

A grey revolution or democracy in action? Understanding protests against welfare reform in contemporary Russia

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Paper proposal for the stream 'Postsocialist Welfare Systems'
Eighth Conference of the European Network of Social Policy Analysis (ESPAnet)
Budapest, 2-4 September 2010

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In the midst of Winter 2005, Russia was rocked by a series of spontaneous nationwide protests. In a country famed for authoritarian rule and a passive population, demonstrations of pensioners and other groups usually seen as pro-Putin surprised both academics and the Russian government. The marches and pickets were prompted by neoliberally tinged welfare reforms that abolished a range of social benefits dating back to the Soviet period.

On the basis of mixed-method qualitative research, I argue that the strong societal reaction to these reforms can only be fully understood by recognising the symbolic value that may be attached to welfare provision. The social reforms restructured benefits that the Soviet regime had awarded to specific groups of the population as reward for taking part in the country's development. Their cancellation was therefore interpreted as a moral affront and slight on the contributions of former workers, soldiers and mothers. Although the reforms were poorly implemented and left certain groups materially worse off, administrative and financial factors do not fully explain the fierce societal reaction to the reforms. Rather, my paper will suggest that the Russian government underestimated the symbolic significance of existing social provision. This oversight resulted in direct protests that provoked a governmental move towards populism that remains today despite the pressures of the global economic crisis.

The Russian case ultimately reminds us of the moral and symbolic importance of welfare support and highlights the need for social policy studies to consider popular responses to reform, even in authoritarian states thought to be dominated by elite politics.