

The crowds should focus on corruption – not beating Putin

The protesters do not represent the public, which supports overwhelmingly the president-elect

Richard Rose

The emergence of anti-Putin demonstrators on to the streets of Moscow has filled our screens with images of young, educated people fighting for their democratic rights. It is a familiar image, but one that could be misleading. In order to have a titanic impact on how Russia is ruled, those demonstrators must be the tip of an iceberg. The evidence suggests they are more of a loose ice floe.

Moscow's protesters do represent a new middle class. The Levada Centre, Russia's oldest independent pollster, reports that 83 per cent are university graduates or students and 72 per cent are sufficiently prosperous to be able to buy a car. This marks them out as unusual. Less than half of Muscovites, and barely one in five of the country's national population, have a higher education. Most Russians are not yet on the internet and politics is not the main interest of those who tweet.

What's new about the protesters is that more than five sixths of them think protests can bring about real change and they brave the cold and truncheons of Moscow police to make their point. The same proportion of all Russians think exactly the opposite.

After Sunday's presidential election protesters produced evidence of fraud at more than 1,000 of Russia's 95,000 polling stations. No one doubts that significant padding of the Putin vote occurred, but it did not affect the outcome. Had it been a free and fair election, a majority of Russians would still have voted for him.

The Levada Centre's forecast of the result actually overestimated Putin's support, while the least favourable independent poll suggested that three million fraudulent votes boosted Putin's total support from just under 60 per cent to just over 60 per cent of the total. This would still have left him with a lead of more than 40 per cent over the Communist runner-up.

The party of the candidate the protesters initially favoured, Grigory Yavlinsky, won only 3 per cent of the vote at the Duma election in December. The reform candidate, the billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, received just 8 per cent of the vote on Sunday, as independent polls predicted.

The demonstrators have no future as an electoral movement. But they do have public opinion behind them in protesting against corruption. The future of the demonstrators lies in abandoning efforts to annul an election that they could not have won and using their energy, phone cameras and websites instead to press the President-elect to root out the corruption that plagues the lives of ordinary Russians.

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