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Rights Veteran Quits Rallies

By Alexander Bratersky

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Opposition rallies aren't difficult just for octogenarians; police officers often jostle and rough up protesters. Here, policemen holding people back at the Aug. 31 rally for Article 31 near Triumfaln **Igor Tabakov**

Human rights veteran Lyudmila Alexeyeva said Thursday that she would stop attending opposition rallies because of her age and poor health, as Washington criticized a police crackdown on a rally near Moscow's Triumfalnaya Ploshchad this week.

“I've had my share of going to rallies in my life. After the last event on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, I understood that I am physically incapable of doing it," said Alexeyeva, 83.

"I had to leave the car too far [from the site], and the walk is too long,” she said, Interfax reported.

Alexeyeva was referring to Tuesday's rally on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, the latest in the opposition's attempts to stage rallies on the 31st of each month to draw attention to Article 31 of the Constitution, which grants freedom of assembly. The events are regularly banned by

authorities and broken up by police.

The rallies, held since 2009, are organized by Alexeyeva together with writer turned politician Eduard Limonov and Left Front activist Konstantin Kosyakin.

Ilya Yashin, a senior member of the Solidarity political movement, praised Alexeyeva as a symbol of the Triumfalnaya Ploshchad protests and called her "more of a man" than many opposition leaders.

“This woman has turned out to be more of a man than many well-known opposition leaders, who have shown themselves to be babblers,” Yashin told The Moscow Times.

He said he fully respected her decision.

Alexeyeva, a slight, frail Soviet-era dissident, was detained by police at a Dec. 31 rally on the square, sparking international condemnation. She was not touched at Tuesday's rally.

In Washington, the U.S. State Department expressed concern about intimidation tactics being used at Tuesday's rally, where police detained more than 100 people, and said it was also concerned about the Russian government's actions in recent years.

“We have concerns about intimidation of citizens, intimidation of journalists, intimidation of nongovernmental operators who are working on behalf of the Russian people,” Assistant Secretary of State Philip Crowley told reporters Wednesday, referring to the rally.

“We are concerned by actions by the Russian government in recent years, shrinking the space for civil society,” he said, according to a transcript on the State Department's web site. “Through our embassy, we have expressed our concern to the Russian government, and that conversation is ongoing.”

Four European Parliament members who attended Tuesday's rally have criticized the police.

Alexei Venediktov, editor-in-chief of Ekho Moskvy radio, said he would appeal to the deputy head of the presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov, to stop crackdowns on rallies, Kommersant reported.

But a Kremlin source told the newspaper that the presidential administration took no responsibility for the actions of Moscow's police force, which answers to City Hall. “To see the Kremlin's hand in crackdowns on rallies is to simplify the situation,” the source said.

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