
Russian Protests and Russian Elections. How to Understand Public Behaviour

On 8 March 2012 **Nina Belyaeva**, Professor at the Moscow High School of Economics, delivered an open lecture at the Faculty of Political Science "Roberto Ruffilli" in Forlì in the framework of the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe (MIREES). The lecture, held in the wake of Russian presidential elections, attracted great interest among students and professors.

Starting her lecture with 8 March greetings, Professor Belyaeva explained the title of her presentation "**Russian Protests and Russian Elections. How to Understand Public Behaviour**". The speaker focused on the mass mobilization of Russian citizens on the eve of presidential elections and the underlying reasons for their actions and reactions. She stressed that the overall perceptions of the protesting public were very clear: by organizing demonstrations and protests, the people really knew what they wanted to achieve.

The speaker went on to analyze the role of **mass media** (particularly "Kommersant", a mainstream newspaper owned by the oligarch Usmanov). Special attention was paid to the processes that went beyond the power struggle: people did not want a single vote to be rigged. Professor Belyaeva argued that "cleaning up" the political scene on the eve of the elections contributed to increasing Putin's electoral fortunes. She analyzed in detail the political profiles of Putin's official rivals. One of the candidates, Sergey Mironov, was Putin's supporter. Another one, Mikhail Prohorov, appeared only about a month before the elections, which significantly reduced his chances. Likewise, Gennady Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy had only limited electoral fortunes, as suggested by previous election statistics. Referring to Putin's opposition, the guest presented cooperation attempts undertaken by Prohorov, Zyuganov and Mironov.



Commenting on the political and social characteristics of the demonstrators, Professor Belyaeva pointed to the fact that the overall **protest group** was not associated with a certain political party. Another question discussed during the lecture concerned weaknesses of the demonstrations and demonstrators, the main one being lack of organization. For example, the colour of the protests was white, but numerous organizations protested under their own colours.

During her lecture the guest presented many photos, including those of the "White Circle" Protest

in Moscow. This event, in her view, was not about power, but rather about **solidarity**. The speaker also touched upon the amount of money raised as charity for the protests: about four million roubles were collected in the Yandex money system.

In concluding her lecture, Professor Belyaeva quoted one of the posters displayed at the demonstrations that conveyed the popular stance toward the present government: "We are not the opposition, we are your employers!".

The lecture aroused **great interest** among the audience and was followed by a lively discussion.

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