The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Day of National Unity

By Julia Phillips

November 09, 2011



Conversations before a three-day weekend turn out the same in any language:
In the university, on the street, people said, "Remember the fourth is a holiday!" They lifted their faces and sighed with relief. "I'm going to sleep until lunch." "I'm going to sleep all day!" On Wednesday, we made the excuse that tomorrow was "Friday," anyway, so we could stay out later and have another beer. And by Thursday afternoon, everyone was staring at the clocks.

A friend asked me what my plans were for the holiday. "If you're not doing anything," he said, "you should come to the Russian March with us." He explained the nationalist demonstration's philosophy to me. "In short," he concluded, "we want to keep Russia for Russians."

I stared at him. "But I'm not Russian," I said. He stared back at me. "Are you trying to tell me something?" I asked. "Why would I go to that?"

He shrugged. "You could take pictures of it." There's no doubt that it would be a fascinating

cultural experience, but I couldn't imagine what place I'd occupy as a foreigner at a nationalist march. It would be an unnecessary provocation. And as an outsider to this culture, I find it difficult to understand the march's significance.

It's not like Kamchatka has never confronted the question of immigration before — in June, the region's governor announced plans to construct a city specifically for migrants, which, he added, "will not be a ghetto"— but the issue doesn't feel urgent. The 2002 census found that ethnic Russians make up the vast majority of Kamchatka's population; the most significant minorities counted are Koryaks, who are indigenous to the region, and Ukrainians. When I look with foreign eyes at the people on the sidewalk, it seems like those statistics still reflect reality: Nine out of 10 appear ethnic Russian to me.

Nov. 4 came freezing and clear. Indigenous people were holding a celebration in the town center to mark Khololo, a feast to honor sea animals, and both native and non-native residents of Petropavlovsk lined up in their snow boots to take flimsy plastic cups of rose hip tea. Night comes early here now. I met up with the same friend who'd invited me to the march, and we chatted a little in the twilight of the early afternoon: "They changed the time zones last year, so now we're eight hours ahead of Moscow instead of nine," he said. "They wanted to push Kamchatka back yet another hour, but 3,000 of us came out to protest — we stood in the rain all day and chanted. Local government listened."

"Three thousand people!" I said.

"I have pictures," he said. "I didn't expect so many, myself."

And speaking of protests, I asked, how was the Russian March?

He laughed. "I took the bus there to see how it looked. There were 10 people there, 10 guys and two flags and no megaphone or anything. ... I just kept on riding the bus past. I went home and napped instead."

I started laughing, too. I couldn't help it. "And 3,000 people came to the demonstration on the time zone change!"

"Of course," he said. "That was a matter of our day-to-day lives. Nationalism, maybe, doesn't matter to so many people. But the sun matters to everyone." Around us, the city smelled like exhaust and fish soup, the bay looked flat as ice, and a few Koryaks were dancing on an open stage. It was 5 p.m. and almost dark. It had been a good holiday.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/11/09/day-of-national-unity-a34710