ROUND TABLE ON RUSSIAN SOCIOLOGY
THE PROTEST CYCLE OF PERESTROIKA:

THE CASE OF LENINGRAD

A. Duka, N. Korney, V. Voronkov and E. Zdravomyslova

Abstract This article describes the protest cycle of perestroika (1985–1991) in the city of Leningrad. The political and economic reforms of democratisation were the subject of this protest. The bipolarisation of the protest movements and authorities, on the one hand, and of opposing political movements, on the other, is conceived as the developing mechanism of the protest cycle. The authors distinguish four phases of the protest cycle that correspond to the shifting political opportunities on the country and local levels.

Theoretical framework

Political protest and social movements in Russia are only starting to be a subject of research owing to the fact that open protest is quite a recent phenomenon in this country. The political mobilisation that took place during perestroika urgently calls for a sociological analysis of this phenomenon. This article is one of the first attempts to apply a political process model and relevant notions of political cycle, protest cycle and political opportunities to the study of political mobilisation in Russia, mainly in Leningrad, during the years of perestroika.

In accordance with the political process model, as formulated by Tilly (1978), McAdam (1982) and others, we analyse political protest within the framework of the much broader processes of socio-political transformation, which could be called democratisation. The emergence and dynamics of political protests are considered to be a reaction to and a feedback for the shifting political opportunities that are triggered off by the cycle of reforms. We emphasise the rationality of political movements in their ways of using the emergent political opportunities and internal resources to attain their goals.

The political opportunity structure is one of the key conceptual tools used in the political process model. Political opportunities can be conceived as assets of the movement’s environment, facilitating political mobilisation. There is a list of over 14 variables selected to depict the opportunity structure of the movements (Della Porta 1992). We would like to use the broadest interpretation of the concept, which includes almost every part of the context structures that influence political mobilisation (Rucht 1992).

The analysis is limited to the period of perestroika in Russia (1985–1991). We would like to observe in concrete terms what general and local political opportunities opened up in the course of the political cycle called perestroika, and how they influenced the development of the protest cycle in Leningrad. We
underwent permanent revision among the general public. The so-called ‘kitchen culture’ and ‘table liberties’ flourished. They were cultures of political anecdotes that became widespread and which the authorities could do nothing to stop. Home seminars, dissident movements, youth counterculture – all these phenomena demonstrated the decline of ideological monopoly and constituted a cultural resource for the political protest of perestroika.

The social context provided certain opportunities for the reformation of the system. Discontent, an increasing polarisation between population and authorities, and the intelligentsia as a social group with democratic values formed the social base of perestroika. In the 1980s new organisational structures were established under the umbrella of Komsomol. Many of them were historical clubs and leisure centres where the official ideology was revised and organisational skills were learned by the participants. These structures greatly assisted the alternative informal organisations of perestroika.

Socio-psychological. General discontent and the lack of confidence in the authorities promoted the erosion of state socialist ideology and devaluation of socialist values among significant sections of the population.

Political factors produced contradictory effects on future mobilisation. On the one hand, the one-party system did not channel the interests of social groups. The polity was closed to challengers. The legislature did not anticipate the creation of initiative groups outside state control. There were no legal political channels for open political protest. However, after the death of Brezhnev in 1982, a conflict within the ruling elite rapidly developed. The failure of the USSR's international policies was demonstrated by the war in Afghanistan. The above mentioned factors helped protest mobilisation, which started in the second half of the 1980s.

We observe a general context for political protests in Russia on the eve of perestroika, although it was still unfavourable for open protest actions and social movements. However, it provided certain opportunities for mobilisation under the condition of political openings in the course of reforms.

Perestroika as a political cycle

We argue that the political cycle of perestroika (1985–1991) contained a cycle of reforms and a cycle of protests that developed in parallel interactionist fashion, although protest followed reforms only after some delay.2 As reforms developed, the political process proper was characterised, on the whole, by the struggle of three political forces: (a) the party-state oriented toward the preservation of control over society in the process of transition to democracy; (b) the democratic movement whose goal was to create a Western-type society (political and economic pluralism); and (c) the conservative movement striving to preserve Soviet socialism or to return to some version of the Russian Empire.

We can distinguish four periods of the mobilisation cycle that correspond to certain ‘openings’ in political opportunities for challengers and certain shifts in the locus of opportunities. The boundaries of these phases of the cycle are
analysis of regional mobilisation. We would like to apply it to the case of Leningrad.

The political opportunity structure in Leningrad

The dynamics of mobilisation in Leningrad were shaped by general and local context factors. The general factors are: the all-Union political process, and especially the course of the political cycle in the Baltic republics, the closest North-Western neighbours of Leningrad. The influence of political protest in the Baltic republics, and their use of ideological and material resources for mobilisation distinguished the protest cycle of Leningrad. Among local factors we distinguish stable and conjunctural ones. The most important stable local factors are: local cultural context, local political context and local social context.

Stable opportunity structure in Leningrad

Local cultural context. In the consciousness of its citizens and of the whole population of the Soviet Union, there existed a myth of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) – a city with a mysterious soul, the antipode of Moscow. The peculiar history of the city founded by Peter I as a ‘window to Europe’, as well as the Europe-oriented culture that was moulded here, has engendered in public opinion a stable image of a European city inhabited by a specific democratically oriented public (Metaphizika Peterburga 1993).

In spite of its immense economic and political importance for the country, Leningrad in the pre-perestroika years was called ‘a great city with a provincial fate’. It is true that the territorial-administrative policy of the socialist system did its best to put all the cities of the country except Moscow on the same level. This policy induced an inferiority complex and relative deprivation that generated a peculiar type of local patriotism in the population which further assisted the protest mobilisation of perestroika (Gurney and Tierney 1982).

Local political context. In the last few decades Leningrad has been a city of political reaction which drastically contradicted the aforementioned mythological image. The city was home to a powerful CPSU apparatus and rigid local rule. It served as a breeding ground for reactionary social projects and was noted for its particularly cruel repression of the intelligentsia and dissidents. The strongly repressive character of Leningrad politics as a result produced powerful political protests with the openings created by perestroika.

The local social context promoted both reformist and counter-reformist mobilisation. Firstly, the share of the military-industrial complex in the city’s economy amounted to 40 per cent. It was precisely the military-industrial complex that was most negatively affected by the reforms in the first place, the destruction of which was fraught with the dangers of mass unemployment and the loss of privileges (Voronkov 1991).

Secondly, more than half of the city’s population was and still consists of migrants (Garabtsov 1989). This part of the population had limited rights of
local Soviet and was thus institutionalised. The city became one of the outposts of democratic opposition to the Union's central authorities. Anatolij Sobchak was elected as chairman of the Leningrad Soviet and later, as Mayor of the city, in the Congress of the People's Deputies symbolised the democratic stand of Leningrad. He was a constant opponent of Gorbachev and the governments of Ryzhkov and Pavlov. Together with the Mayor of Moscow, Gavril Popov, and the future President of Russia, Yeltsin, he was part of a democratic leadership triumvirate.

After the elections of March 1990, the collective actions taking place in Leningrad supported the democratic movement of the USSR. Many rallies were initiated by the local authorities and took place in the central square of the city, headed by the Mayor and Speaker of the local Soviet. The legitimacy of the democratic authorities was maintained up to the coup of August 1991. One of the final landmarks of this legitimacy was the referendum on the issue of renaming the city St. Petersburg, which was held at the same time as the election of the Russian President in June 1991. This symbolic act reinforced the democratic image of the city and its opposition to the conservative centre.

Let us now consider the development of the political cycle in the concrete case of Leningrad.

The initial phase of the protest cycle in Leningrad

The start of the political reforms in the USSR launched by the reformist branch of the CPSU was represented by the new slogans of acceleration of economic development and the restructuring of Soviet society in April 1985. The new political course created opportunities for an open discourse on the reform of socialism. This was the start of the policy and practice of openness and glasnost. Ideological reformism initiated the public revision of Soviet history and contributed to the eventual delegitimisation of the regime.

As early as June 1986 the CPSU used the slogan of democratisation that was conceived as an opportunity to hold elections with alternative candidates. At that time, the democratisation of society was considered to be an effect of democratisation in the CPSU. Thus the leading role of the CPSU in reforming society was emphasised. During this phase Gorbachev initiated the unpopular anti-alcohol campaign which gave rise to the delegitimation of the regime and large-scale protest among the population.

The initial reforms had a greater influence on the mass media than on any other social actor. The publication of historical archives and public discussions contributed to the awakening of public opinion. At that time the policy of glasnost de facto legitimated, though restricted, 'socialist pluralism'. Important newspaper discussions before the 27th Congress of the CPSU provided the ideological framework for political struggle. The image of the enemy of reforms – a bureaucrat affiliated to the party-state apparatus – was conceived at that time, and perestroika was identified with the fight against the command administrative system, nomenklatura and bureaucracy.

The conflict among the elite was first made apparent in February 1986 at the
PROTEST CYCLE OF PERESTROIKA

The economic reforms of that period, which were widely seen as contradictory and impracticable, led to the establishment of the first cooperatives and counteraction to the reforms in the shape of a fight against ‘dishonest incomes’ and speculators. These unsuccessful and ambiguous attempts at economic reform contributed to the image of a weak state that could hardly implement its own decisions.

Besides the all-Union context, the dynamics of protests in Leningrad were influenced by local factors. Initially the mobilisation was triggered off by the city authorities’ neglect of local problems: for example, the preservation of the decaying historical centre, the destruction of the environment caused by the construction of a dam in the Finnish Gulf, and the fire in the world-famous Library of the Academy of Sciences. In 1986–88 several dozens of ecological-cultural groups appeared to voice civic protest (in the form of picketing and rallies) against specific actions taken by the executive (Zdravomyslova 1989). During this phase local issues that led to mobilisation were very quickly translated into the language of political protest against local authorities and later against the political regime in general.

In 1987, after the publication of rather unorthodox materials on Soviet history, there emerged discussion clubs where certain parts of Soviet history began to be questioned. These clubs appeared as associations of admirers of radical publications representing all political trends (Eco, Soviet Russia, Ogonyok). By the end of 1987, the first political clubs of the intelligentsia also appeared: ‘Perestroika’, ‘Synthesis’, ‘The Alternative’, and others. Their repertoire of activities at that time took place exclusively indoors, the most popular forms of which were city-wide discussions on urgent problems. These new informal organisations were quickly politicised because the practice of civil initiatives had shown that all the problems could be solved only by political means in Soviet society. In our case, therefore, all the groups made political demands by the end of the first phase.

It is important to emphasise that during this period ‘informals’ (as they were called) did not consider themselves opponents of the Union government, but rather as allies of ‘the progressive centre’ in the realisation of the ideas of perestroika. The ideological and political symbols used by informals played a special role in protest mobilisation. Striving for broader popular support, the movements did their utmost to associate their demands with mass consciousness stereotypes. One of the mechanisms of such a frame-alignment (Snow et al. 1986) was manipulation of the ‘image of the enemy’. In the initial period of the protest cycle, when the activities of social movements still had a non-political character, the image of the enemy was rather vague. The enemy was not identified with a social group or a concrete political leader. As the groups became politicised, however, the enemy image began to be associated with existing social groups. The first label that was used to designate an enemy of perestroika at that time was the word ‘bureaucrat’.

During this phase, the opportunities for open discourse were constantly expanding and openings for organisation building, of clubs and informal groups, appeared. Thus, the first collective actions (all-city disputes, meetings, rallies,
continued to promote the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the Baltic republics, popular national fronts were organised whose candidates won at the republican elections. The civil war in Nagornyj Karabakh was escalating. Even the earthquake in Armenia did not help the consolidation of republics.

What was the content of this phase of the protest cycle in Leningrad? In addition to general electoral mobilisation, local factors also led to increasing mobilisation. Protest during this phase was escalating and had a pulsating reactive character. Against the background of growing general discontent and protest sentiments among the population, temporary mobilisations were reactions to the following issues on local political agenda: the publication of the letter by Nina Andreeva (she was a Leningrad resident), preparations for the 19th Party Conference, the activities of the radical nationalist-patriotic group Pamyat (Memory), and the forthcoming elections for the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR.

The reaction of the authorities was the crucial mechanism in the dynamics of protest. A distinct political confrontation between the democratic movement and local authorities developed after the publication of Nina Andreeva's letter. The city authorities who backed this manifesto took an openly conservative stand. If the opposition on the Union level could be described by the formula 'progressives vs. conservatives', in Leningrad it acquired the form of 'the authorities + the conservative orthodox-communist organisations + part of the nationalist patriotic organisations vs. democratic social movements'.

This political mobilisation began to trouble the city authorities by that time. Local authorities used various tactics of weakening and dividing the democratic movement. On the legal level, they introduced restrictions on rallies, demonstrations and other larger gatherings (March 1988). The legal procedure of granting permission for collective action reduced the potential for mass mobilisation because the authorities determined the 'when' and 'where' of such planned actions. As a rule, permission was given to hold meetings on the outskirts of the city where it was difficult to get mass attendance.

Another tactic oriented to weakening mobilisation was an attempt to oppose pragmatically and politically oriented eco-cultural groups: groups which were engaging in the restoration of architectural monuments and planting trees, and groups which compelled authorities to implement an environmental policy. A further popular tactic was the so-called zubatovchshina. If there was a real danger of mass political mobilisation, the authorities would create parallel groups with similar goals to the non-formal organisations that were actually controlled from above. Such 'pseudo-informals' had a large amount of institutional resources at their disposal: premises, permission to hold meetings wherever and whenever, indirect financing, access to the official mass media, etc. There are several examples of such organisations: the society Spravedlivost (Justice) in competition with the already existing initiative group 'Memorial', which united those who had suffered from Stalinist repression; parallel groups to the self-help and cultural organisations of national minorities; parallel voters' clubs, etc.

However, these tactics of demobilisation misfired. In the elections, the candidates of the party-administrative nomenklatura lost. This failure stirred the
removal of the CPSU from the political scene and a transfer of power to the representative and executive bodies. As a consequence, the conflict within the elite extended from the CPSU structure to the factions in the Congress of Deputies and the Supreme Soviet.

This change provided political movements with institutional allies. The democratic movement allied itself with the Inter-Regional Deputies’ group headed by A. Sakharov and B. Yeltsin. Counter-reformists consolidated around Ligachev, although it is necessary to emphasise that counter-reformists in the elite failed during this phase because Gorbachev forced them out of the party leadership and replaced them with his followers – the future leaders of the coup of August 1991 – who had not shown an independent political stance until then. By that time the mass media had also transferred their support for a revision of Soviet-Russian history to an analysis of current political processes. The largest space was given to materials arising from Congresses, sessions, elections, and so on.

The Russian and local electoral campaigns considerably enhanced political opportunities for protest and a shift in their locus. Electoral opportunities became even more promising than in the previous phase, thanks to amendments in the electoral law. The very agenda of elections promoted the regionalisation of political movements which were forced to shift their attention to the interests and demands of local communities.

This phase is characterised by the peak of nationalist mobilisation in the republics. The majority of collective actions and important political events discussed on the all-Union level were concerned with the coming disintegration of the USSR. During this phase the Baltic republics declared their independence from the Soviet Union. Centrifugal tendencies became distinct all over the country. Russia was also affected by this process. For the first time the issue of Russian sovereignty was raised not only by Russian nationalists, but by democrats as well. The fight with the Union authorities obtained the meaning of a struggle with political conservatism and the centre of imperialism that exploited not only republics, but Russia itself.

The activities of social movements during this phase were oriented to electoral goals. In the elections to the Russian and local Soviets, democrats were successful in gaining the majority of seats in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Their most convincing victories in Russian cities were in Leningrad, Moscow and Sverdlovsk.

The delegitimation of the one-party system and the CPSU per se reached its peak at the Third Congress of People’s Deputies when the sixth article of the Soviet Constitution declaring the leading role of the CPSU was abolished. This formed a constitutional opportunity for multi-party building. The post of the president of the country was established. Gorbachev was elected the first and last president of the USSR.

The protest cycle in Leningrad at that time was isomorphic to large-scale mobilisation in the whole country. But the results of electoral mobilisation were quite specific. This was the period in which the food supply in the city drastically deteriorated, when its sale had to be restricted to the residents of the city and ration cards for essential items were introduced. The economic crisis
PROTEST CYCLE OF PERESTROIKA

To give a rough idea of citizens’ support for political movements in the city at that time, we refer to the results of the opinion surveys conducted in September 1989. According to these, the positive attitude toward the democratic LPF (41 per cent of respondents) by far exceeded the positive attitude toward the socialist UFWP (17 per cent). In the first place, the democratic movement was supported by intellectuals who connected their political hopes to radical reforms. As to the social basis of the UFWP, the picture was the reverse: an overwhelming majority of unskilled and semi-skilled workers and the so-called ‘limitchiks’ declared themselves adherents of this organisation (Keselman 1989).

Trying to get the majority of votes in the Russian and local elections in Spring 1990, the counter-movement (UFWP) proposed a new electoral formula, according to which two thirds of Deputies had to be nominated by occupational districts. As a political consequence of this plan, the administration of state enterprises could manipulate the votes of electors (Izbiratelenye 1989). This proposal was rejected.

The elections of 1990 in Leningrad resulted in the takeover of power by the democratic majority. Among the elected deputies, two thirds were candidates from the democratic bloc. Of the 380 deputies of the City Soviet, only four represented the socialist UFWP and only two the nationalist-patriotic ‘Otechestvo’. The CPSU did not venture to propose its own list of candidates. Thus the protest cycle in the city ended with a resounding democratic election victory. The democratic movement succeeded in realising its main task. Since that time institutional Leningrad began to be perceived as being in opposition to the Union centre. As for the Russian Federation, the cycle of polarisation was completed only after the August 1991 coup, when the same realignment of political forces in Russia and Leningrad took place.

Conclusion

The protest cycle in Leningrad during perestroika was determined by the local conjuncture of political opportunities. We singled out stable and conjunctural cultural, political, social, socio-psychological and contingent factors. The analysis of protest cycle in Leningrad contributes to an understanding of the unevenness of the democratic transition in different regions of Russia, which is determined by the local face of political opportunities.

Notes

1. In the period at issue (1985–1990) the city was officially called Leningrad. However, it should be noted that the original name of the city was St. Petersburg. It was changed several times from 1703, the year the city was founded by Peter the Great. In 1914 the name was changed to Petrograd (replacing the German ‘Burg’ with the Russian root ‘grad’ as a result of the Russian-German War of 1914). The city was renamed again in 1924 after the death of Lenin when it became Leningrad. In 1991 the city’s name was returned to the original St. Petersburg.

2. In the party-state Soviet system, intra-party resolutions carried the meaning of political reforms of society.
PROTEST CYCLE OF PERESTROIKA


Biographical Notes: Alexander Duka is Researcher in the Institute of Sociology, St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The main focus of his work is on the emerging party system in Russia and the political elite.

Nikolai Kornev is Senior Researcher in the Institute of Sociology, St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. During perestroika he was one of the activists of the democratic organisation 'Leningrad People’s Front'.

Victor Voronkov is Senior Researcher in the Institute of Sociology, St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the founder and director of the Institute of Independent Social Research. He is editor and author of the collection of articles entitled Russian National Right: Yesterday and Today.

Elena Zdravomyslova is Senior Researcher in the Institute of Sociology, St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. She is the author of the monograph Paradigms of the Western Sociology of Social Movements (in Russian). The main focus of her work is on social movements and political symbolism in contemporary Russia.

Address: Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg Branch, 38 Serpukhovskaya, 198147 St. Petersburg, Russia.