



A UNITED RUSSIA?

BY ANGELINA ROTMAN

Russia without Putin! Shame! Constitution! This is our city!” protesters in Moscow shouted as they took to the streets this past December. In the largest protests since the collapse of the Soviet Union, tens of thousands of people across Russia rallied against election fraud, calling for the resignation of Vladimir Putin and burning flags of Putin’s party, United Russia.

While United Russia won only roughly 50 percent of the parliamentary votes, as opposed to 64 percent in the 2007 elections, cries of fraud and falsification seized the Russian blogosphere, sparking protests of a size and scale not seen in Russian since the 1990s.

Tufts students Scott Mimnaugh and Ben Van Meter, studying abroad in Russia, experienced the historic events first-hand in the city of Yaroslavl, less than 200 miles northeast of Moscow. The Yaroslavl oblast, or province, had one of the lowest turnouts for the United Russia party.

“Despite the fact that there was opposition, there was not a huge amount of people out for the protests,” Van Meter said. “For a lot of people, they did not want social protests in their country. It was the first major one in Russian since the collapse of the Soviet Union. I think that partially scared the crap out of a lot of people. I think, to many people, the protests could go to that bad end—the ‘90s, or as my host mom said, another Stalin.”

A history of too much change too quickly, combined with remnants of the Soviet era feeling of political powerlessness, has kept Russia from its own version of the Arab Spring. Political authorities,

too, were careful to manage the protests, keeping things under control through police and even military forces in Moscow.

“It was very managed demonstrating, managed civil rights,” Mimnaugh said of the protests in Yaroslavl. “Everyone was allowed to protest, but it was not an American type of protest. It was completely fenced in, and there were cops everywhere. There was a very large police presence—kind of absurd. I’m surprised they had enough cops to do that. It was very much this kind of, ‘you’re allowed to do this, sure, but we also have the strength to stop you.’ It was a show of force.”

When state media sources failed to give the protests adequate coverage, Russians turned to the Internet to express their discontent and relay news. Russian blogs, news websites, and social media exploded with coverage of the protests.

“Once I was in the teacher’s lounge, and I asked a professor something about the protest, and immediately she and another professor started having this exchange of information,” Van Meter said. “Then other professors joined in, and it was basically everyone debriefing each other about what had happened.”

For Russians, the protests marked the first real civic engagement of the post-Soviet era, shaking the general sense of political impotence.

“I think it clearly affects the idea of people being powerless. I think that might have a long term effect—people can self-organize and make a difference,” political science professor Oxana Shevel said. “The[re] is a conception of civil society, that people can stand up and feel that sense of camaraderie.

Civic association life has been traditionally undeveloped. That might actually change things. You hear how everyone felt this sense of oneness. Will that last and will that morph into stronger civil society? It’s still too early to say.”

As the March presidential elections draw nearer, the likelihood that Putin will transition back into the role of president does not appear too damaged by the protests. The same cannot be said for his carefully structured public image.

“Putin has to tread lightly, because he’s used a lot of his political capital at this point,” Mimnaugh said. “It’ll be interesting to see how a PR machine like United Russia deals with what may become a sinking ship.”

While there’s little doubt that Putin will soon reclaim his position as Russia’s president, the Russian public’s reaction to the election process and results will be something to watch.

“It’s going to be interesting to see how the election is going to be perceived by Russians,” Van Meter said. “Putin’s candidacy was seen as sort of background dealing. You’re deciding the results before we even vote on it. If falsification is too brutal, Russians are going to get angry. I think they’re tired of being treated as children by their government. They don’t want the government to think it can lie to them through its teeth and get away with it.”

As the opposition finds its footing, Putin and his party face a complicated political landscape, one made even more so by the public’s thawing political apathy. A new era of Russian politics is emerging, whatever Putin’s official title may be. ☺