

# Commentary

Institute of Diplomacy and Global Affairs

## **A Vivid and Amusing Eye Witness Account of the February 4 Moscow Demonstrations**

By Paul Gregory

A colleague of Marianna Yarovskaya and me, Gregory Kataev (film and theater director), sent this description of what it was like to be a part of the 100,000 plus Moscow demonstrations of February 4. This letter shows the confusing and quixotic mix of "anti-government forces" that must organize themselves if Russia is to have a return to democracy.

"On Saturday, February 4th, my friends and I went to Bolotnaia Square. We walked the full length of the demonstration route along Yakimanka Street – from the Oktiabr'skaia metro station to the Udarnik cinema, and on to Bolotnaia Square.

There were A LOT of people there. Unfortunately, there were also a lot of Communists and Nationalists. My friends and I lost each other as I was carried off by the crowd. As I'm walking, I'm thinking to myself: Here are some good guys – rosy cheeked, stalwart, marching with precision, holding jaunty cute yellow flags; in short, nice guys. They appear to regard me with compassion. And suddenly these nice guys start yelling at the top of their lungs: "Russia for the Russians!" "Russia for the Russians!" I thought, "Well, I'm in trouble."

It was not easy to get out of there! To my right, a bearded guy, about 40 years old and a head taller than I (and I'm not that short myself), looks at me and asks: "Why aren't you chanting?" I reply: "Sore throat." And immediately I ask myself, "Why did I chicken out?" Then I say to him, "As a matter of fact, I'm half Jewish." He says, "Aaaaaah... And which of your parents is Jewish – mother or father? Your father is a Jewish man?" I answer: "The Jewish man – is my mother." He says, "Well then you are Russian. The important thing is that your father is Russian!" And he bellows out once more: "Russia for the Russians! Russia for the Russians!" And to me again: "Well, you have done well, brother, coming out to march!" That is how I became the brother of a Russian Nationalist.

Then, I seized the moment and defected to another column of demonstrators. But things went from bad to worse. Now I was marching with Anarchists (black-and-red flags), also nice guys. We were followed by a huge crowd of Communists with red banners, stars, hammers and sickles, and other such horseradish. In general, Marianna and Paul, one thing was clear: if any of these nice guys comes to power, he will hang people like me from lampposts.

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We caught up with the biggest column, a coalition of Democrats, Liberals, People's Freedom Party (Parnas) and Yabloko already in Bolotnaia Square. My friends and I again lost each other there. I roamed around among different groups of people. I heard conversations that were reminiscent of the revolution of February 1917! The only difference was that people were not shooting their Mausers into the sky.\* But it seemed like they might start firing any minute. So I walked around and talked to people, then finally stopped to rest and climbed onto a huge snow mound where it seemed to be a bit quieter.

To my surprise, I found myself among some American journalists. They did not seem like themselves. They wore *valenki* (felt boots) or some kind of specially warmed boots and winter coats. Their faces were blue from the cold. It was -22°C, and even I wore my father's *dublenka* (sheepskin coat) and ridiculous winter hat for the first time in several years. In short, they looked like engineers from the Russian industrial town of Tula, but certainly not like Americans!

One guy, in his 40s, turned out to be James Brooke, the Voice of America Moscow Bureau Chief. In a nutshell, standing right there in this snowdrift, I said something to him and his microphone, which ended up on [Voice of America news](#) in my brief moment of fame as:

"Standing on a pile of snow, Gregory Kataev, a filmmaker, said he was happy to see such a turnout when the temperature was minus 20 degrees. 'If I want a better Russia, if I want it to be a democratic country, I have to do something, not only speaking in the kitchen, as we say in Russia,' he said."

The atmosphere was like a crowded, chaotic marketplace, but with snow and arctic cold. Bearded, rosy-cheeked men wearing *tulups* (rural sheepskin coats), members of the Union of Russian People, stood nearby. They stared at us as though we were reptiles, bastard spies, smack dab in the middle of the Russian nation and wanting nothing more than its demise. I strongly felt home-brewed patriotic hospitality in their kind glances – it became clear that it was better not to speak English for more than ten minutes in their earshot.

They started asking us questions. I kept my VOA interview brief because I wanted to avoid engaging in a more radical form of interaction with these people than discussion. They carried posters reading "Give the power to the Russian people!" and they outnumbered us significantly.

The funny thing is that the Russian version of the VOA report says that I addressed the crowd from the height of the snow mound! And all I did (besides my short interview) was help the Americans understand a couple of speeches that were broadcast by the powerful loudspeakers. We all stood on the snow mound very far from the stage and it

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was impossible to get anywhere near it because of the dense crowds. The next day two friends of mine called me to say: "We heard you on the Voice of America! Have you been addressing the people from the top of a snow mound, like Lenin from the roof of his armored car? Did you get there in the sealed train from Washington?"\*\*

I hope, Marianna and Paul that you find this account entertaining and enlightening.

*\* Mauser - the name (the brand) of the hand-gun popular during the First World War, Revolution and Civil War in Russia. The crowd of people shooting in the sky from their Mausers is a typical political-meeting street scene in pre-revolutionary Russia.*

*\*\* Lenin, Russian Communist and Bolsheviks' leader, was sent by the German secret service from Germany to Russia (in April, 1917) across the First World War frontline in a sealed, protected train-wagon in order to get safely into Russia and complete the Russian revolution—so that Russia would sign a peace treaty on German conditions. Having arrived in Russia, Lenin held his famous "uprising speech" addressing the people on the train-station square from the roof of the armored car (bronevik).*