

THE RITUAL YEAR OF RUSSIAN POLITICAL “WHITE-RIBBON” OPPOSITION (2011 – 2012)

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Abstract: In this paper, based on personal archive data, the intensive ritual political year of 2011-2012 (and some new facts of 2013), mostly in Moscow, is examined to show manifold traditional ideas and practices involved in expressing major political issues. It also characterizes the oppositional activity as generating some new ritual calendar customs in Russia. The modern political and social opposition as such appeared and showed itself massively after the falsification of the elections to the Lower House of the Parliament of Russian Federation (State Duma). December 4th, 2011, marked the beginning of the corresponding ritual year. The Presidential elections on May 5, 2012, and further steps of the government provoked even wider resistance and new ritual forms of protests.

On Facebook, in mass-media and in the streets, the citizens developed unprecedented creativity while preparing for, taking part in, and then reflecting on the meetings, marches, motor rallies and other forms of protest. Thousands of posters, cards, huge billboards, etc., illustrated the values, hope, and political views of the people. The oppositionists looked for historical, political, and geographical parallels to make these activities and their respective artifacts satirical and expressive. In doing so, they often resorted to the symbolism of the ritual and nature calendar years, church festivities, and family rites. Christian holidays such as Shrove Sunday, Easter, Pentecost, and Transfiguration of Christ (the so-called Apple Feast) can be discovered in the slogans, programs, and comments of the opposition. All the state holidays (March 8th, May 1st and 9th, The Day of Russia, June 12th, etc.) have been transformed to assist in the political struggle. The 60th jubilee of the President of Russia took on its own oppositionist scenario with fake presents and greeting cards. Oppositional festivity with its ritual artifacts; Carnival images of color, flora symbolism; linguistic games with political personal and city place names; and songs and rhymes are thoroughly examined in the paper.

Keywords: festival, ritual year, protest, state holiday, Orthodox calendar, carnival

Introduction

Recent protest activities in Russia, which started to develop after the elections in the Parliament (December 4, 2011) had been massively falsified. Initially non-organized, the first riots grew into an organized movement which received its own symbol – the white ribbon and correspondingly the name, “Belaya lenta”. Political life in Russia is very dynamic at the moment, accordingly the variety of the political acts is huge. The oppositional movement uses all displays of creativity. Scholars of the humanities immediately realized that this movement would provide valuable data for analysis in any field of research – sociological, historical,

linguistic, folklore, ethnological, visual anthropological, etc. On Facebook, a new group was created, which was named “Folklore of the Snow Revolution” (moderator Andrey Moroz). The members of the group participate in the political events, collect the data, take interviews and make publications.¹

In spite of the obvious importance of the ritual components for the oppositional activity, the problem of a political event as a holiday and its correlation with the ritual year has not yet been discussed. This paper aims, first, to examine the intensive ritual political year of 2011-2012, mostly in Moscow, to show manifold traditional ideas and practices involved in expressing political views. It also illustrates the oppositional activity as producing new ritual calendar customs in Russia. The study is based on personal archive material and data published in mass media and social networks, such as Facebook. The latter turned out to be a useful and productive public space for discussing and planning the events and then summing up the results, feelings and emotions.² Facebook is the place where the creative and ideological planning of all the oppositional events takes place, and it is where the organizers and the participants share their views and the impressions of the event.

Many people describe their feelings and emotions towards the event as festive and joyful. A political rally is perceived by the participants as a city holiday, and this comparison also needs clarification.

Oppositional Rally as a Holiday

Scholars define a festival in various ways, but they usually agree in one point: a festival gives the participants the feeling of wholeness and recognition of similar people around them. For example, Robert Smith notes that in a festival the ritualistic and ceremonial functions are important, but not adequate to explain the function of a festival as a whole. Rather, the central function of the festival seems to give the people an occasion to rejoice together, and interact in the mood of acceptance and conviviality. There is a bond between the participants and they identify with each other as part of a community. Thus “the festival is a prime device for promoting social cohesion, for integrating individuals into a society”.³ The major intention of the protesters is to openly express their political views and to meet up with people who share similar values and political ideas. Political gatherings and marches give the participants a touch of festivity, with joyful emotions of recognition that are similar for the whole crowd. As early as 1931, Robert Briffault argued that festival was “the most concrete expression of collective emotions and loyalties”.⁴ The idea of recognizing and meeting soul mates

1 AZBUKA PROTESTA (Азбука протеста) 2012; АХМЕТОВА (Ахметова) 2011; VOLKOV (Волков) 2012; GROMOV (ГРОМОВ) 2011; СЕДАКОВА (Седакова) 2013.

2 On the role of Facebook in protest activity see MASON 2012.

3 SMITH 1972. 164.

4 BRIFFAULT 1931. 201.

was expressed most during the “White Ribbon” car rallies, which were organized in February 2012 in Moscow. Cars decorated with white symbols were joyfully cheered by the crowds standing along the roads and waving with white flowers, scarves, cloths, etc.

Festive meetings of people are especially important in big cities. Unlike the villages, city residents do not know their neighbours. The cheerful atmosphere and the feeling of conviviality is always underlined and remembered by the participants of the rallies: “Remember the joy of recognizing soul mates, this wonderful feeling of being among friends, which you experienced maybe for the first time in your life in the winter political marches of 2011-2012. ‘These amazing faces around’ – sounded as a refrain in many reports from the rallies, and even more often this summer”.⁵ Festive motifs are included in the protest activity more and more often, with the events even being described as a holiday. For example, the rally organized to greet the released from prison Aleksey Navalny was called “The Festival of Disobedience”, with a rally-concert taking place on the night before the elections.

Apart from internal, emotional, and festive components, there are also external festive components in protest events. The spontaneous meeting on the day of the elections (December 4, 2011) did not have any festive potential; frustration, anxiety and anger dominated. However, the first organized rallies on December 10th, 2011, on Bolotnaya Square and then on December 24th 2011, on Sakharov Prospect, as well as other events, did remind of a city festival (with a stage and a program, concerts, decorations, etc.). Any new event adds new festive and ritual forms and details to these organized gatherings. Thus “The big white circle” car rally on the Garden Ring in Moscow established the contest for the best “white” decoration of the car. “The walk with the writers” on May 12, 2012, initiated by Boris Akunin, included typical events of a cultural city festival with poetic readings, talks, etc.

Festive Political Artifacts

The modern Russian oppositional movement, as noted above, received its name from the distinguishing sign of its members – the white ribbon. This symbol is inspirational to those who take part in the movement. White strips are tied to clothes and hats, to bags and backpacks, to strollers, pushchairs, and dogs’ leashes. Women put the ribbons into their hair and men weave them into their beards and moustaches. Groups of protesters prepare beforehand white strips several kilometers in length and take them all the way through the protest march. Other artifacts and objects of white color aroused in the rallies and this gives the event a very festive outlook. There also were many white flowers and toys. Special attention was drawn toward the balloons, which are also an important

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/Russia.will.be.free?fref=ts>, Last accessed: September 06. 2013.

decoration in any festive public event. In this protest, balloons, like many other objects, obtain additional symbolism and serve as slogans. Relevant mottos are printed on the balloons, according to the political ideas of the riot. In the first oppositional events “For fair elections”, one of the most frequent slogans written on the balloons, was in Russian “*Меня надули*” (literally ‘I was inflated’, while the Russian verb for *to inflate* means ‘to cheat’). The protesters used the balloons at the 60th Putin’s jubilee to wish him “Happy retirement”. There are also many white badges and stickers with topical mottos which express the protest idea and also help to feel the togetherness of the movement members.

The same functions and the idea of joyful celebration have influenced the choice of the protesters’ clothing. Many of them wear white garments (scarves and hats, dresses, shirts, etc.) and T-shirts with portraits of the protest leaders, political prisoners, with mottos. Carnival costumes and masks are often used in the protest marches. The figures of Father Frost and the Snow Maiden in the December and January events around the New Year are natural; they add to the festive atmosphere of these seasonal protests and allude to the themes of wishes, miracles, and gifts. The figure of the Death (The Grim Reaper) in black with a scythe also does not need additional explanation. (Compare this to other political and social rallies with symbolic funerals of education, medicine, science, etc.). Masks and carnival costumes without evident semantics are interpreted in several ways. Some see the reflections of the medieval carnivals in the political events, but others insist on serious differences in the function of the costumes. I agree with the latter, since the aim of the costumed protesters is not to hide themselves or their identity in terms of the dialogical nature of the culture,⁶ but to express themselves as vividly and openly as possible. Apart from that, the carnival culture is dialogical. In the case of the modern Russian protests there is no dialogue. The main political demand of the oppositionists is to be heard, and that is why there are many slogans that appeal to speaking and listening – the major components of a dialogue: “My voice has been stolen”, “Nobody listens to us”, “Return my voice”, etc.

Another festive aspect of the protest is the frequent use of terms normally attributed to circuses and games. This language brings together the Russian words *ЦИК* (Central Commission of Elections) and *цирк* (Circus); it is further supported by the fact that the Chair of the Commission, Mr. Vladimir Churov, is called a magician and a circus actor because of falsifications in the elections process. Similar to the city folk festivals, people dressed as clowns and jokers, as well as people on stilts, take part in the marches. There are also puppets and other forms of entertainment, including nano-meetings with small toys holding small posters.

6 БАХТИН 1984.

“The Ritual Year” of the Oppositional Activity

The intention to make the political events ritualized and to search for appropriate festive themes, symbols, and signs is one of the most important features of any political movement. “The White Ribbon” uses the symbolism of natural and cultural time, historical memory of important national events, and the calendric cycle. One of the first reactions to the falsification of the elections in 2011 was the allusion to the historical time. *December*, the month of the elections, has an important symbolic link to the Decembrists – the tsar oppositionists of 1825 and the famous December riot. Another direction in development of the content and symbolism of the modern opposition is the winter – the snow and the chilly weather. The snow adds meaning to the white symbolism of the opposition and occasionally gives the name to it (the group on Facebook is called the Folklore of the Snow Revolution). Snow served as a wonderful decoration for the cars that took part in the protest rally with white artifacts in Moscow on January 29, 2012.⁷ The winter weather corresponded with the Russian fairy-tale hero Father Frost. Of course, December is associated with the central winter holiday in the Russian (and former Soviet) official calendar – the New Year. In the Soviet times, the New Year was the central festival in the run of the year, since Christmas had almost faded during the time of aggressive atheism. As a ritual complex, the New Year bears a wide array of meanings and practices, and many of them were used by the protesters. The figures of Father Frost and, occasionally, the Snow Maiden appeared in the protests, and there were many slogans asking for freedom as a New Year gift, or requesting a miracle and fair elections. In 2013 there was a huge poster in the center of Moscow, saying “Happy New Riot!”

Concurrence with state, Christian, folk, and personal family holidays enriches the festive atmosphere of the rallies and makes the protest ideas more expressive and picturesque. The car rally in Moscow on the last Day of the Shrove week, the Day of Forgiveness (February 26, 2012) was called “Seeing off the Russian political winter”. It exploited the typical Orthodox motives of forgiveness, as there were many signs reading “Forgive and Farewell, Vladimir”; and it was also based on the traditional folk celebration of change of the season and saying “Farewell” to the winter. The Orthodox Christian arguments were used to prevent the oppositional rallies from being organized on that day. The Deputy of State Duma Andrei Isaev wrote “The oppositional rally on that important for the Church day is aimed at humiliating of the traditional values. This Sunday is the day when people have to forgive each other and to stop the arguing”.⁸

In keeping with the change of the seasons, the end the “dead” season of the winter and the inspiration of the spring gave a strong creative force to the protest activities. Furthermore, the connection with the typical Russian folk festival Shrovetide was seen through the Russian folk costumes of political leaders, such

7 http://www.belayalenta.com/2012/01/blog-post_7683.html Last accessed: September 06.2013.

8 http://www.belayalenta.com/2012/01/blog-post_7683.html Last accessed: September 06.2013.

as that of the ecologist Evgenija Chirikova. It is very unusual for Russian citizens to wear a Russian national costume in the street. Usually only actors and singers in folk performances and city festivals do that.

An interesting example gives the commemorative date of the coup d'état of August 19th (1991), which was chosen for a protest event in 2012. This date coincides with Transfiguration – an important Russian Orthodox church festival also known as Apple Savior day. On that day apples and other fruit are sanctified in the church, and the ritual is well known in the society. One of the organizers of the protest event was the famous party Jabloko (“The Apple”), so apples were used as symbolic artifacts. A representative of this party had a big basket filled with apples and was giving them to those who were passing by, along with a leaflet about the activities of the party. This example proves that any possibility to make the protest more ritualistic and to use as many symbols as possible is typical for the protest organizers.

The International day of Women, March 8th, has inspired the oppositionists to dedicate a special rally for the girls of the “Pussy Riot” punk rock protest group (Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Aljokhina); these young feminists took part in the performance in the Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow and were arrested and sentenced to two years in prison.

All the official state holidays are used by the opposition to express concrete ideas and to state certain demands, like to urge freedom for the political prisoners. State holidays with “Soviet” patriotic flavor are also used by the pro-governmental gatherings and meetings, but the message is very different. For example, on February 23, 2012, a huge meeting was organized at the stadium Luzhniki in Moscow, which, as the leaders of the party “Edinaya Rossija” (United Russia) summed up, showed the patriotic feelings of the Russians and their wish to oppose those who do not share Vladimir Putin’s policy”.⁹

To make a ritual construction of an oppositional event, various dates are being used. The very date of the elections turned into the name of a political Party (V December, where the Roman figure V is for Victory), and since that time the date has a memorial one and is commemorated by various special events. Another important date is the May 6, 2012, when during a peaceful march to the Bolotnaya square the protesters clashed with the police, and several people were arrested and are still in prison. Twelve people were arrested initially, and the symbolic power of this number has been used many times. On the Day of Independence of Russia, June 12, 2013,¹⁰ one year after the fight on Bolotnaya, the figure 12 dominated. The date and the time of the meeting were also 12. Festivals of the family cycle are also celebrated in the protest events. The 60th jubilee of the President Vladimir Putin (October 7, 2012) has been widely celebrated by the oppositionists by a protest march and other events. In Russia, 60 years is the age when men retire, so the decorations – balloons, flowers, and cakes have

⁹ <http://er.ru/news/2012/2/23/politiki-i-politologi-putin-lider-luzhniki-dostojnyj-otvet-oppozicii/>
Last accessed: September 06.2013.

¹⁰ An ambiguous modern Russian state holiday, see SEDAKOVA 2008.

been accompanied by such slogans as “Happy birthday, Grandfather! Enjoy your retirement!” . There was also a competition of the best “protest” gift for the birthday: all of them had to do with leisure and hobbies associated with retirement.¹¹

In contrast, the 50th jubilee of Mikhail Khodorkovsky turned into a rally for his freedom, since he is regarded as a political prisoner. On his birthday, June 26th, flowers, balloons, and festive slogans wishing the prisoner to get back home (“Khodorkovsky, go home!”) decorated the Nikitskaya square where the event took place, while political speeches sounded from the scene and the crowd sang “Happy birthday to you!”.

The modern oppositional movement has its history and follows its own ritual year, which consists of tragic dates only. Apart from the aforementioned date December 4th, other dates turned into important points in the “White Ribbon” protest ritual year. The day of the President’s election March 5, 2012, is commemorated as “The day of shame”, and the 6th of May (2012) was the date of a huge march which ended up with arrests of the peaceful protesters. Other dates of new laws and legislations which are not supported by the protesters, such as the “Dima Yakovlev’s Law”, “Anti-gay Propaganda”, are also commemorated by protesters.

Conclusion

A brief analysis of “White Ribbon” oppositional activity shows that ritual components and festive allusions are very important. First of all, the festive, highly emotional atmosphere gives the flavor of a holiday to each protest event. To meet close friends and those people whom you have not met for a long while or just people who share your political views makes these events really joyful. To prepare the artifacts and slogans and to choose a special garment is also a certain type of festive action. A very important detail for the Moscow rallies is that many people end up in the city cafes drinking coffee or wine and socializing. The atmosphere at the oppositional meetings and those organized to support the government (*Putting* – to greet Putin’s election, or *Sobianing* – to support election of Sergey Sobianin as the mayor of Moscow) differ drastically. The pro-governmental events have a flavor of Soviet official holidays with patriotic music, and socialist-like slogans without any creativity, etc.).

The Russian oppositional movement is developing and the process of choosing appropriate rituals and making new ones is going on. New forms of political activity appear, such as a meeting-concert on the eve of elections of Moscow mayor, walks, and symbolic funerals of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

¹¹ A very coverage of this day see on Youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fljtp2nUKQ&feature=youtu.be> Last accessed: August 30, 2013.

Widening perspective for researchers allow for comparative analysis of ritual forms and components of modern protests in different countries. Ritualization of the political events depends on broad national historical and cultural contexts, and on the state of the tradition and its preservation. For example, in Bulgaria and Turkey an important part of any political rally is the collective folk dance. These dances are "a must" in any family or other festive celebration. In Bulgaria, this dance (khoros) is obligatory even in the scenario of city festivals. The program of the Day of Independence in the city of Veliko Tarnovo on September 22, 2013, included a huge Tarnovo khoros. The national love of this folk dance is reflected in the name of modern Bulgarian oppositional movement "DANCE with me", where the English word DANCE coincides with Bulgarian ДАНС, the abbreviation for State Agency for National Security.

With so much political instability in many countries, unpopular governmental laws give rise to oppositional activities, many of which include urban events with many festive and ritual components. This is an open process and the study of the protest forms and the rituals it generates should be continued.

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