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The Russian Protest Movement of 2011–2012: A New Middle-Class Populism[1]

Abstract

The article deals with the mass civic protests that shook Russia in 2011–2012. The article examines the question of populist and ideological self-determination on the part of the protesters qua political subjects. Based on a group empirical study of protest rally participants, the author points to the frequent populist self-identification used by the protesters. They called themselves "the people," although they obviously represent a minority, and share some special features such as a relatively high level of education and income. The article analyzes this phenomenon within the context of the theory of populism. It reconsiders some aspects of this theory and identifies the Russian case as a historically new but currently quite typical version of populism.

This article seeks to understand the recent protest movement in Russia (2011–2012). The movement was an unexpected and massive revival of contentious politics in an authoritarian state previously characterized by relatively low-level protests with modest demands, and it emerged in a fragmented society where politics was commonly considered the realm of the naïve or the corrupt. This article poses two questions. First, who, if anyone, is the collective political subject of these protests? Or, rather, what is the collective identity of the protesters, an identity that might eventually give rise to political subjectivation? Second, what is the movement's ideology? Or, if it has no ideology, what is its agenda and discursive self-construction? On the basis of empirical data (especially our own set of semi-structured interviews conducted at the rallies), I will demonstrate that the movement's discourse and self-framed subject is partially and potentially *populist*.

The article's method is dictated by its subject matter, and it relies on the literature in both social thought and political sociology. Its main methodological framework, however, is political theory. This is why the question of political subjectivity and subjectivation is central here.[2] But we do not really encounter the classical political subject in today's Russia. We observe, rather, an apolitical politics or the subjectless subjectivity of "the people." However, this self-identification may be the classical starting point of an emergent political subject that has been subaltern and is now attempting to impart a universal significance to its subordinate status (Rancière 2004). Or it may be the promise and pledge of an emerging democratic solidarity.

1. The Story

The mass protest movement of 2011–2012 in the major Russian cities was an unexpected turn of events for experts on Russian politics, because it emerged in the climate of deep depoliticization and retreat into

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[2]   The question of the subject implies the question of collective identity that is common in more positively oriented sociology. "Identity" is a symbolic claim, while collective subjectivity implies the existence of a social force that has come (or has not come) to self-consciousness. Furthermore, identity and self-identification are, by definition, centered on something that exists in a self-identical way, while "political subject" implies transformative action and self-overcoming. While social movements in liberal democracies are often viewed as stable institutions that can be studied from a neutral bird's-eye perspective, I tend to look at them historically and politically, as open-ended mobilizations of previously latent social groups.

private life that had prevailed in Russia over the eighteen years since the forcible dissolution of the Russian Supreme Soviet in 1993.[3] Large urban rallies and demonstrations against or for the ruling party and government were common during the late-perestroika period, when they took predominantly liberal-democratic or nationalist shapes. Grand political slogans and demonstrations were the order of the day until President Yeltsin violently cracked down on mass protest actions by his opponents in 1993. After this, the level of politicization in the liberal pro-western milieu decreased: Yeltsin no longer appealed to democratic support, and his policies were not seen as continuous with his perestroika image. The oppositional "red-brown" coalition (a mixture of communist revivalists and Russian nationalists) was repressed and unable to organize in large numbers. The obviously important role of the mass media in mobilizing protest led to widespread cynicism in the way all political involvement was perceived.

There were, however, strong and numerous social protest movements involving workers and other impoverished strata of the populace, mostly in provincial towns, and mostly over salary arrears and factory closures (Javeline 2003; Robertson 2011). These protests, large as they were, did not put forward any significant political agenda and were unable to join up with each other. In a way, they were "protests without movements" (Robertson 2011). The next large-scale mobilization took place in 2005 in response to a law designed to monetize welfare benefits. This was a very large movement but it was also politically inarticulate. Apart from it, the 2000s witnessed a proliferation of civic activism, mostly of a local nature, that evinced a very cautious attitude towards political agendas and politicians (Clément et al. 2010). All this shows that while social movements did exist during the first eighteen years of post-perestroika Russia, the public sphere and popular mindset were depoliticized. There was a withdrawal from a concern with politics (and, thus, with universal questions of public life and broadly based social solidarity) and a deep suspicion of political involvement as something that was, by definition, alienating and corrupt.

The new protests were triggered by well-founded allegations of vote rigging by electoral commissions during the December 4, 2011, parliamentary elections, although the fraud was not wider in scale or more cynical than it had been during previous elections in the 2000s. There were no strong opposition parties, either those parties that were represented in parliament or parties without seats there, who could have prepared or organized a protest. But after the social networks Facebook and

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[3] An important exception was the Center for Strategic Research and its director Mikhail Dmitriev, who in November 2011 published a policy paper entitled "The driving forces and perspectives of political transformation in Russia" (Belanovskii et al. 2011).

VKontakte were flooded with the reports by independent observers of electoral fraud, and the ruling United Russia party returned historically low results even after this fraudulent advantage, thousands of people, many of them involved in protests for the first time, suddenly flooded the streets. The following Saturday, December 10, around a hundred thousand people gathered for a sanctioned rally in downtown Moscow, while much smaller but relatively well-attended rallies were held in other major Russian cities. In the months before the March 4, 2012, presidential election, there was a mobilization aimed at preventing Vladimir Putin's victory. Major rallies took place in Moscow and other cities on December 24, 2011, and February 4, 2012. It has usually been estimated that over a hundred thousand people attended the events in Moscow, while the rallies in other cities were much smaller, not exceeding ten thousand people. On February 26, 2012, a symbolic protest action, dubbed "Big White Circle," was held in downtown Moscow: around thirty-five thousand people "enclosed" the city's inner Garden Ring by joining hands with each other.

On March 4, 2012, despite the massive presence of independent observers at polling stations, Putin won in the first round of the presidential election with an official tally of 63.6 percent. According to some objective estimates, the result had again been inflated through electoral fraud, but the same polls show that Putin would have won over fifty percent of the vote even without this boost.[4] Protests against Putin continued: on May 6, 2012, the so-called March of the Millions brought together around seventy thousand people and led to the first serious outbursts of violence, during which some protesters as well as policemen were slightly injured. As a result of these clashes, more than thirty people who had attended the rally were subsequently arrested and charged with involvement in mass riots (literally, "mass disorders," as defined by the Soviet and Russian criminal code). The last mass rally, which drew more than fifty thousand people, took place in Moscow on June 12, 2012, the official holiday of the new Russian state. The Russian parliament also passed a law in June 2012 that stipulated fines between one thousand and ten thousand dollars for involvement in unsanctioned rallies and other similar offenses, and that criminalized non-political mass gatherings. After these and similar repressive measures, undertaken by the government, the wave of protests began to wane. It currently remains at the relatively low level of ten to twenty thousand attendees at periodically convoked rallies. However, on important occasions such rallies still do take place, and so we cannot speak definitively of the end of the protest wave, only of its waning. Significantly, however, no unified, institutionalized movements or parties

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[4]   See, for example, the reports by the League of Voters, who estimated Putin's real election total as between fifty and fifty-two percent, as opposed to the official sixty-four percent. http://ligaizbirateley.ru/hot/18.html; www.svodnyprotokol.ru.

have emerged from the protests to date, even though their emergence would be legally possible.

On the one hand, nothing surprising has happened. The protests in Russia, first, were a classical instance of the electoral protests common in regimes of electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2006), even though they differ in terms of scale and effectiveness. Even in the countries surrounding Russia, we witnessed a wave of such protests, the so-called color revolutions, in 2003–2005. Second, events of this kind have been relatively common over the past fifty years; they have traditionally been interpreted as protests by the emerging middle class, with its new values and sensibilities (Huntington 1991). Third, the events might have been determined historically, since they occurred during a global wave of protests in 2010–2013, involving Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, followed by Spain, France, the US, Greece, and (after the events in Russia) Turkey. Whether these other events had a decisive influence would be hard to prove or disprove, but within the global context, the Russian protests against a regime long renowned for its authoritarianism did not appear surprising.

In the specific political context of Russia, these protests happened unexpectedly. Apart from theoretical questions, they pose a practical political challenge. Does this movement have a chance to grow, produce institutional structures, and eventually score political victories? Or is it weak and ineffective by definition? A distinct obstacle for social scientists working on this problem is that there is no clear-cut separation between subject and object: academic definitions of the protests have every chance of filtering into the discourse of the media and the authorities on the movement, and the discourse of the movement itself. Hence the significance of searching for and identifying the movement's unusual, unexpected aspects, of going beyond the standard classifications (such as "middle class" or "creative class") that have already been incorporated into the movement's public representations and objectively weaken its chances by objectifying it, by construing it as predictable and quantitatively limited. In these circumstances, social scientists cannot avoid being engaged with the movement and occupying a reflexive position. Their task is, therefore, to explore the facts from the viewpoint of their potentiality. To this end, a qualitative methodology that aims to discover multiple tendencies and possibilities, and explores ideal types and unique symptomatic examples, is the obvious instrument of choice. It is this approach that our team of researchers has chosen.

2. Theory

The theoretical background of this article is heterogeneous: I think it important to stay in dialogue with all the major traditions of conceiving the subject and ideology of protests. One existing tradition is the sociol-

ogy of social movements; another is contemporary social theory; a third is the post-Marxist school of ideology and discourse analysis. Unfortunately, these traditions do not often jibe with each other, but all of them pose important questions and contain insights into the nature and strategies of contemporary social movements. The disjuncture in question has to do not only with different theoretical traditions and disciplinary affiliations but also with the implicit political positions of researchers. However, this should not prevent us from arriving at a theoretical synthesis.

A. The Subject

The first question that rises with regard to the protests in Russia is, who is protesting? This question is twofold: it refers to the objective social groups and forces involved in the movement that define its agenda, but it also speaks to the *self-definition* of those involved. This is the old Marxist motif of the "class-in-itself" and the "class-for-itself," which only gains in relevance in a society where class boundaries are anything but self-evident. The two aspects of subjectivity are inseparable today, because, on the one hand, contemporary class structure is itself fluid, hard to objectify, and crucially depends on social construction. On the other hand, the "identity" of protesters, as co-produced by themselves and the media, cannot be fully detached from their objective determinations. Such hallucinatory politics would theoretically be possible: there could be a movement for the recognition of hobbits or goths, or, more importantly, "imaginary" ethnic identities, but it could hardly sustain itself without at least some distinguishing content. Contemporary theories of political subjectivity, most notably that of Alain Badiou, take special care to show how this subject is constituted jointly by a previously suppressed social force, the unpredictable event of its emergence, and the subject's own free act of recognizing both the force and the event, and remaining loyal to them (Badiou 2005).

In our case, the protests in Russia (2011–2012), such social definitions were immediately produced both by sociologists and the media, who dubbed the events a "middle-class protest," a "creative-class protest," or, as high-ranking Russian presidential administration official Vladislav Surkov said (citing a bon mot originally used to describe protests in Germany), they were the protests of "angry urbanites." Certain people from within the movement (e.g., Sergei Udaltsov, during a speech at the February 4, 2012, rally in Moscow) and the academic world (Bikbov 2012: 277ff; Levinson 2012) tried to contest and reject this definition, thus running the opposite risk of repressing the question of social structure or viewing it purely as the result of "social construction." Bikbov has mapped and derided the media's interpretation of the protests as "middle class," while showing, in interviews, how unpopular this self-identification was with

the protesters themselves. In his book on the protests, Mischa Gabowitsch has likewise rejected the use of social categories vis-à-vis the protests: "Expressions like 'middle class,' 'generation' or 'rentier' suggest actually existing collective actors. [...] In today's Russia, this is not the case: except for the state, identity-building institutions are weak, and people usually abstain from relating themselves to a social or professional group." Gabowitsch has proposed that we refer, instead, to a "movement," which is "not a group but a condition" (2013: 29–30). Alexei Levinson, an expert from the Levada Center, a polling institute and liberal think tank, published a newspaper article shortly after the rallies in which he claimed they represented a movement of a universal "we," not of the middle class. Even though there were many relatively well-off people among the protesters, wrote Levinson, the distribution of incomes was huge, and "a group with such distinctions in wealth cannot be a unified class. It cannot be a class, but it can be a society, a nation, a people. It is not the middle class that came out in the protests. It is society at large that sent forth its heralds to say it intends to live differently from now on" (Levinson 2012). In Levinson's reaction we can detect not only engaged concern from a movement sympathizer but also an anti-Marxist impulse from a scholar of the last Soviet generation, even though "middle class" has nothing to do with Marxist "classes": "The class approach will lead us astray."

Some protesters themselves agree with this viewpoint. Here is what one election observer from Saint Petersburg told us:

I disagree with the idea that this is a protest of the so-called middle class. I don't recognize the notion of the middle class, because it is based on dividing citizens according to their income, not their class. That is, it is not like the division into bourgeoisie and proletariat. It is something different. That is, people emerge as diverse. Therefore, I disagree with those who say the protesters here are rich, that they are a creative class, etc. These are very diverse people, and this is good, because it witnesses to the fact that this problem concerns very diverse people, not just people from a certain profession or social group. (Engineer, 35 years old, Saint Petersburg, March 7, 2012)

In contrast, Denis Volkov, another Levada center scholar, has objected that the movement "looked from the inside as though 'everyone' or 'very diverse people' came to the rally (in particular, because the crowd was quite motley: there were diverse slogans, clothes, demands). But to the average Russian who observed the events on television, they must have looked like a gathering of the rich" (Volkov 2012b: 20). State-controlled television insistently emphasized the class particularity of the protesters ("middle class," "creative class," "the well-fed," etc.). The March 5, 2012, election seemingly supported this point of view, since Putin won a majority of votes even in the major cities, where his support was esti-

mated to be lower than elsewhere.[5] As Graeme Robertson, one of the leading authorities on Russian protests, has noted, citing numerous surveys, "[T]he cleavage that has opened up between richer, better educated urbanites and, more specifically, between residents of Moscow and Saint Petersburg and the rest of the country is deep and here to stay" (Robertson 2012: 4).

At the same time, Volkov's assessments of the crowd are based on the Moscow protests, while the Fair Elections movement was by no means limited to Moscow or even to Moscow and Saint Petersburg (where the turnout for rallies was much lower than in Moscow). Lacking statistics for the social composition of protests throughout Russia, we can guess by examining photographs and videos that the social composition there was not as clearly distinct as it was in Moscow (cf. Gabowitsch 2013). Still, from the relatively low numbers of people involved in the movement in provincial Russia, we can infer that the mass concentration of protesters did in this case have a social aspect (as opposed, for instance, to the protests against the monetization of welfare benefits, which were not centered in Moscow or Saint Petersburg, and included a telltale multitude of old-age pensioners, the primary recipients of such benefits).

These tentative appraisals suggest that the Russian movement is similar to the new, post-1960s social movements in the West. The vast research on these movements, whether we call them "new" or not, has pointed to the determinate nature of their social constituencies. Social movement scholarship has identified them as middle class (Huntington 1991) or, more often, new middle class (Bell 1973; Gouldner 1979; Eder 1993), emphasizing consensus and solidarity as the value of the new middle class, or some even more specific parts of the middle class (Kriesi 1989).[6]

In any case, the new movements inherit their repertoire and certain issues from the contentious social movements of the past, which had been based more in the lower classes, among workers and peasants, for example. Since the 1960s, however, their repertoire and demands have diverged from traditional revolutionary or trade unionist politics. They have tend-

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[5]   Support for Putin does not indicate, of course, an active political stance on the part of supporters. Their support combines an approval of his policies with a general preference for him over the few remaining alternatives. The survey data, for what is worth, shows that trust in Putin remains relatively high, reaching fifty-seven percent in September 2013. (This was the total percentage of respondents who agreed with one of two statements, "I fully trust Putin" and "I mostly trust Putin"; see Ivanov 2013.) For an interesting analysis of Putin's "majority" support, see Rogov 2013.

[6]   Eder, for instance, usefully points to the characteristic values of the new middle class: consensus and solidarity. This coincides with our own observations on the discourse of the protesters.

ed to raise identity issues, put forward cultural or "post-materialist" issues, and so on. On the one hand, protests of this sort have become common and exemplify a new "demonstration democracy" (Etzioni 1970) or "counterdemocracy" (Rosanvallon 2008). On the other, in today's West, these movements usually have shed their radical, antagonistic nature, rarely seeking to subvert the liberal democratic regime, and even more rarely taking steps in this direction. In the past decade, the new social movements have evolved into new forms of anti-authoritarian struggle, such as the regional and world social forums of the 1990s and 2000s, or the recent Occupy movement. These movements have returned to a leftist ideology, but at the same time they have put an increasing emphasis on their mere presence in public space (through occupations, for example) rather than their influence on policy. Some scholars (e.g., Goldfarb 2012) have even called them "new new social movements," to distinguish from the more subject-focused and identity-affirming but simultaneously less revolutionary-minded "new social movements." But choosing to simply reduplicate the word "new" in the name shows that the exact socio-political role of these movements is not yet clear to anyone.

Given that the recent Russian protests featured mostly political and moral slogans ("fair elections," representation, corruption), with very little focus on social inequality, poverty, and direct oppression, and that they proved to be moderate and non-violent in their repertoires, these protests would fall into the same category as the "new" and "new new" social movements in the developed (core) countries, even though their immediate target (authoritarianism, electoral fraud) is more typical of semi-periphery societies, which evince more complex mobilizations (for example, the Tunisian protests, which were driven by an alliance of urban middle-class groups with workers and unemployed people (Beissinger, Jamal and Mazur 2013a, 2013b).

The weakness of "middle class"-focused diagnoses is threefold. First, a middle-class constituency can be the result of the failure of protests to achieve a wider social basis in their political aspirations: unable to gain popular support, such movements remain confined to their intellectual initiators. Nineteenth-century leftist movements were also driven by middle-class intellectuals, but found response and support among exploited workers, peasants, and the déclassés (cf. Della Porta and Diani 2006: 56). To say that a movement is middle class in today's developed society means that, as a movement of the relatively well off and privileged, it cannot be antagonistic to the regime. For the same reason, such theories ignore the self-definitions of protesters and, consequently, their own complicity in defining the subjectivity of others.

Second, the concept of the middle class is a dubious product of the abandonment of Marxist class theory, with its rooting of class in the division of labor. This concept reduces social complexity to quantitative homogeneity. It does describe a certain social group, vaguely united by in-

come, consumption styles, and way of life. However, it does not clarify the issues of contention and antagonism, apart from the group's *intermediary* status and its *moderate* views. The only thing it implies is that the middle class is the class that (like Marx's bourgeoisie) has something to lose and will thus abstain from truly radical politics. More interesting is why and how this "class" can become antagonistic to others.

Third, as I have already mentioned, "middle class" or any similar definition is an unlikely candidate for self-nomination by a movement. It co-exists, as an objective characteristic, along with the work of self-presentation and self-nomination, something highly typical of contemporary movements. However, in the analysis common within the social movement paradigm, these two are unrelated: people identify themselves via cultural, sexual, and biosocial definitions, not socio-political ones, as in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Therefore, the problem of the subject is split by analysis into two disjunctive aspects, objective and subjective, which does nothing to help us understand the social reality of "reflexive modernity" (Beck, Giddens and Scott 1994).

There have been empirical studies contesting the "class" theories of the new protests, such as, for instance, Dalton, Kuechler, and Burklin, who claim, in summarizing the existing research in an introduction to an ambitious volume, that the new social movements draw on a socially diffuse base of popular support rather than any class or ethnic base (Dalton, Kuechler and Burklin 1990: 12; Buechler 1995: 454). As we will see, below, the case of the Russian protests supports this "popular" diagnosis, although we must be careful and distinguish between the "objective" class characteristic and the movement's political identity.

Theoretically, a response to the thinness and weakness of "middle class" theories emerged in Italian neo-Marxist political theory and political economy almost without reference to mainstream sociology. I have in mind Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno's notion of "the multitude," a new class (or quasi-class) that would have workers engaged in "immaterial labor" as its core: a hybrid of bourgeois intellectuals and wage laborers, they sell their intellectual ("cognitive") and communicational skills on the job market (Negri and Hardt 2005; Virno 2004). Unlike nineteenth-century classes, the multitude is not a unified group; it is actually a very heterogeneous, globalized milieu that is quite hard to organize into a party. According to Negri and Hardt, however, this group is growing; it is increasingly oppressed both economically and morally (underpaid, alienated, precarious) and is therefore objectively antagonistic to the status quo. Its most probable means of rebellion would be negative, "exodus" rather than revolution. Nevertheless, this force will completely subvert the system in the long run, they argue. The benefit of their approach is that it explains antagonistic struggles without undermining their significance. The multitude is not the only group in the society, and naturally it encounters resistance. The weakness of their approach is that the multitude,

exactly like the "middle class," is unlikely to serve as the self-nomination of a serious oppositional force. Also, despite the different way they conceptualize the problem, Negri and Virno agree in principle with the aforementioned theorists that the main subject of protests today is the educated urban professional. The difference lies in how we construe this subject.

As a result, we see that the challenge for social movement research today is to understand the social and political subjectivities and identities of movements, so as to correlate their objective and subjective aspects. Therefore, the key question is how movement participants reflect on their own social identities and those of their peers.

B. Ideology

The content and agenda of contemporary protests and social movements (which I here prefer to call "ideology" for reasons that will become clearer, below) have been widely analyzed. There are several generally accepted circumstances that should be emphasized here.

First, there is the agenda of the new movements and contentious politics that emerged in the 1960s by contrast with the traditional socialist, Marxist ideologies. "Superstructural" problems have acquired a significance at least as large as issues of the socio-economic "base," and the degree of radicalism (give the absence of imminent social revolution as an idea) has diminished. The classical ideological values of the new movements are environmentalism, social solidarity and consensus, dignity and respect, etc. (Mellucci 1996; Touraine 1985), even though more socio-economic themes such as anti-capitalism, the struggle against inequality, migration, and so on are present as well.

The proliferation of movements and agendas in the last thirty years has resulted from the crisis within traditional parties and ideologies, which have lost their stable social constituencies, become bureaucratized, and shifted to the center, such that their programs are often indistinguishable. Within this context, the newer parties and political movements tend to be ideologically eclectic and entrepreneurial in their approach to voters, a tendency that, in the twentieth century, was often (pejoratively) designated as "populist" or "catch-all" (Kirchheimer 1966). I will return to this issue when I discuss the results of our research.

Second, among many of the movements in question, the principal *ideology* is their own *identity* (ethnicity, sexuality, etc.). They are "we are here" movements rather than movements on behalf of an objective cause (Tarrow 1998). Hence the inevitably self-fulfilling nature of their programs: the very fact of demonstrating already fulfills the need for solidarity and collective existence (Buechler 2005). This might not sound serious, but in fact these movements promote the genuine issue of group

recognition (Taylor 1994; Honneth 1996; Tarrow 1998), which sometimes also entails transforming the entire society (e.g., recognizing gay marriages redefines marriage for everyone, etc.). Still, the emergence of recognition-based agendas as central does point to the relative moderation and routinization of the movements as compared to the revolutionary uprisings of the past.

Third, the Greens, social forums, and anarchist opposition groups (such as Tiqqun) have inherited a strong utopian sentiment that makes them resemble the Old Left. At the same time, in recent decades, the new social movements have also overlapped with extreme rightist ideologies (national identity and protest against migration) (Mouffe 2005; Virno 2004).

However, if we evaluate them by the standards of traditional ideologies, most contentious movements of the past fifty years in the West have shown a tendency towards *liberalism*, as evinced by their evocation of the language of rights, their complete acceptance of the liberal democratic state, and their appeals to it. This is even truer when we shift our focus from the West to struggles in the global periphery and semi-periphery. Protests against various forms of tyranny in non-Western countries have taken, more often than not, a liberal turn: hence, the theories of "democratization" (Huntington 1991), "liberal revolution" (Ackerman 1994), and so on. The Eastern European movements against communism in the 1980s, with their demands for liberal democratic constitutions and free markets, were a classical case in this sense, as were the so-called color revolutions of the 2000s in the former Soviet republics. Similar, too, were the 1989 protests in China, the 2010 protests in Iran, the 2011–2012 protests in Russia, and the 2013 protests in Turkey. The relationship between these liberal or neoliberal political movements and new social movements is an open, under-theorized question.

3. Research

We chose the simple and practical method of semi-structured interviews with people who attended the rallies that took place in Russia in 2011–2012. Members of our research group (between eight and ten researchers at different periods) approached and interviewed these people during the rallies, mostly but not exclusively in Saint Petersburg and Moscow. Each interview lasted from fifteen to twenty minutes. Given the relatively low number of interviewers, we were unable to secure a truly random sample, but care was taken to select people of different ages, genders, and social groups (wherever it was possible to guess at this through superficial signs such as dress). Two hundred interviews were conducted over the course of a year, which provides us with a limited but considerable sample of rallies, where the attendance ranged from five thousand to

a hundred thousand people. The interview questionnaire (see Appendix) emphasized the potentiality of the movement's development and the self-identification of protesters. It consisted of twenty-two questions, split into three sections: attitudes towards the rallies, political views, and biographical information. The questionnaire included such key questions as, "What people come to these rallies? What people stay home instead?" "Could this movement incorporate not only demands for fair elections but other, broader demands as well?" "Which problems in our country need to be addressed first?"

The results of this study should be used only in connection with other data, such as mass polling of participants and documentation of rally placards. Such data exist, and we have relied in particular on the surveys conducted by the Levada Center (Volkov 2012a; Volkov 2012b) and the archive of signs and other discursive materials from the rallies collected by Mischa Gabowitsch (the PEPS database). The limitation of the interviews is their geography (Saint Petersburg and Moscow): they help us to understand the events in the country's two capitals, but to the extent that something distinctive was happening in the western part of Russia, our data are unhelpful. Gabowitsch's database includes numerous data from the rallies outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg; therefore, merging it with our interview data is useful only so far as the *common* features of the protests throughout Russia are concerned. Still, as we shall see, there are some important commonalities of self-identification that traverse geographical stratifications.

Nevertheless, a qualitative study like ours increases hermeneutic understanding, traces the rationales of the subjects involved in the new movement, and gives us a glimpse of the movement's possible development through the large-scale picture of the movement that emerges from the responses to our standardized questions.

4. Results

In this article, I will examine just one research question concerning the subjective identity of protesters. Even though the movement focused on "fair elections" and did not present identity as an important issue, and was thus not a standard identity movement, there was a degree of self-identification involved. More importantly, there was the potential for self-identification, something important for the possible future evolution of the movement (or some of its participants) into a political force. Self-identification or self-naming is an important aspect of political *subjectivation.*

In the interview questionnaire, we included two direct questions to this effect, "What people come to these rallies?" and "Do you consider yourself a member of a particular social group, stratum or class?" How-

ever, the protesters also engaged in self-identification in their responses to other questions.

First of all, there were fifty-one identificational mentions of "middle class" in thirty-eight interviews (from a total of 165 analyzed interviews). There are also six self-descriptions of the informants as hailing from the "creative class" in six interviews. So the total of middle-class or creative-class self-designations comes to twenty-six percent.

"Middle class," when mentioned by the informants, was always a direct response to the question, "Do you consider yourself a member of a particular social group, stratum or class?" "The people" was mentioned, however, in reference to people present at the rally or those they represent, in various contexts. Interestingly, in nine of the thirteen interviews, the "middle class" self-identification was accompanied by a disclaimer—e.g., "I belong to the middle class, but it does not exist"; "I don't belong to the middle class but I'm probably in it"; "I belong to the embryonic middle class." Strangely, in the current Russian discourse, the originally descriptive notion of "middle class" has acquired a utopian normative meaning, and so this identification did not seem to our informants like an exact fit.

Given the popularity of the notion in the media, and the application of this term to protesters by social scientists, this "middle class" self-identity is not surprising. The label "the people" (in Russian, *narod*) seems objectively inadequate, however: the protesters could not realistically aspire to represent the majority or pose as social outcasts. It also goes against the tendency of both the state-run and liberal media, which have insisted on the "middle class," "hipsters," etc., as the driving force behind the protests.

Some of the responses clearly identified the protesters as belonging to the more educated and privileged strata of the populace, which thus accords with the liberal depiction of protesters as a movement of a small, westernized middle class against the more backward and undeveloped masses.

> There are entrepreneurs here, people, say, of middle income. I cannot say I earn a lot, but people, when they have this minimum, want something else, not just sausage and bread. I understand that there are a lot of people, in the provinces mostly, who want just bread and sausage. Roughly speaking, of course. Even in Petersburg and Moscow there are such people. But when you reach [a higher standard of living] . . . the expression [of this wanting something else] changes. (Male, approx. 40 years old, Moscow)

One gets the impression this informant has read the collected works of Maslow and Inglehart. This reflexivity (cf. Touraine 1977; Touraine 1985) is quite common within this particular movement. As we shall see,

below, this quality can serve both to foreclose and open up the movement's prospects.

While this self-depiction does have objective grounds, if it were the dominant form of self-consciousness, it would render the protests a desperate affair under a strong authoritarian regime that uses elections for its self-legitimation. Lacking hegemony, an "elite" minority movement can hardly expect to defeat such a regime through extra-parliamentary protests. Many of the protesters, even those who would objectively fit the "middle class" description, understand this problem.

However, our results show that "middle class" was far from the only form of self-identification among protesters. Another less common but also widespread self-designation was that of "the people" (*narod*). There were eighty mentions of "the people," as an identification on the part of protesters themselves or the larger group they represent, in sixteen interviews (ten percent of the total).

Question: Do you identify yourself as a member of a social group?
Answer: Yes, the people, ordinary people. (Retired worker, male, 63 years old)

Most mentions of *narod* were unspecific, although it is clear they referred to "the people" in the sense of the particular group of people opposed to the government. Let us divide mentions of *narod*, following Margaret Canovan (1999), into liberal, nationalist, and social usages. I shall call *liberal* those instances where *narod* means "the people" as a legal entity, sovereign under the constitution; *nationalist*, where it means the Russian nation; and *social,* where it means ordinary people united against the elites. We thus see that there were about fourteen references to "the people" in the constitutional sense, as an abstract entity to be represented under the fictional assumption that "the people" is the actual sovereign ruler who "hires" the government. There were three mentions of "the Russian people" (plus one negative instance where the informant mentioned it as something he "does not care" about). Eight usages clearly evoked the "ordinary people" as opposed to the elites and authorities: "This is what happens in countries where the authorities don't pay attention to those at the bottom, to the people [*narod*]."

Most mentions were, however, unspecific: they referred to those gathered on the square as "the people" or as part of "the people," and claimed power for it in a more or less direct way: "Power should rest with the people." Here was one of the most eloquent responses:

Question: What do you expect will happen?
Answer: That the society and state will change, that power will reside with the people. [...] Corruption means the government regards people as senseless scum [*bydlo*], that they can take people's money and use it

for their own purposes, and that the people are just expendable material. (Historian, male, 25 years old, Saint Petersburg)

A complex rhetorical operation has taken place in this case. In Russian, *bydlo* ("scum") usually refers to the uneducated, uncultured masses. This word was actually sometimes applied to the majority who, allegedly, supported Putin, as opposed to the more enlightened protesters. Our informant, an intellectual, evoked this notion, but as a self-reference. He evoked the presence of the social divide while simultaneously denying it, attributing it to the authorities, who had mistreated *all* the people. Thus, a rhetorical union with the supposed "scum" was achieved.

Among the sixteen informants who described the protesters as "the people," four belonged to groups that seemed untypical of this movement, that is, they did not belong to the "middle" or "urban educated" class. They identified themselves, respectively, as a worker, a retired former worker, a mechanic at a factory, and a former medical worker now employed as a cleaner. In this sense, the "populist" subgroup of sixteen people may have had some basis for declaring its heterogeneity. At the same time, however, the data does not support the hypothesis that "the people" was the self-nomination employed by lower-class people who attended the rallies. They were only four out of the sixteen people (that is, twenty-five percent) who used the word. Meanwhile, within the general sample, the number of untypical informants (defined as those not involved in cognitive or communicative labor, and those who were not entrepreneurs) was twenty-seven out of 165, that is, about eighteen percent. Considering the small size of the sample, these percentages (twenty-five and eighteen) are not that far apart; therefore, one cannot conclude that the "populist" subgroup within the Fair Elections movement was peculiar in terms of its social composition. This group was as heterogeneous as the bulk of the protesters, but at the same time the urban educated class constituted its core. The majority of protesters employed in manual or low-skilled labor did not evoke "the people" during their interviews.

In the public discourse of the protests, the notion of "the people" was present, but it was distributed unevenly. The one public face of the movement who has been systematically invoking the notion is Alexei Navalny, a tall, thirtysomething lawyer with a high-pitched voice, famous for unmasking cases of official corruption cases on his blog. Navalny actively agitated Russians to vote for any other party than United Russia in the 2011 elections, and he was present at most of the major rallies in Moscow and Saint Petersburg in 2011–2012. He is currently out on probation after an embezzlement conviction and has been accused of another such crime. In September 2013, Navalny ran for mayor of Moscow and came in second with twenty-seven percent of the vote, which made him the most influential leader of the new opposition movement that emerged from the 2011–2012 rallies.

Navalny consistently refers to "the people" in his rhetoric. He began his political career in the social liberal party Yabloko while also collaborating with leaders of the orthodox liberal Union of Right Forces. In the late 2000s, however, he began searching for a broader platform: he co-founded a "national-democratic movement" known as Narod ("The People") and participated in several events organized by oppositional Russian nationalists. In 2010, Navalny launched the blog RosPil, dedicated to tracking and denouncing corruption in government expenditures. This has proved to be a highly effective project: Navalny and his associates have launched many court cases and even forced some government officials and MPs to resign. Navalny is a classic case of the "populist" politician, and it is difficult to distinguish between the possibly manipulative intentions of the liberal within him and his genuine devotion to nationalist and anti-establishment credos.

Navalny appeals to "the people" in virtually all his public speeches, and resorts to emphatically aggressive characterizations of the elites ("crooks and thieves," "brutes," etc.) In a telltale passage from a speech at a May 6, 2013, rally in Moscow, he said, "It is clear that today, something huge, powerful, and terrifying to some took to the streets. I am a part of it and am not afraid of it. This huge thing is the people [*narod*]."[7] In typically sublime rhetoric, Navalny makes the double gesture of construing the people as something alien and ungraspable ("I am not afraid of it") and simultaneously identifying with it.[8] The ambiguity derives from the problematic attempt to identify protests by a narrow group of urban professionals with all the people, and with "the people" as an irrational, elemental power. One *should*, theoretically, be afraid of these masses, but if one is a true revolutionary, one is not afraid.

Navalny has hedged his bets by simultaneously espousing liberal-democratic and nationalist-oppositional positions, which, in Russia, have traditionally belonged to different milieus and discourses. During the nationalist rally Stop Feeding the Caucasus, shortly before the beginning of the fair elections protests, Navalny juxtaposed "normal" residents of the Caucasus to the brutal "scum" (*bydlo*) who migrate to central Russia from the region: this is the same pejorative treatment of the plebs we have already encountered in this article.[9] Just recently, on the eve of the so-called Russian March, in November 2013, he made the ambiguous gesture of not

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[7] TVKeep, "Govorit Naval'nyi na mitinge 6maia na Bolotnoi pl," *YouTube* video, 8:09, May 6, 2013., http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZtUWR1SQFQ.

[8] Sublime in the strict sense of the word, that is, describing an incomplete perspective on a thing surpassing our imagination; see Kant 2000: 128–159. "The people" is a notion particularly predisposed to sublime language.

[9] drug2001, "KHVATIT KORMIT' KAVKAZ! A. NAVALNYI (MITING)," *YouTube* video, 5:42, October 24, 2011. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8AtH44_39c.

attending the nationalist demonstration while also expressing his sympathies with it.[10] Meanwhile, in his commentaries during the time of the protest movement, he abstained from the obvious step of equating the *narod* with the Russian nation, referring instead to a "majority" opposed to presumably intrusive immigrants. He also tries to articulate nationalism with liberal democracy via *liberalism*, by emphasizing that he is defending European values from non-European immigrants, etc.[11] This attempt to construct populist nationalism is typical in Europe, where in recent years we have also seen the rise of right-wing democratic populism; Navalny actually refers to such European parties explicitly.[12] However, in Russia, this agenda still remains at the symbolic level, and we shall see whether Navalny manages to build a discursive and political platform around this amalgam.

The numerous signs and slogans brandished by protesters at the rallies were another manifestation of "the people" rhetoric. Creativity in poster making has been a feature of the new social movements since 1968. In Russia, we encountered an extraordinary proliferation of such signs, executed in a witty, creative manner, something that had not been a prominent part of previous social movements in Russia. Mischa Gabowitsch and his team have catalogued texts from over eight thousand protest events, photos, and slogans. They kindly allowed us to study their database.[13] A search shows that the word *narod* ("the people") was used 222 times to mean a force opposed to the government with which one identified. This constitutes three percent of all slogans.[14] By contrast, references to the middle class are absent. The "working class" was mentioned twice (at non-Moscow rallies), and the "creative class," once ("'Creative Urban Class'—this is about us!"). I classified the slogans that evoked "the people" (*narod*) according to the threefold model described above,

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[10] Navalny, "Russkii marsh," November 2, 2013. http://navalny.livejournal.com/877154.html.

[11] Navalny, "Kuda denut tysiachu sadovodov?" October 28, 2013. http://navalny.livejournal.com/874403.html; navalny, "Pochitaite otlichnogo Ashurkova o visakh," October 29, 2013. http://navalny.livejournal.com/875207.html; Il'ia Azar, "Ushchemlennyi russkii: Pochemu Aleksei Navalnyi ne khochet kormit Kavkaz," *Lenta.Ru*, November 4, 2011. http://lenta.ru/articles/2011/11/04/navalny.

[12] Azar, "Ushchemlennyi russkii."

[13] See the *PEPS* (*Protest Events, Photos, and Slogans*) *Database*, gabowitsch.net/peps. See also Gabowitsch's own analysis of this data in his book (Gabowitsch 2013), the most complete account of the Russian protests of 2011–2012 to date.

[14] See Gabowitsch's comment on the tendency of the protesters to identify themselves as the people against the authorities, which he criticizes as the reason for their failure to "sharpen" their position in the conflict with their opponents (Gabowitsch 2013: 151).

dividing them into those where *narod* meant "the people" as a legal entity, sovereign under the constitution (the *liberal* meaning); those where it meant the Russian nation (the *nationalist* meaning); and those where it meant ordinary people united against the elites (the *social* meaning).[15] Forty-four of the slogans clearly fell into the liberal category ("The people must change its manager"; "Power belongs to the people according to the constitution"). Only eight appealed to the Russian nation, while all the other (170) instances were "social" (e.g., "Power should belong to the people not the politicians" and "Power to ordinary people") or borderline, where the people were presented as a real but unspecified entity, for example, "All power to the people" (a slogan exceeding the standard model of representative democracy) or the famous slogan of the 1989 German anti-socialist movement 1989, *Wir sind das Volk.* In both cases, "the people" appeared as a real force opposed to the regime from below.

5. Discussion

What does this all mean? Why did educated urban professionals and the heterogeneous social groups who joined them appeal to "the people," moreover, to "ordinary people"? What does this tell us about the ideology of the protests and their potential for hegemony and political subjectivation?

Use of the signifier "the people" suggests we are dealing with a *populist* discourse, even though this concept is notoriously vague.[16] Originally used for specific Russian and US social movements in the mid and late nineteenth century, the word began to be used pejoratively in the early twentieth century. It has come to imply a bad version of popular politics, as opposed to its "good" version in the parliamentary *democratic* discourse. Democracy, by definition, relies on the people as sovereign, but when one starts appealing to "the people" as a totality or "the people" as opposed to the government, this is supposed to be a sign of irresponsible "populism." Populism has been associated not only with excessive invocation of "the people" but also with *rhetorical*, dishonest discourse (Minogue 1969; cf. Laclau 2005: 71–72) and "exaltation" (Canovan 1981). It has commonly been used to denote movements centered on charismatic leaders, movements with vague ideologies that exploit social resentment. Slightly more generous but nevertheless denunciatory accounts, such as that of Pierre-André Taguieff (Taguieff 1997, 2010), emphasize that populist movements are reactions to crises of political representation, and

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[15] See a similar classification proposed by Margaret Canovan: "united people, "our people," and "ordinary people" (1999: 5).

[16] As Margaret Canovan explains, "[W]hat all populisms have in common is an appeal to the notion of 'the people' as ultimate source of legitimacy" (2005: 80).

their common ground is the rejection of political representation. Nevertheless, Taguieff terms populism a "deformation" of democracy, seeing the idea of non-representative popular power as an "illusion."

In recent years, after "democracy" as a consensual hegemonic value has begun to be problematized, the notion of populism has reemerged as relevant, and it has been rehabilitated both practically and theoretically. The large-scale political protests in the West in 2010–2012 (Spain, France, Greece, the US, Italy, etc.) can be described, arguably, as populist in ideology. The clearest case is the slogan of Occupy Wall Street, "We are the 99 %." It is populist in the sense that it opposes the "bottom" to the "top," and because it attempts a risky rhetorical identification between the tens of thousands who were present at Zuccotti Park and ninety-nine percent of the US population. As Wendy Brown wrote in the wake of the movement, "[The] eye-popping wealth at the top and dismantling of public goods [...] has facilitated a new populist political consciousness. Out of broken traditional solidarities and assaults on democracy itself, a new ethos of the mass is being carved: modestly democratic, probably even more modestly egalitarian, but certainly contoured by more than individual, sectional or partisan interests" (Brown 2011). In a more prescriptive vein, Chantal Mouffe agreed with Brown: "What is at stake [after the Occupy movement], through the establishment of a synergy between extra-parliamentary and parliamentary struggles, is the building of a left populist movement that would provide the collective will necessary to effectively challenge neo-liberal hegemony" (Mouffe 2011: 5).

Theoretically, it was Margaret Canovan who first revived the concept: she shifted from the detached position in her 1981 book (Canovan 1981) towards a more sympathetic treatment of populism as a symptom of democracy's internal tension in a 1999 article (Canovan 1999) and 2005 book (Canovan 2005). There, she identified a rising "new populism" within the stable bourgeois societies of Western Europe and the US, where this could appear to be unexpected.

But the definitive step toward both rehabilitating and remaking the concept for leftist politics was taken in Ernesto Laclau's 2005 book *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005). Like Canovan, Laclau sees populism as a phenomenon inherent to democratic politics, but the issue is not merely the people's constitutional sovereignty. The real root of populism is the blurring of fixed social class boundaries in contemporary capitalist society and the indeterminate flexibility of political ideology and identity that follows from this. There is no collective subject that could pre-exist politics, and the subject is therefore constituted in the very event of political action. Using the logic of hegemonic "articulation" he had earlier elaborated with Chantal Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1983), Laclau explains that populism involves building a "chain of equivalences" between seemingly heterogeneous issues and identities around one particular issue, which

becomes the "quilting point" of ideology. Populism is an articulation that formulates an *antagonism* between the "common people" and the authorities. The abstract character of this opposition arises from the fact that there is no substantive ground on which various groups and protests could be united. The emptiness of "the people" and other populist slogans fills the void of the social whole, Laclau claims, evoking Lacan's negative ontology. Laclau registers this ideological emptiness and eclecticism in protest movements, but similar trends have long been registered by less engaged political scientists in the strategies of parliamentary parties that have moved from class politics to "catch-all" politics (Kirchheimer 1966: l).[17]

Laclau praises populism for being an instance of genuine *politics* in the depoliticized environment of neoliberal capitalism. The vagueness of social definition is for him a plus, not a minus, of the movement, because the movement thus opens itself to the future and is not subordinate to a dogmatic logic. For Laclau, it is populism, with its open and empty master signifier, which can serve as a unifying and emancipatory force in contemporary societies, and it is populism that gives real meaning to conventional "democracy."

The movements across the world in 2010–2013 can be described as *populist* in Laclau's terms. However, in the West (Immanuel Wallerstein's "core") and in countries of the semi-periphery such as Greece, Russia, and Turkey, these protests failed to mobilize large masses of people and were relatively easily neutralized by governments—more violently in the semi-periphery, less violently in the core. Leftist or liberal populist hegemony, which is, by definition, a rhetorical claim that has not yet been substantiated through ideological struggle, has not become an actual fact. In this sense, the new populists have lost ground to right-wing nationalist discourses, which are also populist, and are willingly used by authoritarian leaders such as Putin.

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[17] I privilege Laclau's account here not only because it provides a structural theory of hegemony but also because Laclau makes the political gesture of reevaluating populism and opposing the ideological usage of this term in mainstream political science. (Canovan and Piccone had moved in the same direction as Laclau, but see, for example, Müller (2011) for a violent reaction to Laclau from the traditional point of view: Müller reminds us that populism is irresponsible, rhetorical, and so forth—unlike, we are meant to imagine, established representative elites.) Not that Laclau's populism is unrelated to what the word commonly denotes, but it indicates a perspective, a future beyond this particular type of political discourse and mobilization. Therefore, when I speak of "populism," I am distancing myself from the existing notion of a rhetorical, manipulative politics as opposed to a principled politics. Thus, I am not merely registering a phenomenon under a known rubric but also suggesting the birth of something new, phenomenally and conceptually.

Based on the findings of our study, I would suggest some corrections to Laclau's theory of populism as applied to Russia and other similar countries.

First, in societies like Russia's, the emptiness of high-flown slogans and of "the people" is an effect of politicizing an *apolitical* society.[18] There is originally no political self-consciousness at all, and "the people" appears as its proxy only *potentially*. There has so far been no serious attempt to make the new "people" into the basis for a new hegemonic platform. Because the signifier "the people" is empty, it is good at firing up ("exalting") and uniting protesters, but bad at sustaining a movement in the long run.

In his refusal to conceive a social basis for populism, what Laclau does not see is that in most countries today it is not the lower classes that represent themselves as "the people," but the educated bourgeoisie (or the "new middle class," to use a more empiricist language). "The people," then, is not an alliance of many social groups, but a paradoxical inversion of their roles. This does not mean we are dealing with an imposture. The inversion in question is dialectical and signifies a critical moment in the development of modern democracy. The democratic counter-elites opposed to anti-democratic majorities are, potentially, today's "people." This has to do with the transformation of work in the post-Fordist economy: creative, educated thinkers occupy the place of wage laborers, thus combining the role of an ideological elite with the role of subordinate functionaries. Today, the traditional prestige of intellectuals in the public sphere has faded, and the latter role gradually eclipses the former one, even though intellectuals still tend to identify with the decision makers whose actions they are equipped to understand and evaluate. Thus, under the influence of neoliberal policies, there has been an ongoing process of disempowering the "middle class." Gayatri Spivak even goes so far as to claim that it is undergoing a "subalternization" in the Gramscian sense (Spivak 2011: 9), but she may be accepting the self-image of the protesters too hastily. There may be more room for paradox here than Spivak would be prepared to acknowledge.

The former elites assume the role and form that earlier belonged to "simple folk." This is a paradox that so far has no resolution, but it may lead

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[18]   Bertrand Badie (1997: 227) notes that populism is by nature apolitical or depoliticized. I would argue, instead, that it is apolitically *politicized*. Hence its unstable and ambivalent function in politics, which has been very well encapsulated by Francesco Panizza: "At the heart of populist narratives is populism's relation with the political. Populism both depoliticises and hyper-politicises social relations" (Panizza 2005: 20). This means that when ordinary politics loses its legitimacy, the appeal to extra-political or supra-political ends can sometimes serve as a very strong mobilizing slogan, the core of a populist leader's charisma.

to a reconstruction of the whole political universe, which has previously re-lied, roughly, on the struggle of leftist "have-nots" against rightist "haves."

"Populist" technologies of mass manipulation remain typical of such movements, but in our case, the protesting subjects have used them on themselves, so to speak. It is not the leader who manipulates the masses; on the contrary, it is the protesting crowd that is highly reflective and willing to form alliances by extending its slogans. This is the positive side of today's populism: it allows for openness and the construction of hege-mony from heterogeneous discontents if (and this is a big "if") there is enough persistence and political will.

Some of our informants commented on the movement's heteroge-neous nature. Adopting a reflexive position (or "meta-position"), they discussed possible shifts in ideology.

Question: What should the idea of the movement be?
Answer: I don't know. If I knew I would run for MP. It's hard to say what the idea should be, since the forces are so multidirectional and multipolar. [...]
Question: Could social demands be included on the list of issues?
Answer: Yes, for sure. Sure. Because the protest for democratization and liberalization is a thing for the two capitals. When we go over, say, to the Urals, they don't care [there] about democratization; their protests have different demands. So I think one needs to extend this base somehow. One has to include social issues. I even think they should move to the forefront! (Historian, 35 years old, Saint Petersburg)

I think if we include social demands, it will attract more followers. (Phy-sician, 69 years old, Moscow)

Similar comments were quite frequent: twenty respondents agreed that social demands should be included, while fifteen rejected the idea, usually voicing the liberal argument that political freedoms would help re-solve social issues. All other respondents avoided answering the question.

Some informants even broached the issue of populism:

Question: Do you think that the movement can include social demands?
Informant 1: Yes, probably. What demands do you mean?
Question: Things like free medical care, education, the struggle against corruption.
Informant 1: Yes, of course.
Informant 2: But this would smack of populism. One must solve radical problems.
(Informant 1: former teacher, currently a housewife, 45 years old, Mos-cow; Informant 2: male, photographer with no higher education, 45 years old, Moscow)

As we see, the protesters are *reflexive*, ready to objectify themselves. This leads them, on the one hand, to soberly perceive the limitations of their movement; on the other hand, to search, sometimes even in cynical, Machiavellian forms, for ways of overcoming these limitations. However, classical liberal ideology, which privileges legal forms of protest and the fiction of constitutionality as its language (according to which "the people" are already supposed to be the all-powerful sovereign), turns its anti-populist legacy against the movement's potential social opening.

Let us return to the definition of populism. Its three essential elements are:
· an eclectic ideology and social base
· antagonism between masses and elites
· its use of the designation "the people"

The third element indicates we are dealing not just with a structural socio-political constellation but also with a concrete historical phenomenon. It is no accident that "the people" are the "quilting point" of a heterogeneous, populist movement. "The people" is the master signifier of contemporary political culture, and of modern political ideology in general. Ever since the Roman Republic, and particularly throughout the modern age, various forms of government have tended to appeal to "the people" as the final authority. During the last two hundred years, this lip service was actually literalized: there was an attempt to institutionalize the authority of "the people" through the institution of universal suffrage, to establish "democracy" in the major capitalist states. Because this change was achieved, in part, through recurrent revolutions, "the people" was understood ambivalently: as both the entire population and the insurgent oppressed masses (Magun 2013). Because the institutionalization of liberal representative democracy relies on the *convention* of seeing the totality of people as present only when they are individually and voluntarily casting their secret ballots, there is always room to claim that democracy is absent and the place of the sovereign people has been usurped by elites. "Populism" is, thus, a politics that denudes (and employs) the merely conventional nature of representation by claiming to search for the *true* people, a mystical force that no one can actually see. At the same time, it plays on the fact that this force can be neither physically presented nor rationally described in terms of social categories. It is not by chance that "the people" is the empty signifier of antagonistic politics. It is not even a name of the "empty place of power" (Lefort 1988: 86), but the proper name of the absent God or, rather, demon (because it is convoked, as an insurgent force, from the lower reaches of society) of modern politics, the focus of its political theology.

However (and this is also something that Lefort rightly shows), in reality there is still a particular individual or group that speaks (not quite legitimately) on behalf of the totality and the oppressed, and that tries to

present its cause as universally valid while ignoring existing socio-political cleavages. Such a posture of "hegemony" is always also an *imposture*: the "whole" of "the people," even after elites are excluded, can hardly be present or presented. One aspect of this is the illegitimacy of any particular ruling actor in a democratic regime. Another aspect is the relative *legitimacy* of constituent power: during a revolution, whoever acts to unseat the unpopular old regime and claims to represent the people does so by virtue of that fact alone, and voting takes place later.

The complex situation of the urban educated class that forms the core of the current protests in Russia as well as in Europe and the US, is that the protests showed once again the political divide that separates them from the majority of the population, which does vote for the status quo. Thus, its populist wager ("We Are the 99 %") is an attempt both to dismiss the cleavage by appealing to "obvious" truths and demonizing the ruling regime, and to build an alliance with the uneducated "mob," which they hope to persuade with their simplistic rhetoric. (Arguably, this is the role that Navalny's nationalism can claim to play.)

Russia is not an alien country when it comes to populism, because it is one of the places where it (known as *narodnichestvo*) originated as a concept in the nineteenth century, before the term began to be used pejoratively. Even the pejorative use was linked to the polemics against Populists led by Bolshevik Marxists in early twentieth-century Russia. This first instance of populism was something quite different from the current global trend, but it was also an ideology of the intelligentsia. Russian Populists, despite the diverse trends within the movement, all aspired to a democratic politics in which "the people" itself would act. However, they understood "the people" in an orientalist way, as a dark, unknown element (cf. Etkind 1998). Nowadays, on the contrary, intellectuals see themselves as among the oppressed people (as witnessed by Spivak's evocation of "subalternization," mentioned above) and as its vanguard.

During perestroika, in the 1980s, liberal-democratic intellectuals successfully encouraged large numbers of people to support them by entering into an alliance with the populist Communist Party leader Boris Yeltsin. As Boris Kagarlitsky claims, however, since the mid-1970s they had abandoned genuinely democratic values in favor of westernizing liberalism and had "stopped being populist"; the populism of the 1980s was thus a short-lived tactical alliance (Kagarlitsky 2008). Therefore, in the 1990s, the educated class found itself in the minority and continued to support Yeltsin's regime despite the fact that a large part of the population was being impoverished, which has led some to claim that it betrayed the popular cause for the sake of group egoism. Until now, national support for liberal parties has ranged between five and seven percent, and there is a growing divide between the westernized values of the educated urban class and the conservative nationalism hegemonic among the relative majority. Within this context, it is a risky wager for urban profession-

als to claim to be "the people." In a way, though, it marks an inverted return to nineteenth-century Russian Populism. Once again, it is the mysterious "people" who is seen as the unconscious subject of the protests, but now intellectuals see themselves as its organic and most oppressed part, such that (quite logically for "the people") they do not even know why and wherefore they are revolting. It is the demonic/democratic people *within them* that calls them to rise up.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I presented the results of a qualitative empirical study that aimed to trace the formation of a new political subjectivity during protests that suddenly politicized previously apolitical urban dwellers in Russia. Together, the constitutional framework of liberal democracy, a special situation in which politicization impacted a deeply apolitical society, and the current global anti-authoritarian trend has produced a movement that combines the features of middle-class liberal and westernizing politics with *populism*. This populism has still not been articulated or become wholly conscious: it constitutes a realm of potential development rather than a fully formed subjectivity and ideology. It is not only a promising but also a theoretically interesting phenomenon, as it is based on the gap between the objectively privileged and minoritarian status of the movement's members, and their image of themselves as "ordinary people," wrongly denigrated by the authorities as "scum."

The fact that contemporary democracy has the self-proclaimed "people" contesting power in social movements is due not just to the sovereignty of "the people," but also to the fact that, in recent decades, the "democratic" element of politics has increasingly shifted to civil society (Etzioni 1970; Rosanvallon 2008). Moreover, this is not only the civil society that is firmly split into classes or institutionalized in NGOs but also, increasingly, the civil society of sporadic social movements. If we seek democracy not in the state, but in this grassroots and contentious civil society, then it is no surprise that its collective subject emerges as the amorphous and indeterminate "people," rather than as an articulate, unilateral ideological party. Originally, Hegel had understood civil society as an amorphous mass of abstract and despicable individuals opposed to the organized state (Hegel 1991). It was the Marxist tradition (Marx and Gramsci) that inverted the picture by revealing the presence of particularist structures within civil society, which, according to Marx, undermined the state's supposed unity (Marx 1978). But the idea of civil society as the state-in-dissolution has nonetheless been present in the background. Today, as civil society in the Marxist sense has come to be seen as the bearer of genuine democracy, this latent content of dissolution returns, and the "new new" social movements contest the state from the standpoint of an

unstructured public's indeterminate unity, while particularist identities are seen only as unfortunate limitations on an abstractly universalist viewpoint.

The task for thought and practice is, thus, to find means of uniting this enormous and diverse multitude into a unity. Contemporary philosophy has pondered this question in many fruitful ways. One helpful notion is Virno and Negri's concept of the irreducible "multitude," which I have already mentioned. The multitude is a means of gathering diverse, precarious, and unruly individuals in such a way that their plurality is preserved, and no unitary "state" emerges as a result. Another approach is Badiou's notion of the "generic" unity of post-revolutionary subjects. In the language of mathematical set theory, he argues the possibility of artificially constructing an integral "set" in such a way that the resulting union *escapes* any particular characteristic or definition that was available in the pre-existing situation (Badiou 2005: 327–390). Laclau's notion of a hegemonic and antagonistic "people" is a weaker but equally relevant proposal for a unification that would preserve multiplicity. All these are theoretical notions, but they are useful for trying to conceive ways out of the current crisis of democracy, which is locked in the state/civil society coupling.

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Appendix: Questionnaire for Participants of Protest Rallies in Russia, 2011–2012

1. What do you expect from this rally?

2. Did you take part in the December (February) rallies? Which ones exactly? Remember the moment when you decided to go the first rally. What happened at that moment? What changed when you began going to the rallies?

3. Do your closest friends and family members know you have been going to these rallies? How do your parents feel about this? Your spouse? Your children? Your grandchildren? How do your colleagues at work/acquaintances at school feel about it? And your friends? Do you have friends who feel negatively about it?

(*If the informant says someone feels negatively about their attending the rallies, ask follow-up questions.*)

Do you quarrel with them? Do you argue? Do you discuss the situation?

4. Where and how did you get information about the first rallies in December? Where and how do you get information now? What Internet resources do you read to keep abreast of events?

5. What do you like about the rallies? What do you not like about them? What would like to change about how the rally has been organized and staged? If you compiled the roster of speakers, what would it look like?

6. What people come to these rallies? What people stay home instead? What kind of people do you like, and what kind do you not like? Who among the people who come to the rallies would have better stayed home? Why do you feel an affinity for some and not for others?

7. Recently, there were rallies in support of Putin and against the "threat of orange revolution" in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. How do you feel about these rallies? What people attend them? Are they different from you, for example? Could the same people have come here today?

8. Have you encouraged anyone to attend rallies, vote against United Russia or something else of the sort?

Section 2: Political Experience and Views

9. Have you previously been involved in small-scale initiatives or social movements? What were they? When was this?

10. Which problems in our country need to be addressed first?

11. What can you do personally to change the situation in the country?

12. Are you going to come to the next rally? (If not, why not?) Would you come to rallies after the presidential election? What would have to happen for you not to come to these rallies?

13. In your opinion, why is it important for elections to be fair? (*If the informant doesn't understand the question, clarify what you mean.*) Why is it

so terrible that there is electoral fraud? After all, don't all of us sometimes give small bribes, violate traffic rules, and so on?

14. Could this movement incorporate not only demands for fair elections but other, broader demands as well? What demands?

Follow-up questions:

Do you think, for example, that social demands could be included?

OR

Aside from the issue of fair elections, could issues of wealth and poverty, fee-for-service medicine versus free medical care, raising taxes, etc., be brought up at these rallies?

15. Do you consider yourself a member of a particular social group, stratum or class?

16. Try and describe your ideal representative, someone who would best represent you and people like you. What sort of person would they be? What, for example, would they look like?

17. We are all fighting for change in our society now. What would your ideal society, the society in which you would like to live, look like?

OR

If you or your supporters came to power, how you would change the structure of society?

Section 3: Social Status

Thank you. I want to ask a few more questions about you personally. They'll help us to better understand what kinds of people come to the rallies.

18. What is your education and your current occupation or profession?

19. Is there something that prevents you from fully realizing yourself professionally (academically, personally)?

20. Tell me a little bit about your family. With whom are you living right now? What do the members of your family do?

21. What keeps you occupied besides work and family?

22. Where were you born? What kind of education did your parents have? What did they do or do they do?

23. What, roughly, is your monthly income?