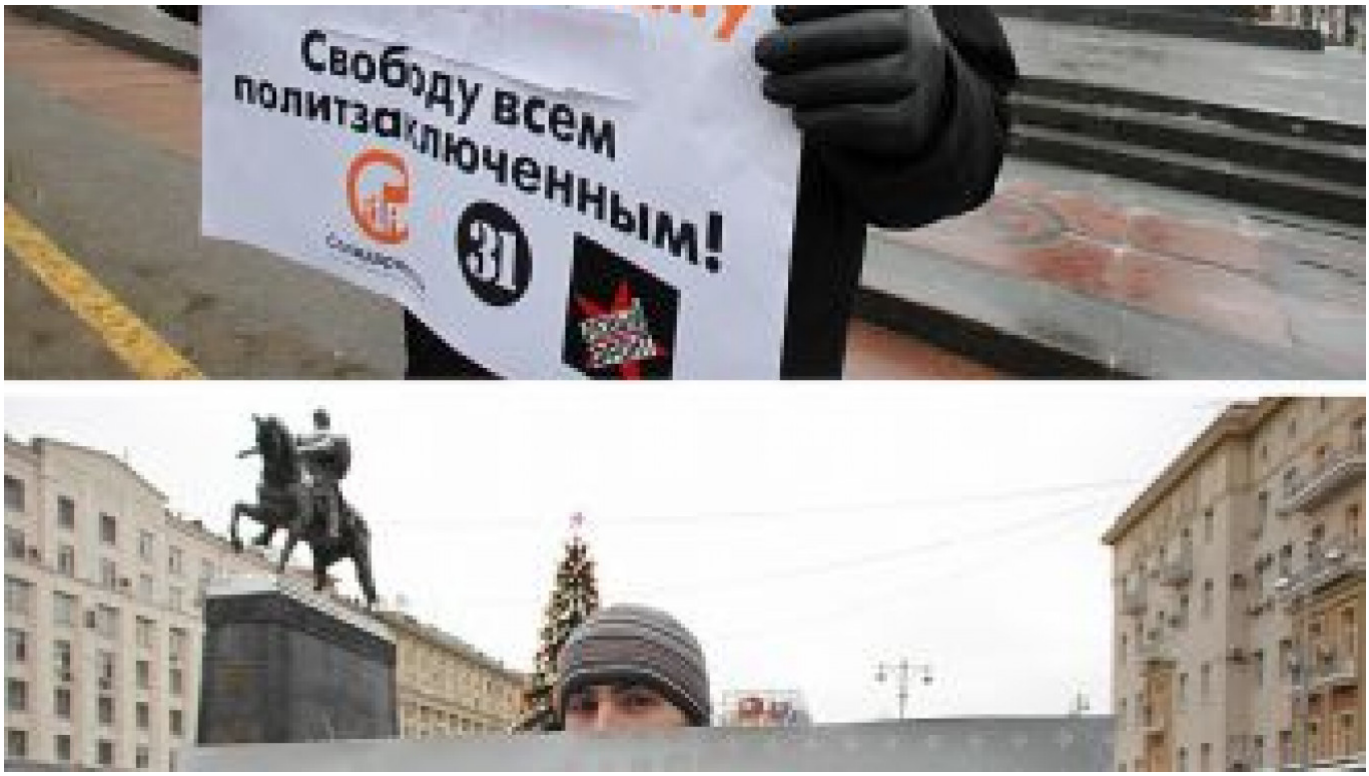
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Arrests Called Election-Year Warning

By Natalya Krainova

January 10, 2011



Activist Lev Ponomaryov, top, participating in one-man pickets Monday. **Igor Tabakov**

A senior opposition activist on Monday accused the authorities of jailing Boris Nemtsov and five other opposition leaders over the New Year's holiday as a warning to the opposition not to rock the boat ahead of national elections.

Left Front co-leader Sergei Udaltsov said the arrests at a sanctioned anti-Kremlin rally on Dec. 31 were "preventive measures" and predicted further difficulties for the opposition ahead of the State Duma elections in December and presidential vote in March 2012.

"This year will be notable for the suppression of the opposition," Udaltsov said by telephone.

Udaltsov spent about 45 days in custody last year, a record for an opposition activist, after being sentenced on charges similar to those filed against the detained activists: Solidarity leaders Nemtsov and Ilya Yashin; Left Front co-leader Konstantin Kosyakin; Vladimir Tor, co-leader of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration; and Kirill Manulin, a senior Other Russia official, who were arrested right after an authorized opposition rally on Triumfalnaya

Ploshchad on Dec. 31. Other Russia leader Eduard Limonov was detained as he exited his apartment building to attend the rally.

Moscow district courts jailed Nemtsov and Limonov for 15 days; Kosyakin and Tor for 10 days; Manulin for eight days; and Yashin for five days, starting from Dec. 31, news reports said. They were convicted of minor offenses such as swearing in public, hooliganism, and resisting the police.

The Dec. 31 rally was one in a series staged by the opposition on the last day of every month with 31 days and aimed at drawing attention to Article 31 of the Constitution, which allows freedom of assembly. The authorities have regularly cracked down on the rallies, which were banned until Mayor Sergei Sobyanin took office last fall.

Amnesty International denounced the arrests Saturday, saying in a statement that "Russian authorities do not fulfill their obligation to protect the right to free assembly."

Opposition activists held one-man pickets Monday in front of City Hall and a detention center in southern Moscow to support the jailed leaders. Several of them were detained, Interfax reported.

In a post on his LiveJournal blog on Friday, Nemtsov thanked opposition activists for holding pickets to support the jailed opposition leaders in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Omsk, Tver, Arkhangelsk, Voronezh, Volgograd, Lipetsk, Ulyanovsk, Magnitogorsk, Pskov, Chuvashia, Ryazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Irkutsk and Abakan.

Yashin, who walked free Wednesday, described his detention cell as "a dirty [expletive] hole [with] an army of omnipresent cockroaches and cigarette smoke eating out our eyes."

"Our main social circle behind bars were drunkards and people with a criminal past," Yashin wrote on his LiveJournal blog the day after he was released.

He added, "The authorities have made it a goal to humiliate opposition activists and break our spirit."

As if to prove his words, a video posted on YouTube by an unidentified blogger Sunday showed several young female activists with the pro-Kremlin group Stal collecting signatures in the street for an appeal to prosecutors to check whether Nemtsov had been sexually abused in police custody.

Stal said in a statement that it planned to pass a book to Nemtsov on Friday, the day before his release, on how to cope with sex abuse.

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