

Dozens Detained as EU Officials Join Rally

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Policemen dragging a protester away from a crowd attempting to rally on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Tuesday. **Igor Tabakov**

Police detained dozens of protesters attempting to rally late Tuesday at the closed Triumfalnaya Ploshchad in central Moscow, including rally leaders, but did not exert additional force despite a warning from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin that the protesters deserved to be beaten.

A crowd of 500 to 600 people tried to enter the fenced-off square but was stopped by about 1,000 police officers, who formed a human barrier that allowed only several protesters to seep through.

“Dear citizens, your activities are not coordinated with the executive authorities. Please abandon the square,” a police officer barked repeatedly through a megaphone.

Many opposition leaders, including Boris Nemtsov, Eduard Limonov and Ilya Yashin, were detained before they reached the square. But human rights veteran Lyudmila Alexeyeva attended the event and left without any obstruction.

Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov, who made it to the police barricade, was detained after shouting, "Russia has become dangerous for its own citizens."

Police reported detaining about 60 people, but a law enforcement source told Interfax that the figure was more than 100.

Four lawmakers from the European Parliament, including Heidi Hautala, head of the EU parliament's subcommittee on human rights, showed up to support the opposition.

Baton-wielding police officers also violently pushed around her colleague, Dutch lawmaker Thijs Berman.

"This is an amazing way of dealing with democracy, shocking," Berman told The Associated Press.

Police said no excessive force had been used, but some of the detained were treated roughly while being taken away from the square.

A policeman, who refused to give his name, said he felt uncomfortable at the rally because he was more used to dealing with outright criminals, not political activists, in the line of duty.

Tuesday's rally was organized by the Strategy 31 opposition movement, which attempts to hold rallies on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on the 31st of every month to draw attention to Article 31 of the Constitution, which grants freedom of assembly.

None of the rallies, held since July 2009, has been authorized, with city authorities citing a wide range of pretexts, including previously planned car festivals, concerts and blood drives. Police have broken up previous attempts to rally, sometimes violently.

Fears of an increase in police violence grew ahead of Tuesday's rally after Putin said in an interview published in Kommersant on Monday that the police would continue to break up rallies if the opposition failed to secure permission to stage them. "You will be beaten upside the head with a truncheon. And that's it," Putin said.

His words appeared to be heard by the Moscow police, whose deputy chief, Vyacheslav Kozlov, swore to crack down on participants indiscriminately, not holding back even with European Parliament members in attendance. "Let them come, and they will be met with the same response as the participants of unsanctioned meetings," Kozlov told reporters hours before the rally.

He called the lawmakers' visit "another attempt to throw mud at the Moscow police."

Last week, City Hall fenced off Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, saying an unidentified investor would construct a 600-car underground garage there. Work is scheduled to end no earlier than 2012 — the year of the next presidential election in which Putin might run.

Several members of the Moscow police's public council attended Tuesday's rally, and one of them, Alexander Gerasimov, editor of the City FM radio, said in an interview that "the activity on both sides looks like foolish clownery."

The council criticized the police for their actions during a similar rally in May, when officers broke the hand of a participant, who is also a reporter. No one was charged in connection with the injury.

Tuesday's rally attracted some unexpected participants, including an Orthodox monk from Novosibirsk.

"I came to support the protesters because Putin and [President Dmitry] Medvedev are destroying the country while Patriarch Kirill condones it," said the monk, who identified himself only as Grigory.

But passers-by, who had to make their way through a crowd that all but blocked access to the nearby Moscow Conservatory, expressed annoyance.

"Why do they demand civil rights? Are there no other problems?" said a 17-year-old female public relations student.

Prior to the rally, one of its organizers, Left Front activist Konstantin Kosyakin, filed a lawsuit against Russia with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The suit accuses the authorities of violating the people's constitutional rights, including the right to fair trial and freedom of speech, said Kosyakin's lawyer, Dmitry Agranovsky. He said the suit was accepted by the court.

"The very fact that this complaint was filed is a powerful incentive for the citizens to fight for their violated rights," Agranovsky [told](#) Ekho Moskv.

Civil society achieved what appeared to be a victory last week when Medvedev caved in to pressure from environmentalists and ordered a halt to the cutting down of trees in the Moscow region's Khimki forest for a major highway.

But the victory was downplayed by Limonov, who said environmental concerns had little impact on human rights violations.

"I would like to remind Russian citizens that a forest is a forest, but we live in a police state and we need freedom of assembly, alongside other freedoms," he [said](#) on his blog.

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