies, produces similar effects. Equality of condition generates an intense focus on economic success, because in societies where no one is born into privilege that cannot be legally overcome, “no one can be expected ... to be satisfied with less than any fellow citizen has” (Offe 2005:20). Such unstoppable drive for economic egalitarianism “steers citizens towards a political self-expropriation” (21):

In their intense ... anxiety to make a fortune they lose sight of the close connection that exists between the private fortune of each and the prosperity of all ... The better to look after what they call their own business, they neglect their chief business, which is to remain their own masters. (Tocqueville [1945] 1990b:140)

The main consequence of such abdication of citizens’ political power, a byproduct of individualism and materialism intrinsic to democracies, is the rise of the centralized state administration, of tutelage and guardianship—in other words, of the new, democratic despotism (which, Tocqueville thought, he was witnessing in France).

The opposite of this democratic despotism—and of tyranny and servitude more generally—is liberty, Tocqueville’s notion that deals with the “how” of governing. He construes political liberty as the ability of “a political community to practise republican self-government” (Offe 2005:11n19), as a “political culture in which citizens took for granted ‘the idea of rights and the practice of asserting them ... against the invasion of the State’” (Wolin 2001:222). If

democracy results in individualism, a certain collectivism is imperative for liberty as Tocqueville understood it: “So wrong it is to confound independence with liberty. No one is less independent than a citizen of a free state” (1955:275). So, while the “democratic men” stand asunder, the free men need to act together. Liberty as a collective enterprise has two components and is thus enacted on two levels: the constitution of political subjects (and of subjects in general) through a process of mutual recognition, on the one hand, and, on the other, the dissolution of “the abstract opposition between self-interest and the common good” (Villa 2006:230).

Tocqueville posits that three sets of factors explain the stability of American democratic republic: (1) geographic, economic, and military circumstances of the country—its large and rich territory and no need to fight anyone for it (he did bracket the Native Americans); (2) the laws and institutions, such as vertical and horizontal divisions of power; and (3) subjective dispositions (i.e., customs, norms, and practices)—“habits of the heart,” as he called them—of the Americans. Therefore, it was not only the design of America’s political system—the Constitution, the separation of powers, decentralized federation—that prevented tyranny’s rise, but more so “the whole moral and intellectual condition” of the American people (Tocqueville [1945] 1990a:299; see also Tocqueville [1945] 1990a:318–322; Wolin 2001:172–182; Offe 2005:28n105). As Tocqueville wrote elsewhere, “political societies are not what their laws make them, but what they are *prepared in advance* to be by the sentiments, beliefs, ideas, habits of the heart, and human spirit composing them” (quoted in Mélonio 1998:89, emphasis added). In short, institutions and laws of free societies, America as a prime example of them, depend on a preexisting and decisively more important culture of liberty.

But what is this peculiar American culture of freedom and where does it come from? The most important practice that Tocqueville points to is the Americans’ impulse to “constantly form

associations” driven by the urge to “make themselves useful to their fellow creatures” (Tocqueville [1945] 1990b:106, 105) and the understanding that “collective self-help serves their [individual] interests” (Offe 2005:31)—self-interest rightly understood, in Tocqueville’s words. In short, it is civic mindedness, the recognition that they are part of the society and have common interests with fellow citizens, that propels Americans to participate voluntarily in self-government and, as we would call it now, in civil society. This associational life “serve[s] not only to decentralize administrative and political power”—controlling the rise of despotism—but also “enable[s] ordinary citizens to attain a degree of *positive* freedom it would otherwise be hard to imagine ... by fostering the habit of joint action amongst the equal, isolated, and privatized individuals of modern democratic societies” (Villa 2006:225, emphasis in the original).

In America this culture is largely a product of Protestant Christianity, both its content and its form, as it was brought to the New World by the British Puritans (and therefore predates the Republic). But once firmly established, various religious, secular, and political associations reinforce and perpetuate this culture of civic engagement. In contrast, in Europe “the people have to be *educated* to the practice of freedom, and the ‘reform of customs’ is itself a political task” that can take decades (Offe 2005:13n29, emphasis in the original). But how exactly does this education happen, who is charged with this task, how do habits and mores of democratic liberty emerge? Except for hints at cultured and virtuous elites (likely of aristocratic extraction) as possible “educators” (see, e.g., Mélonio 1998:25; Wolin 2001:9), Tocqueville does not provide clear and compelling answers to these questions.

Contrasting America and France, he suggests that if in the former “free customs have created free institutions,” in the latter “it is free political institutions that have to create the practices” (quoted in Wolin 2001:199). But what if these participatory institutions are “in

limbo,” as was the case in Tocqueville’s France, due to “two centuries of royal and revolutionary centralization” (Wolin 2001:275)? In other words, where are the habits of freedom to be learned if the press, the local government, and other free associations are under the control of central powers? For much of the nineteenth century and some of the twentieth France oscillated between what Tocqueville would describe as anarchy and despotism and yet in the end it did develop sufficient enough, although perhaps not as robust as America’s, culture of liberty. How do we account for this from the Tocquevillian perspective, not only in France but elsewhere too?

In this article I use the example of contemporary Russia to discern how the culture of liberty (the democratic political culture, to use a more common contemporary term) might begin to develop in societies that have a long history of centralized power and, therefore, lack free institutions. I will demonstrate that in the absence (or at least weakness) of preexisting independent voluntary associations broadly understood, the habits and practices of self-government can emerge elsewhere, namely in a setting that did not seem likely to Tocqueville himself—mass street protests. Tocqueville was never a supporter of popular unrest. In fact, the many uprisings, rebellions, and revolutions that happened in France in the first half of the nineteenth century were, in his view, a reason for the country’s frequent state of political chaos—and for its other political extreme, despotism: it is in times of great change and constant turbulence that democratic liberty is in most danger. Of course, in Tocqueville’s age mass popular actions were much more likely to turn (or at least were perceived so) into uncontrollable violent rebellion than they are now, since mass protests have become a normal and quite peaceful part of the repertoire of modern social movements although retaining a certain, but very limited, disruptive component. Tocqueville’s fear of popular uprisings was likely compounded by the perception that such protests were led by politically inexperienced and uneducated leaders, not

by “the most powerful, the most intelligent, and the most moral classes of the nation,” “those virtuous and peaceful individuals whose pure morality, quiet habits, opulence, and talents fit them to be the leaders of their fellow men,” in other words, by (former) members of the aristocracy (Tocqueville [1945] 1990a:7, 12), who could, in his view, guide and temper and educate the masses into liberty.

Perhaps most common measure of successes of popular political mobilizations is regime change, institutional change, or, at least, policy change (see, e.g., Giugni 1998). But these aren’t the only possible consequences of mass mobilizations. In this article I want to investigate effects of popular political mobilizations on political culture, more specifically the origins of democratic political culture in nondemocratic societies, such as contemporary Russia. In what follows, I will show that mores of democratic liberty—habits and practices of self-government—can emerge, or at least begin to emerge, not only through interactions of citizens within free institutions that Tocqueville observed in America but also at street protests, as was happening during the protest cycle of 2011–2012 in Russia.³ This was the largest political mobilization in Russia since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens had attended “pro-democracy” and “pro-independence” rallies throughout the country in late 1980s–early 1990s, which culminated in the popular mass opposition to the attempted coup in August 1991. However, after that street activism significantly subsided. Already smaller crowds came out to protest then President Boris Yeltsin’s dissolution of the Russian parliament in September–October 1993, and in the second half of the 1990s street actions, while sometimes quite big and disruptive, were primarily to express economic grievances like wage arrears. Putin’s first

³ I am not engaging here with the literature on social movements and political culture (see, e.g., Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Giugni 1998; Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly 1999; Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2004; Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, and Su 2010; McAdam and Snow 2010) primary because it largely focuses on the West, where democratic political culture has long been established, and therefore does not seem automatically relevant to Russia or other nondemocratic contexts.

presidential term barely saw any mass political activism; there was a slight resurgence of protesting in his second, but these protests were small in size, localized, and put forward limited demands (see Kleman, Miriasova, and Demidov 2010:83–102). The popular mobilization of 2011–2012, therefore, was an unprecedented phenomenon for the post-Soviet Russia.⁴

My analysis of the protests and what they mean is based on a variety of sources. Russian domestic and international media provided extensive coverage of the protests as well as reports on public opinion polls from and about the rallies. Even though the mobilization was quite unexpected, several groups of local social scientists were able to quickly organize for the study of the protests and in addition to participant observation and polling managed to conduct in-depth interviews with participants of the rallies; I use some of the published results of these studies. Much of the mobilization and preparation for the rallies were done with the help of social media. Through friends and acquaintances I got connected to a variety of communities on Facebook, which was useful not only for staying informed about what was going on but also for observing discussions about strategies for and meanings of protests among their participants. Lastly, the website of the oldest independent radio station in Moscow, Ekho Moskvyy, was also an important hub for dissemination of personal blogs of journalists, writers, artists, lawyers, politicians, scholars, activists, and other participants of the protest movement. Many of these blogs, on their original websites and reposted by Ekho Moskvyy, were open to comments by

⁴ Graeme Robertson (2013) argues that the anti-Putin protests of 2011–2012 should be seen as a continuation of long-standing trends of protest activity in Russia. Specifically, he suggests that protest activity of 2007–2011 was crucial for the more recent protest cycle. While he convincingly demonstrates that the protests of the late 2000s were significantly different from those of the late 1990s in repertoire, demands, and location, his data does not really allow him to show whether the former drew as many participants as the most recent wave. Furthermore, he only speculates that participants of the anti-Putin rallies in Moscow had joined previous protests (although many leaders and organizers certainly had). And while the demands of the pre-2011 protests shifted from the focus on wages and benefits to broader issues of redistribution of resources and became more rights-oriented (Robertson 2013:20, 21), few if any of the better-attended rallies demanded changes to political system, including electoral processes. See Dmitriev (2015) for additional criticism of Robertson’s conclusions.

readers, which gave me an invaluable glimpse into opinions of many Russians. My story is Moscow-centered, which is a function of both the fact that this city had the biggest rallies and the bias of my sources, but there was similar activity in many other cities in Russia, although admittedly on a smaller scale.

Timeline of the 2011–2012 mobilization in Russia

On Sunday, December 4, 2011, Russian voters cast their ballots in the parliamentary election. At the end of the evening, the pro-Putin party Edinaia Rossiia (United Russia) was pronounced the winner with almost 53 percent of the seats in the Duma. Despite its apparent victory, United Russia had a much weaker performance compared to the previous election: it received 15 percent fewer votes and therefore 77 fewer seats than four years earlier. However, by the next morning the Russian internet was flooded with reports, accompanied by photos and videos, from hundreds of independent observers who had witnessed electoral fraud of various kinds (from stuffing ballot boxes to forging wards' final tallies). However, one of the most iconic images proving this fraud first came from the Central Electoral Commission: broadcast on a government-owned television station, it showed election results of one of Russia's regions adding up to 146 percent.

The next evening, between 2,000 and 10,000 people⁵ showed up in the center of Moscow to protest this fraud. It was five, possibly ten times more people than the organizers of this rally hoped for, and it was the best-attended political rally in ten years. Two main leaders of the event, along with dozens of participants, ended up sentenced to 15 days behind bars for disorderly conduct because after the rally they tried to march toward the Central Electoral Commission's headquarters about a mile down the street. For the next couple of days there was other street

⁵ As is often the case, the police underreport and the organizers overestimate the number of participants. I try to give a range for each rally as reported by the Russian media (e.g., Diatlikovich and Martem'ianov 2012).

activity in Moscow and other Russian cities, including rallies by Putin's supporters. During the first three days after the election the police detained over a thousand people at the opposition rallies just in Moscow. Nevertheless, by Friday that week nearly 50,000 people declared on social networks (Facebook and its Russian equivalent VKontakte) that they would come out to a rally in Moscow on December 10 (Radchenko, Pisarevskaia, and Ksenofontova 2012:10).

Despite disagreements within the ad hoc committee of organizers regarding the venue (which, according to Russian law, must be approved by authorities) and the list of speakers, the rally took place across the river from the Kremlin—on Bolotnaia Ploshchad'—and was attended by 25,000–150,000. About the same number of people (29,000–120,000) came out two weeks later, on December 24. Demands at both rallies were to investigate electoral fraud, pass legislation that would allow more parties to run for parliament, repeat the vote in a truly free and fair manner, and free all political prisoners including those taken in the days after the election.

After a six-week break for the holidays and strategizing, 36,000–120,000 turned out in Moscow to march for about a mile in 4F-degree cold on February 4, a month before the scheduled presidential election. In another three weeks, some 11,000–35,000 Muscovites participated in a flash-mob action called the Big White Ring, when standing shoulder to shoulder, holding hands, and wearing white ribbons and other white accessories (the white color had become the symbol of fair elections) they encircled Moscow's downtown with the Kremlin in the center of it.

On March 4, 2012, Putin, then prime minister, was again elected president of Russia (he held that office for two terms in 2000–2008). His victory was both anticipated and unexpected: there weren't any strong candidates running against him, but Putin's opponents hoped that he would not get a majority of votes right away, being forced into a run-off. The general consensus

among the public and independent scholars was that voting irregularities did happen in the presidential election too, but they were of different kinds than in December 2011, not as brazen and therefore more difficult to document, and that there were not as many of them to influence significantly the outcome of the vote (see, e.g., Saprykin 2012; Zubov 2012). Moscow was the only region where Putin failed to win majority of votes—and it was also the region with the highest number of independent election observers.

Two rallies—on March 5 and March 10—followed the presidential election, but they attracted fewer participants (30,000 according to most optimistic counts), their goals were less clear, the mood—less cheerful. The next big protest (8,000–60,000) took place on May 6, the day before Putin’s presidential inauguration. This was the first rally/march that turned violent—there were clashes between some protestors and the police.⁶ The march was broken up but gave birth to the Moscow version of the Occupy movement, which lasted for about three weeks. The last mass rally of the season took place on June 12, Russia’s Independence Day, with probably 20,000–30,000 in attendance in Moscow, 10,000 in St. Petersburg, and smaller crowds in other cities across the country. Protest activity continued in the fall of 2012 and throughout 2013 but on a much smaller scale.⁷

⁶ It is widely believed that protestors were provoked by the police who, unlike during any previous rallies, interfered with the march. After the rally was dispersed, the police raided several cafes in Moscow, presumably in search of troublemakers from the march but ended up hurting and detaining innocent bystanders. Several protestors were arrested in the following days, and some have stood trial and been convicted to prison terms.

⁷ Wikipedia has meticulously documented and sourced chronology and geography of the protests (http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A5%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B8%D1%8F_%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B9_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0_%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B2_%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%84%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8_%D0%B2%D1%8B%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2_%D0%B2_%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B8_%282011%E2%80%942012%29).

By December 2012, nearing the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the protests, the media in Russia (including social media) were bursting with analyses of the “failure” of the protest movement: The main claims of such commentary were that little had changed in the country and the activist drive of the past year was wasted. While some of this might be true—the “party of power” is still securely at the helm—I offer a different evaluation of the outcomes of the 2011–2012 protest movement. In the next section I will show that the mass protests were an expression of the burgeoning culture of democratic liberty and, at the same time, I argue, a venue of its formation and maturation. My four examples illustrating this thesis include (1) volunteering for the rallies, (2) development of the collective spirit and solidarity among the protesters, (3) their adherence to non-partisanship and coalition building, and (4) independent electoral campaigns for local offices and the coordinating council of the opposition in the immediate aftermath of the protests.

Democratic liberty at Russian protests: Cases

Misgivings about popular protests similar to Tocqueville’s that I mentioned earlier are quite common in Russian, and especially post-Soviet, political discourse of both the authorities and the opposition. Russian authorities frequently present tutelary despotism and anarchy (or stability under a strong-armed leader vs. social collapse, in the terms they use) as the only two alternatives. This means that the opposite of tutelage and guardianship is equated with disorder, leading to calamity, rather than with US-style stability, prosperity, and democratic liberty. But this view is not confined to Russian leaders prone to authoritarian tendencies; the oppositionists are also often fearful of popular unrest. For example, Russian novelist Boris Akunin, who was

active in organizing and spearheading several of the 2011–2012 protests, marking the first anniversary of the protests wrote on his blog that he was against

not just revolution in general but *also the so-called peaceful revolution*. I do not want the authoritarian regime to collapse as a result of town-square rebellions, highway blockages, nationwide campaigns of civil disobediences, and mass Occupy movements. I am afraid of chaos that will accompany such a commotion.... I would like the authoritarian regime not to crumple in an instant, rumbling and rattling, but to be replaced as a result of a fair election. Then, God willing, we'd avoid total collapse. (Akunin 2012, emphasis in the original)⁸

Both the regime and the protestors exhibited this dichotomous way of thinking early on during the protests: The authorities tried to draw parallels between the Russian protests and the uprisings of the Arab Spring (in particular the one in Libya, which was one of the most violent, ending in lynching of the country's president Muammar Gaddafi). At the same time, the protestors were very consciously distancing themselves from the events of the Arab Spring: "No to a revolution, yes to the constitution"—this comment on a Facebook page of one of the groups organizing the rallies best sums up this sentiment (see also Bikbov 2012a:148; Kozyrev 2012b; Radchenko et al. 2012:15). Not only were all but one rallies absolutely peaceful and thus did not result in the eruption of the mythical "Russian revolt," I will show that these massive street gatherings were actually manifestations and the sites of the emerging culture of democratic liberty that, according to Tocqueville, is imperative for the stability of liberal democratic polities.

⁸ Further, Akunin (2012b) elaborates that postimperial states, such as the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, are especially prone to unfavorable outcomes of even "peaceful" revolutions.

Case 1

A big change that happened in Russia in the past ten years and to which the protest activity testified was the decline of focus on purely personal, materialistic pursuits (or, of individualism and quest for well-being, in Tocqueville's terms). As one protestor stated, "Lack of interest in politics has stopped being grounds for pride" (Zaleskii 2012). Another confirmed: "People ... have come to realize that in order for anything to be right, they need to step up themselves, rather than just sit around and wait" (Peshchikova 2012). In early 2000s volunteering and charity were viewed with suspicion—for many, it was hard to believe there was no self-serving motive behind them. But the protests "became a real triumph of voluntary, uncompensated activity" (Tarasevich, Skarlosh, and Ofitserova 2012). Firstly, there were thousands of people across the country who volunteered to be electoral observers, which involved several hours of training before the voting day and then endless hours on the election day at a polling station keeping an eye on election officials. These people wanted to see for themselves that the elections were going to be as fair as officials were promising, and to do everything to ensure they were if the system was indeed rigged, as oppositional politicians were claiming. They were the ones to expose the scope of electoral fraud, and they were among the early and enthusiastic participants of the first rallies.

Then, the protests themselves needed a lot of volunteers: not only members of the organizing committee, which included professional oppositional politicians as well as intellectuals and artists, volunteered their time—or the rally participants, many of whom came armed with handmade, witty, and sometimes very elaborate protest signs. All large demonstrations had a good number of volunteer marshals, who handed out fliers and white ribbons, collected trash, counted rally participants, signed up future election observers, and so

on. It is important to remember that no single organization (such as a political party or a labor union) or even a group of organizations was responsible for mobilization of participants to these rallies—only about 10 percent of participants belonged to political organizations of any kind (Gromov 2012:32). Like most attendees of the rallies, the marshals also self-organized through internet communities. “If one were to add up all the time that election observers, as well as rallies’ organizers and participants and other volunteers spent, it will come up not millions but tens of millions of man hours,” summed up one publication (Tarasevich et al. 2012).

There was also the issue of financing the rallies: the stage, sound systems, porta-potties, and other amenities. From December 2011 through March 2012 the organizers collected about 9 million rubles (300,000 USD) primarily through small (5–10 USD) donations. If in the first decade of this century Russians were mostly interested in making a living and enjoying their earnings, now many “reject the social contract of the 2000s, which rested on the authorities granting their subjects personal freedom—in the areas of self-expression and money making—in exchange for their noninterference in the political realm” (Carnegie 2012:11).⁹ To use Tocqueville’s words, no longer “[t]he discharge of political duties appears to them to be a troublesome impediment which diverts them from their occupation and business” ([1945] 1990b:141).

Case 2

Not only many Russian voters donated their time and money for the protests, they were no longer reluctant to express their protest publicly and collectively. For older Russians showing

⁹ See Kats (2012) for more on volunteers and donations for legal aid for those detained after the May 6 march. In 2012–early 2014, many protest participants also attended several lengthy trials of opposition figures (including three members of the punk-rock performance group Pussy Riot on trial for singing an anti-Putin and anticlerical song in a Moscow church) to express solidarity with the accused and to monitor the judicial system.

membership in a civic or political group by wearing this organization's colors or buttons might be even more difficult than joining such civic initiatives. It is a reaction formation to the overbearing, forced collectivism of the Soviet days; once the obligatory insignia and uniforms of the Soviet era disappeared, few were eager to have them replaced: collectivism and solidarism were, at least seemingly, rejected for the sake of "capitalist individualism." But in the wake of the 2011 parliamentary elections, the sentiment changed—at least for thousands of people who quickly adopted the new symbol of the movement for fair elections—the white ribbon—and wore it not only to the rallies but also every day.

Until recently, such public expression of membership was taken as a sign of groupthink and was expected mostly from staunch political activists (and often of a "radical" stripe: such as socialists/communists or nationalists). For many, it was not easy to join the protests, to be "in the crowd," as they often admitted in interviews to the media or in online communities. But once this discomfort was overcome, many rally participants gleefully commented on the sense of solidarity and community that they felt at protests. They found themselves to be part of not a mob but of a benevolent public. "One for all, and all for one"—a chant at an early protest (Iashin 2011)—was now a profoundly felt sentiment that many of the participants described to journalists and sociologists. It was perhaps most evocatively expressed by a participant of the Big White Ring flash mob in late February 2012. She wrote: "This is an unforgettable feeling: we are standing on the sidewalk shoulder to shoulder and all the cars on the road are honking ... and people [in them] are shouting [to us]: 'We are with you!' They waved white ribbons at us not only from cars but from trolleybuses too. And from cars without any white symbols they nonetheless shouted: 'We are with you!'" (Bakushinskaia 2012). As one publication summed up, "the psychological barriers have moved—the fear of collectivity has disappeared. Thousands of

students, market researchers, historians, teachers, writers, and businessmen have become aware of their responsibility for their country” (Tarasevich et al. 2012). Not only is “general indifference [not] a ... public virtue” any more, but many Russians, at least the rallies participants, do not any longer hold a “habit of ... considering themselves as standing alone” (literally), to use Tocqueville’s language ([1945] 1990b:102, 99).

Case 3

In the same self-conscious way that both the organizers and participants of these protests enacted the movement’s peaceful and self-limiting character,¹⁰ they, for the most part, remained—which is quite unusual for Russian oppositional politics—non-partisan and therefore unified. Already for the first rally, popular opposition activist Aleksei Naval’nyi called for unity, writing in his blog: “It does not matter who’s organizing the rally ... Everyone must come out to protest. Nationalists, liberals, leftists, green, vegetarians, Martians. Everyone had their votes stolen” (quoted in Bikbov 2012a:145). Simultaneously, Russian online communities began to discuss and plan scenarios of peaceful expression of civic position, framing it not in terms of “political opposition” but of “a common cause” (Radchenko et al. 2012:16–17). “We are not an opposition, we are the people,” announced one of the best-received speakers at the December 24 rally.¹¹ To a large extent, it was the newcomers to the protest movement who, comprising the vast majority of the rallies’ participants, prevented the movement from deteriorating into factionalism and being hijacked by a group of one political stripe or another (Diatlikovich and Martem’ianov 2012; Kozyrev 2012b).

¹⁰ On the self-limiting character of the East European civil society and revolutions of 1989, see Cohen and Arato (1994) and Ehrenberg (1999).

¹¹ <http://www.publiciti.ru/ru/news/1obrashchenie-leonida-parfenova-24dek-o-putine-narode-i-internete24>.

As I mentioned before, after the first, still smallish rally, the most vocal and visible opposition leaders, including Naval’nyi himself, were imprisoned, and the task of negotiating with the authorities regarding the date and venue—and therefore of “organizing” the protests—fell onto an ad hoc group that consisted of less partisan, often non-professional opposition figures who were not necessarily affiliated with any political group and therefore did not have a well-formulated ideological agenda. This is not to say that there were no disagreements among members of the organizing committee, but for once political leaders and activists of various stripes put their own agendas aside as they realized that even if they were on the stage addressing the rally, the people they spoke to did not come to support any of them individually (see Kozyrev 2012a). Most of political activists who spoke at those rallies did not command much authority over the protestors, as sociologists have found: it was members of the artistic intelligentsia, to use a Soviet-era term, on the organizing committee or among the speakers who garnered the most support and respect (Volkov 2012:22). The protests largely remained “leaderless,” and at the time it was considered their strength: it showed the protestors’ ability to self-organize, tolerate other political views, and remain focused on the uniting goal of advocating for free and fair elections by preventing any single political group or agenda to dominate (Kasparov 2012; Peshchikova 2012).¹²

Organizing of the protests, especially early on, was marked by an animated debate whether to include Russian nationalist groups in the planning of the rallies and to let their representatives speak. Already at one of the very first rallies, groups of nationalists, environmentalists, and antifascists—otherwise an explosive mix—marched together through the

¹² Some critics of such approach, however, argued that this seeming unity came at the expense of the opposition’s ability and willingness to put forward substantive demands for change in social policy (e.g., Silaev 2012). On the other hand, the fact that the protests were “leaderless” was later sometimes presented as one of the reasons they did not result in regime change, because they failed to produce a politician capable of successfully challenging Putin.

city chanting in unison “Russia without Putin!” (Kozyrev 2012b). Yet there were a lot of skeptics and opponents, but the majority in the end chose to compromise, to include the nationalists; no doubt it was done to preserve the image of the movement as beyond ideology, to demonstrate that demands for fair elections were something that groups from different ends of the political spectrum could agree on. A small splinter group, unhappy with such an alliance with the nationalists, attempted to organize an alternative rally on February 4, 2012, but no more than 200 people showed up to it, while close to 100,000 marched elsewhere in Moscow alongside nationalist groups.

Coordinators of the latter demonstration, by the way, agreed on marching in formations organized according to political ideologies: liberals, nationalists, and socialists. However, at the head of the march would be the so-called civic alliance. Explaining this decision, moderators of one of mobilization hubs on Facebook wrote that such format of the march was actually good for preserving unity and tolerance: First, they said, putting the “civic alliance” at the head of the protest march would prevent radicals of any stripe from seizing the lead. Secondly, the division by political ideology would demonstrate that the overwhelming majority not only did not belong to any political organizations but did not even share any of their political ideologies. And lastly, the moderators reminded their audience that one of the goals of the march—and by extension of the entire protest movement—was to ensure “the widest possible spectrum of political forces in the new Russia and to guarantee that the relationship among these parties was based on competition but also on mutual respect. We are all practicing mutual tolerance even if we don’t like each other” (My byli na Bolotnoi). The moderators of this Facebook group were right: while in the beginning of the march political groups tried to maintain some division among themselves, in the end of it, at their destination, they all mixed together into one, packed-in assembly—to

keep each other warm in subzero temperatures and to unanimously vote for the rally's demand of a fair election. "Protests have proved that such dialogue [across ideological divisions] is not only desirable but possible. There is a growing understanding of the absolute need to avoid violent action, and of the need to stay together to jointly press the authorities to open a meaningful dialogue," one analysis has concluded (Carnegie 2012:17).

Of course, leaders of different political groups that participated in these rallies admitted—and their constituents understood this perfectly well—that one day they would fiercely compete against each other in a free and fair election, but for now they were supporting each other and putting their ideological differences aside to ensure such an election happened. As Tocqueville put it, "the desire [of being elected] leads all men in the long run to support each other ... and if it happens that an election accidentally severs two friends, the electoral system brings a multitude of citizens permanently together who would otherwise always have remained unknown to one another" ([1945] 1990b:103). This brings me to my last case.

Case 4

When mass protests subsided, demands for fair elections didn't stop; they took different forms consistent with the exercise of the Tocquevillian customs of democratic liberty. As if they heard Tocqueville say "town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it" ([1945] 1990a:61), quite a few protesters ran in municipal elections as antiestablishment candidates in the spring of 2012 (and even more since then). That was particularly true in Moscow where there were twice as many candidates than previously, and candidates affiliated with opposition parties or running as independents won about one third of all municipal seats, which is more than three times what

they got in 2008 (Newsru.com, March 20, 2012). Not only the number of antiestablishment candidates spiked after the protests, but so too did the number of people willing to vote for them (Schwartz 2012). Some of these candidates—and now members of municipal boards—were local activists of political organizations, but many—especially newcomers to the electoral, and more generally political, process—did not belong to any political organizations and often ran very low-budget and low-profile campaigns. These positions on municipal boards do not pay well, do not get much media attention, they are not very glamorous because the matters these boards decide are not of national importance but rather deal with very local and, some might say, trivial issues such as maintaining sidewalks and playgrounds, and even then the final decision is often in the hands of local bureaucrats appointed by the mayor (at the local level too power is slanted toward the executive branch in Russia). But many activists do see their local boards and municipal districts as breeding grounds for change and arenas to mobilize their constituents, especially since their path to higher-level offices is usually blocked. Many of them ran for these local offices—and have been participating in other local campaigns and initiatives since 2012—desiring, specifically, to “extend the experience of ... collective action” of the protests (Zhuravlev 2015:53).

But it is another election that is particularly worth mentioning in this context: the election to the opposition’s Coordinating Council, which took place in October 2012. This election was unique in several respects: first of all, an entirely independent and transparent electoral system was set up for this election, much of it coordinated online, and all the results, procedures, financing, and such were made public for anyone to scrutinize. The election was preceded by a two-month-long electoral campaign, during which over 200 registered candidates for this 45-member body debated each other in several rounds of televised debates (aired on an internet-

based television channel), after each of which viewers ranked the candidates. Russian citizens who wanted to vote in the election had to register and get verified prior to casting their ballot. Both of these stages—and voting itself—required quite a bit of perseverance as they involved several steps and computer or cell-phone technology. Moreover, the voting, which was supposed to occur entirely online with only a few backup physical polling places, was nearly sabotaged by cyber attacks. Despite these obstacles, over 170,000 people registered, close to 100,000 got verified, and 80,000 voted in the election.¹³ Thus, it was not a political forum or a party congress that elected this coordinating committee, but Russian citizens who chose to participate in the voting. Not all political groups that had participated in the protest movement decided to run candidates in this election, but one third of the council was elected on three so-called party lists: liberals, leftists, and nationalists. While members of the council sometimes exhibited “personal ambition, ideological differences, mutual suspicion, and a lack of trust,” they were attempting to ensure coordination of the opposition’s disparate parts (Carnegie 2012:17)—and this was a big and important development in itself. The council, which was elected for a one-year term, met several times, its sessions were streamed online, and its first joint statement condemned the government’s repressions and alleged torture of opposition activists. Last several meetings of the council in the summer and fall of 2013 suffered from a low member turnout and lacked quorum to take any votes. Its term ended in October 2013 without new election scheduled. However, what its election testified to most of all was the ability of Russian citizens to self-organize for political causes and a growing trust among them.¹⁴

¹³ About two thirds of the voters were from outside of Moscow, which supports the view that the oppositional activity of 2011–2012 was not confined to the central cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg (Naval’nyi 2012).

¹⁴ OkkupaiAbai, the Moscow version of the Occupy movement, is another example of self-organization and trust among the protestors (see, e.g., Bikbov [2012b] and Grigoryeva [2012]), as was a quite

Concluding remarks

By no means the protest movement that surfaced in late 2011 was the first expression of the “awakening of the civil society” in Russia in recent years; many of the protestors, while new to any political activity, had had experience in volunteering at orphanages, with local ecological initiatives, or in neighborhood activism (Bikbov 2012a; Silaev 2012; Tarasevich et al. 2012; Volkov 2012). However, only a year before, a distinguished expert on Russian politics and society argued that despite many local civic initiatives across the country, Russians were unlikely any time soon to mobilize for collective resolution of their problems vis-à-vis the authorities, preferring to resort to the centuries-old method of problem individual solving, bribery (Lipman 2010). The 2011–2012 protests were the most *massive, public, and collective* demonstration of civic engagement—a surprise to the authorities, to the previously small groups of opposition activists, and to the protestors themselves.¹⁵ To these “internet hamsters,” as they had been called before, the spike of protest activity, the discovery of how many they were was in itself an amazing thing, judging by statements in the media and on social networks. Secondly, the protests not only brought the discontent of thousands of Russian citizens out in the open, but they clearly and specifically focused it on *the political sphere* and the existing political system of hyper-presidentialism rather than on individual politicians and bureaucrats as previous protests had

successful—in terms of voter mobilization if not in terms of final tallies—Aleksei Naval’nyi’s electoral campaign for the office of mayor of Moscow in the summer and fall of 2013.

¹⁵ Of course, even the largest demonstration of 2012 drew only about 0.1 percent of the country’s population. But as James L. Gibson (1997:675) notes, “protest behavior in virtually all polities is confined to a narrow slice of the population.” Not much more than half a million people (in the country with the population twice the size of today’s Russia) took to the streets to protest the anti-perestroika coup in August 1991 (671). Proportionately to the overall size of their respective populations, the “colored revolutions” in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) ignited participation of more people than demonstrations in Russia (Tucker 2007:537–538), and perhaps this is why those protests, also sparked by electoral fraud, were more successful in forcing the authorities to cancel the results of falsified elections.

done. Furthermore, these mass street actions articulated an understanding that the processes of developing democratic political culture and bringing about political change are time-consuming, often tedious, and more difficult than revolutions (see Akunin 2012b; Tarasevich et al. 2012; Turova 2012), but there also seemed to be willingness to spend time, money, and energy on them. “The internalization of norms of independence and responsibility among the common people,” until recently unnoticed in Russia (Rutland 2009:211), is taking hold.

At the same time, I do not want to exaggerate the strength, the breadth, and the depth of these democratic mores that, as I have shown, were developing at the protests. Empirical studies need to gauge changes in trust among citizens, to ascertain continuation of their commitment to various collective civic and political initiatives, and to estimate what portion of the population and what socio-demographic groups did indeed develop and retain these new habits of self-government and associationism. The intent of this article is not to suggest that every Russian—or even majority—has in the last few years acquired the culture of democratic liberty; my main goal here is to show that in societies without free institutions street protests can serve as initial arenas of its development.

From the onset of the protest movement, news media—both domestic and foreign—labeled it the “revolt of the middle class” and the “revolution of the creatives” because of the supposedly high percentage of participants from creative and professional occupations. Some sociologists have disputed this assessment, arguing that the rallies’ participants themselves rarely and reluctantly identified as middle class, and instead proposed that the protests were “a symbolic reestablishment of Moscow *Bürgertum*” on the foundation of virtues like honesty, restraint, prudence (Bikbov 2011). According to Tocqueville, as mentioned above, it was the aristocracy, at least in the medieval Europe, who were the main guardians of liberty, although he

does acknowledge municipal self-government of urban commercial classes as well (Tocqueville 1955). But with the spread of democracy (in the postrevolutionary era on the European continent) “social power . . . shifted from the aristocracy to the middling classes, from the class whose ideology was public virtue to the class whose ideology was private self-interest,” and in order to successfully maintain democratic liberty the bourgeoisie had to learn and practice “individual self-denial and collective self-restraint” (Wolin 2001:196, 285). To a certain extent, the Moscow protesters have already discovered the former and exercised the latter.

Even the critics of the “middle class paradigm” of the protests concur that what united the protestors was the experience of self-directing their lives—through search for employment, freelancing and entrepreneurship, frequent domestic and international travel, and so on (Bikbov 2012a:151–159; Dmitriev 2015:232; Gabowitsch 2017:27–32).¹⁶ I have suggested elsewhere that such autonomy and independence are hallmarks of the culture of modern capitalism but also characteristics of the post-Soviet middle class (Author 2010, 2012). One analysis of the demonstrations against falsified election results has suggested that without the growth of consumer society (if not outright “capitalism”) in Russia, such protests would be unlikely: Modern consumers are accustomed to having freedom of choice—where to shop and what to buy, for example; and now this expectation also applies to the political system. Fictitious choice or choice of low-quality options are considered a violation of rights, and this is exactly what happened in the December 2011 election when voters were not only presented with limited and inferior selection of “electoral goods” because many political groups were denied registration to appear on the ballot, but the choice they grudgingly made in these circumstances was denied by electoral falsifications (Veselov, Diatlikovich, and Sokolov-Mitrich 2011). This is not to

¹⁶ Swidler (2001:90) makes a similar point about skills of social value developed through labor market experience in all modern capitalist societies.

advocate that, contrary to Tocqueville, intense focus on individual affairs and materialist pursuits is unequivocally good—or necessary—for democratic liberty. But I want to suggest a revision to Tocqueville’s thesis that when people are “little versed in the art of association,” they are “less reluctant ... to join political associations [than joint business undertakings], which appear to them to be without danger because they risk no money in them.” In other words, while political associations may be “free schools, where all the members of the community go to learn the general theory of association” (Tocqueville [1945] 1990b:116), the experience of autonomous economic activity—of civil associations, in Tocqueville’s terms—can be just as important for learning skills that can be transferred from the private economic sphere of the civil society in the nineteenth-century sense of the term into the public and political—the civil society in the contemporary sense.

To return to the main driving question behind this study: How does the culture of democratic liberty emerge in places where it had not existed before? How does political culture change? While not providing explicit answers, as I have already mentioned, Tocqueville, first of all, suggests a possibility, at least in certain circumstances, of a certain spillover effect (Elster 2009:98) from private to public life (see, e.g., Tocqueville [1945] 1990a:219), which I also pointed to in the previous paragraph. His discussion of the American free institutions and voluntary associations can lead to another possible answer: the very participation in them, he says, fosters public spirit and awareness of mutual dependence, makes private practices and ideas public, produces lasting ties among people, and reminds people they live in a society and not alone¹⁷—the very effects that we saw emerge also from the street actions in Russia. Tocqueville, in a sense, prefigured symbolic interactionism: culture of democratic liberty, like culture in

¹⁷ Tocqueville, needless to say, was not the only one to stress the educative effects of participation. For a summary of these views see Held ([1987] 1996:263–273).

general, is what people do. Symbolic interactionists have defined culture as “products of social action that in turn may be drawn upon in the further conduct of social life” (Hall 1990:20) and have argued that “how culture works as a guide in organizing collective action and how it comes into being are really the same processes” (Becker 1986:19). In other words, political culture changes through everyday interactions of participants (inter)acting for political purposes, either during daily service on civic committees or at street protests. Russian protest rallies of 2011–2012 created something similar to a “barricade sociality” observed at other protests, where the “practices of building barriers, guarding streets, procuring food, or huddling together generated social relations that turned strangers into comrades” and did so “primarily through pragmatic *practice* rather than political *rhetoric*” (Dzenovska and Arenas 2012:646, emphases added).

Furthermore, the protests also created new, public spaces for open and independent communication about politics. As one sociologist concluded, increasingly people came to the rallies not to demonstrate that “they are against [something]” but to meet and interact with each other as members of a newly established communicative community (Diatlikovich and Martem’ianov 2012). Another expert concurred: “People come [to the rallies] to establish horizontal ties. They are sick and tired of vertical [power relations], of [top-down] commands,” they want parity relations (Newsru.com, March 7, 2012). The clever, self-made protest signs played here an important role of self-expression but also of “first contact” with anonymous co-protestors (Bikbov 2012b). A critical communicative function was performed by online media like personal blogs and social networking sites. They were not only effective means for organizing street actions but also important tools of critical thinking and “self-therapy” throughout the entire period of street protests and in their aftermath. Tocqueville stressed the importance of mass media (newspapers, in his age) for cooperation “with ... fellow citizens for a

common purpose” ([1945]1990b:113). When television is controlled by the state and the print—and even online—professional media are struggling financially, as is the case in today’s Russia, the “new media” not only connect many of their users for “common activity” but have an added benefit of an interactive, do-it-yourself quality that makes otherwise passive consumers of news and opinion into their producers. Collective critical deliberation is facilitated by the blogs’ and social media’s “comments” option, with shared-to-the public Facebook “status updates” collecting hundreds of responses, and blog posts—thousands of comments, often in dialog with each other just as much as with original postings. “New” media have been used not only as platforms for analyses of events or recommendations and predictions for the future, but also as sites for (public) self-reflection about personal transformations resulting from participation in the protests, as well as for avowing resolve—and often for mutual persuasion—to continue participation in public affairs. As much as social media might enable narcissism under certain circumstances, they also have the “capacity to create a public(ish) sphere that is integrated into everyday life of millions of people” and “to support the formation of a counter-public” (Technosociology 2011).

Jeffrey C. Goldfarb (2006) has argued that face-to-face interactions in private and semiprivate arenas, like underground readings of dissident writers in communist Poland, are important preconditions for democracy: that is how new definitions of political situation get established, which, according to him, is essential to major political changes like the eventual end of communism in Central Europe. Mass protest movements can also be important and powerful arenas for making new definitions of political situations and thus for changing political culture. For example, “pathological obedience to the law” and “maniacal civility” that participants of all demonstrations and street camps in Moscow vehemently insisted on was a conscious effort to

distance and distinguish themselves from the boorish cheaters on electoral commissions and aggressive policemen “guarding” the rallies, not to mention the country’s top politicians seen as disrespectful of citizens’ demands. Treating each other as they wanted to be treated by the political establishment, the protestors reaffirmed themselves as respectful and respectable, responsible and free citizens even if this role was denied to them by the despotic regime, thus collectively moving a few steps closer to the culture of democratic liberty—which is forged through everyday work not just within the framework of free institutions but at street protests, too.

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