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Protests Crushed in Moscow, St. Pete

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Police officers blocking a sidewalk at Triumfalnaya Ploshchad during a banned rally for the right to free assembly. **Sergey Ponomarev**

Police detained more than 60 activists in Moscow and St. Petersburg at demonstrations against restrictions on freedom of assembly.

Opposition activists stage demonstrations on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad in central Moscow and Nevsky Prospekt in St. Petersburg on the last day of each month with 31 days — symbolizing the right to free assembly secured under Article 31 of the Constitution.

In St. Petersburg, at least 300 protesters gathered on Nevsky Prospekt on Tuesday. A reporter saw police detaining some and dragging them to police buses. Interfax said 40 had been detained.

"The lower the ratings of the United Russia party fall, the more toughly we are dispersed," Olga Kurnosova, a local opposition leader among those detained, said by telephone from a police station late Tuesday. "We can't just keep silent. It is not about a violation of the Constitution, it's about common sense."

Recent polls show United Russia's approval ratings have been falling ahead of State Duma elections in December.

A helicopter hovered over the crowd in St Petersburg, a tactic used police during similar protests in March in an apparent attempt to intimidate demonstrators. "Russia will be free" and "Free elections" were among the posters held by protesters.

In Moscow, police officers and journalists outnumbered several dozen protesters who gathered on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, some holding posters and shouting slogans.

An elderly woman waved a poster reading "Exchange Putin for Khodorkovsky," referring to the former oil tycoon in jail since 2003.

Twenty-six protesters, including opposition leaders Eduard Limonov and Ilya Yashin, were detained, Interfax reported. Protesters said at least 50 people were detained.

In October, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin shocked activists when he gave police a green light to disperse demonstrators forcefully, saying those who protest without permission would be "hit on the head with batons."

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