

# Split Opposition Holds Two 31 Rallies

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A group of young protesters walking along Tverskaya Ulitsa during one of Thursday's Strategy 31 protests. **Ivan Sekretarev**

The opposition appears to have completed its split and settled on a routine, staging two rallies Thursday in downtown Moscow, one of which was dispersed while the other ended peacefully.

City Hall authorized rights veteran Lyudmila Alexeyeva to hold a rally in defense of freedom of assembly on Pushkin Square, attended by a modest crowd of 250 to 350, though the organizers claimed to have brought out 700 protesters.

But a separate event by Alexeyeva's former ally, flamboyant activist Eduard Limonov, saw police briefly detaining more than 50 people on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, a Moscow police spokesman said, Interfax reported. Limonov was among those detained.

More than 300 people rallied in a separate event in St. Petersburg, with police detaining about 100 of them, the report said. About a dozen people took to the streets in Nizhny Novgorod, and they were also all held by law enforcement officers.

Alexeyeva and Limonov used to co-organize the so-called Strategy 31 rallies, intended to draw attention to Article 31 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right of assembly.

City Hall has long refused to authorize the rallies, held on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad since 2009, and many were violently dispersed by riot police. But policy has changed under the new mayor, Sergei Sobyenin, with four rallies in a row authorized since his ascension in October.

This prompted Alexeyeva to declare earlier this week victory in the Strategy 31 campaign. "The authorities have accepted us," she said.

Instead, a new rally campaign for fair elections will begin in April, she said. The timing is evident, as a State Duma vote will take place in December, followed by the presidential race of 2012.

Limonov had a falling-out with Alexeyeva over token compromises she was required to make to Sobyenin's administration. But in a move to smooth things over on Monday, he called her plans for a new campaign on Pushkin Square "smart" Monday.

Still, he said he has no plans to change the venue. "The road to freedom leads to Triumfalnaya," Limonov wrote in his blog on Wednesday.

Hip-hop bands delivered political performances Thursday at the Pushkin Square event, which was attended by ecology activist Yevgenia Chirikova and head of the motorist rights movement Sergei Kanayev, along with liberal politician Vladimir Ryzhkov and political satirist Viktor Shenderovich.

But the crowd was smaller than at previous events, confirming fears that the public may be losing interest in the rallies — or remains unaware of them.

"I support freedom of assembly, but I didn't know they're rallying for it here tonight," a local resident who only gave his first name, Alexander, told The Moscow Times on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad. He said he was simply doing his shopping in the area.

Herbert Mosmuller contributed to this report.

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