

Gays Hold First Legal City Rally

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Gay activist Nikolai Alexeyev releasing an airplane outside the office of Swiss International Air Lines on Friday. **Ivan Sekretarev**

Gay rights activists on Friday held the first street protest sanctioned by City Hall, picketing the local office of a Swiss airline that they accused of mistreating their leader.

About 15 activists took part in the downtown rally, which they hailed as a victory for gay rights after years of confrontation, mostly over annual efforts to hold a gay pride parade in May like those elsewhere in Europe.

Former Mayor Yury Luzhkov, who governed the city for 18 years until being ousted by President Dmitry Medvedev earlier in the week, was a vehement opponent of the gay movement. Street events staged by gay activists were banned under his rule, and unauthorized rallies dispersed by police.

But on Friday, police protected the activists instead of cracking down on them. This involved stopping about a dozen hooded young men, described by the activists as neo-Nazis, who fired water pistols at the participants. Two of the assailants were arrested.

Activists with the Georgiyevtsy Orthodox movement also released roosters — birds whose name is used in Russian as a derogatory term for gays — at the rally, Interfax reported.

Nikolai Alexeyev, organizer of Friday's picket, said he received a death threat by telephone from an unidentified member of another Orthodox movement, Narodny Sobor, who demanded that he cancel the event, Interfax reported.

"The police worked professionally, and we are thankful to them," said Alexeyev, who has been roughed up and detained several times by police in the past. "They protected us."

Friday's picket targeted Swiss International Air Lines, accused by the activists of involvement in Alexeyev's odd disappearance at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport on Sept. 15.

Alexeyev claims that the airline removed him from the boarding gate ahead of his flight to Geneva at the behest of four unidentified men, not in uniform, who took him to a police station.

He said he was warned to withdraw complaints filed against Russia at the European Court of Human Rights and then deported to Belarus.

(MT, AP)

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