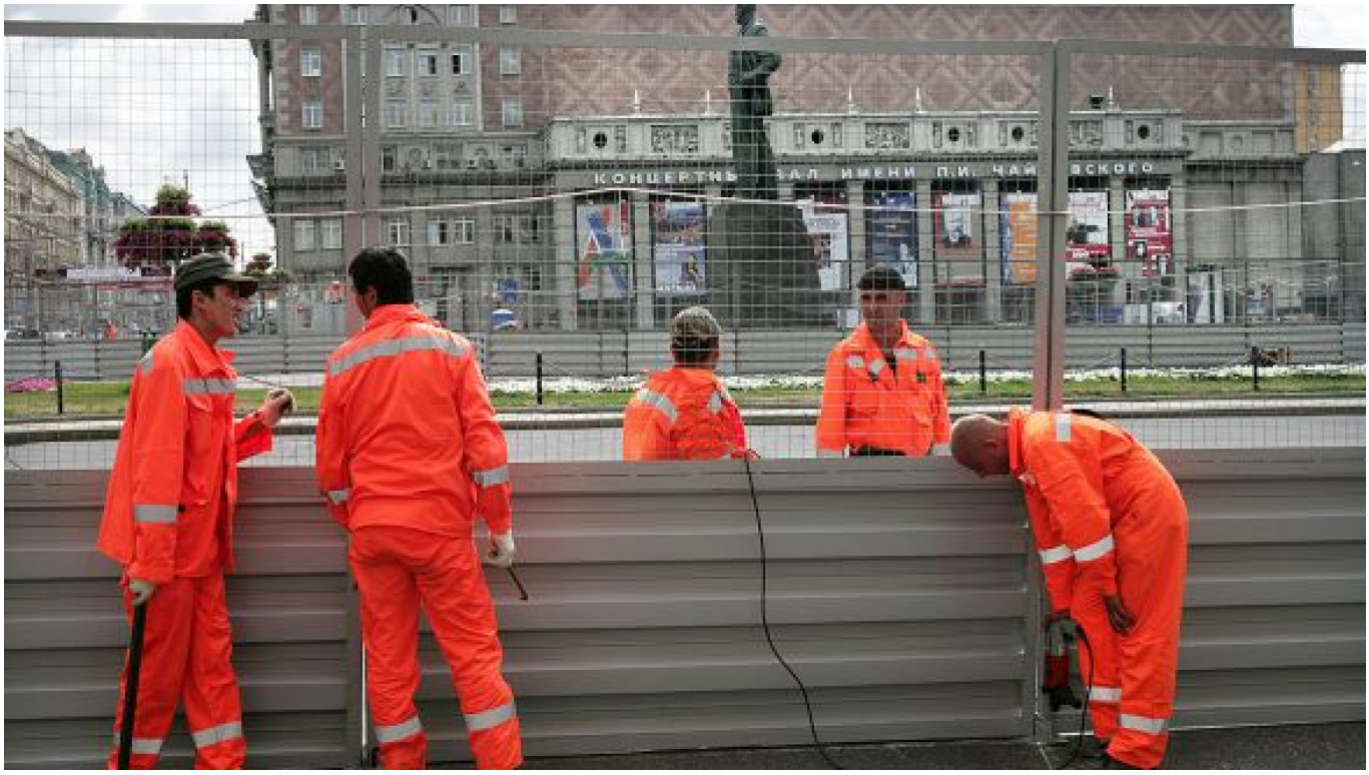
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Opposition Ignores Shutdown, Invites Gays

By Alexey Eremenko

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Workers raising a fence on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Wednesday for the construction of an underground garage. **Igor Tabakov**

City Hall closed Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Wednesday for the construction of a 600-car underground parking garage, leaving a popular venue for opposition rallies inaccessible for the next two to three years.

But the opposition insisted that an Aug. 31 rally would go forward and invited the gay community to join.

City Hall abruptly announced the closing of Triumfalnaya Ploshchad for construction on Aug. 16, just hours after telling the opposition that it could not rally on Aug. 31 because the square had been reserved earlier for a blood drive by a pro-Kremlin youth group. City Hall said a 1,000-car garage would be constructed under the square.

Moscow's chief architect, Alexander Kuzmin, said Wednesday that the 1,000-car figure was wrong. He said an unspecified private investor would open the 600-car garage under the square in 2012 or 2013, Interfax reported.

The construction work promises to create havoc on 1st Tverskaya-Yamskaya Ulitsa, a main street connecting Leningradsky Prospekt in northern Moscow with Tverskaya Ulitsa, which ends at Red Square. A similar project on the square near Belorussky Station, located just up the street from Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, has snarled traffic for months.

Kuzmin did not comment on what impact the construction on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad would have on traffic.

Nikolai Levichev, head of the Just Russia party's faction in the State Duma, criticized the construction as an attempt to prevent the opposition from rallying.

But one opposition leader, Eduard Limonov, said the closure would not prevent activists from rallying outside the construction site fence on Aug. 31.

Opposition and human rights activists have gathered on the square on the 31st of every 31-day month since last year to draw attention to Article 31 of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of assembly. City Hall has refused to authorize any of the rallies, which have ended in police crackdowns and detentions.

Meanwhile, leading gay rights activist Nikolai Alexeyev said in a statement posted on his blog that the gay community shared the same goals as the opposition and wanted to join forces. City Hall has rejected every application that Alexeyev has submitted to stage a Moscow gay pride parade since 2006.

Human rights leader Lyudmila Alexeyeva, who has co-organized the 31st rallies, said the gay activists were welcome to join the Aug. 31 rally but would not be listed among its organizers, Interfax reported. Alexeyeva is not related to Alexeyev.

Limonov refused to comment on Alexeyev's call for the opposition and gays to team up, calling it a “slippery” issue.

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