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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Nemtsov Detained as Police Disperse Rallies

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Police officers detaining opposition leader Boris Nemtsov during a rally on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Saturday. **Mikhail Voskresensky**

Police arrested opposition leader Boris Nemtsov and at least 95 others on Saturday in an occasionally violent crackdown on demonstrations across Russia against restrictions on freedom of assembly.

In St. Petersburg, 60 of about 200 people were detained in what witnesses said was one of the most violent recent crackdowns on protesters. Some of the detained had bloody noses, while others had their heads beaten against police buses.

"Putin is the butcher of freedom," protesters shouted as the detainees were taken away, directing their anger at Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Opposition activists for the past year have staged demonstrations on the 31st day of those months that have 31 days to defend Article 31 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to public gathering.

Activists say this gives them the right to hold protests without prior permission, which is regularly denied to opposition groups. Police habitually break up rallies not approved by the authorities.

In Moscow, police detained Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister who leads the Solidarity movement, as well as Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov and at least 35 others.

Mikhail Schneider, executive secretary of Solidarity, said the protests were intended to promote democracy. "We're here because the government has broken the Constitution," he said. "Pay greater attention because people are lying to you about democracy in Russia."

Only a quarter of Russians have heard of the Article 31 rallies, according to a recent poll by the independent Levada Center.

On Saturday, Moscow's unsanctioned protesters disappeared in a crowd of several hundred people who gathered on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad near the Mayakovskaya metro station to watch a car and motorcycle show.

The crowd paid little attention to the demonstration. "I'm here for the show, the demonstration doesn't interest me," said one young racing fan who declined to give his name.

City Hall had cited the car and motorcycle show as the reason for rejecting the opposition's request to rally on the square. A May 31 rally request was turned down because pro-Kremlin youth had asked to stage a concert on the square.

Human rights champion Lyudmila Alexeyeva said last week that City Hall had indicated it would sanction the July 31 rally if opposition leader Eduard Limonov's name did not appear on the list of organizers. She suggested that the opposition submit two applications — one with Limonov's name, and one without — to City Hall, which has never before approved requests for the rallies.

Alexeyeva said Saturday that the organizers would try to better coordinate the protests with City Hall next time.

"You see that such rallies now are stopped," she told journalists.

Earlier in Vladivostok about 30 people protested and no arrests were made.

"Our goal is to get from the authorities respect of the Article 31 of the Constitution," said Alexander Kurov, an activist with The Other Russia opposition movement in Vladivostok.

In Kiev, about 30 Ukrainian activists held a simultaneous rally at the capital's main railway station in support of the Moscow demonstration. Police swiftly detained several of them, breaking up the rally.

(Reuters, MT, AP)

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