

Article 31 Protesters Set Sights on Vote

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Police cracking down on protesters at an unsanctioned Strategy 31 rally on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Aug. 31. **Igor Tabakov**

Rights veteran Lyudmila Alexeyeva claimed victory Tuesday in an opposition initiative to defend the constitutional right to free assembly by holding rallies in central Moscow and announced a new campaign for fair elections.

Alexeyeva said the last of the regular rallies held on the 31st day of every month with 31 days would take place Thursday.

The so-called Strategy 31 rallies aimed to draw attention to Article 31 of the Constitution, which grants the right to free assembly. But City Hall long refused to authorize the rallies, held on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad since 2009, and many were violently dispersed by riot police.

City Hall changed its policy after Sergei Sobyenin became mayor in October and started granting rally permits, albeit with certain conditions.

"Strategy 31 has fulfilled its task. The authorities have had to accept us," Alexeyeva told Interfax. "This is the fourth time that they have sanctioned our rally."

"But does this mean that we have no problems with anything besides Article 31? We're launching a campaign for honest elections," she said.

The first rally over elections will take place as soon as April 9 on Pushkin Square, she said.

Elections are a hot-button issue, with a State Duma vote scheduled for December followed by a presidential poll in March 2012.

Alexeyeva used to co-organize Strategy 31 rallies with opposition leader Eduard Limonov, but the two had a falling-out in October when city authorities agreed to permit a rally on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad if the number of participants was capped at 800 — a compromise Alexeyeva accepted but Limonov rejected.

A war of words followed, but Limonov appeared ready to settle things with Alexeyeva this week, telling Interfax on Monday that her decision to move rallies to Pushkin Square was "smart."

Limonov, however, said he would persist in his attempts to hold anti-government rallies on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad. He was denied permission to rally there on Thursday on the pretext that a pro-Kremlin youth group had already booked the venue. Alexeyeva's rally will be held the same day on Pushkin Square.

To what extent the rallies have had an impact on the political climate remains a question. While Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has ridiculed the protesters and suggested they deserved to be roughed up by the police, much of the country has not heard about them, possibly because state television ignores their rallies.

A [survey](#) published by the independent Levada pollster over the weekend indicated that 76 percent of the population had never heard of Alexeyeva, while 43 percent did not know Limonov.

Other opposition leaders also fared poorly, with about 40 percent of respondents saying they were unfamiliar with former State Duma Deputy Vladimir Ryzhkov and former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov. Chess master-turned-opposition leader Garry Kasparov was unknown to 35 percent of the respondents, while 24 percent were not familiar with former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov. Approval ratings for all four hovered around 21 percent.

The poll covered 1,600 residents in 45 regions and had a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points.

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