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30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

City Police Break Up June 12 Protest

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A detained protester shouting in a police car during a Day of Wrath rally on Teatralnaya Ploshchad on Sunday. **Sergey Ponomarev**

Police detained 28 opposition activists to prevent them from demonstrating in central Moscow on a national holiday celebrating the country's emergence as an independent state as the Soviet Union crumbled.

This year the June 12 holiday, now called Russia Day, came exactly 20 years after Boris Yeltsin was first elected president of Russia when it was still part of the Soviet Union.

Tens of thousands of people, most of them members of pro-Kremlin youth groups bused in from provincial towns, attended a pop concert and fireworks display on Red Square on Sunday evening. Crowds gathered throughout the day.

Police, who were out in force to prevent any unrest, moved quickly to break up a "Day of Wrath" demonstration by a variety of opposition groups on Teatralnaya Ploshchad. Police said 28 were detained and later released.

Opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov, one of the first to be detained, said his activists from Left

Front “believe that in 20 years Russia hasn’t become a free democratic country.”

The June 12 holiday traces its history to events that were intended to put Russia on the path to becoming a democracy. On that date in 1990, the legislature of the Russian Soviet republic declared the sovereignty of Russia, which intensified the struggle for power between Yeltsin and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

One year later, Yeltsin was elected to the newly created post of president of Russia. Many consider that election more democratic than any held before or since.

The June 12 holiday, originally called Independence Day after the fall of the Soviet Union in late 1991, was given its current name in 2002 when Vladimir Putin was president. Polls show that few Russians today know the origins of their national day.

President Dmitry Medvedev spoke about the significance of the holiday as he handed out state awards during a Kremlin ceremony.

“Let me remind you that then, already 21 years ago, many things happened in our country for the first time,” Medvedev said. “Russia for the first time in full voice declared that it would adhere to the principles of democracy.”

Under Putin and Medvedev, who were photographed clinking champagne glasses after the Kremlin ceremony, many of the democratic achievements of the 1990s have been rolled back.

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