

250 Held in 2nd Night of Vote Protests

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

December 06, 2011



Police detaining a protester during a rally on Tuesday evening on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad over the results of last weekend's State Duma elections. **Anton Golubev**

Opposition activists and pro-Kremlin youth faced off for the first time in a Moscow square on Tuesday, but police cracked down on the protesters before they could do anything but shout a few slogans.

Although largely peaceful, Moscow street protests for two straight days over Sunday's State Duma elections won by the ruling United Russia party sparked a stock market sell-off. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin indirectly responded by promising a government reshuffle after he is elected president next year.

Some 250 people, including Yabloko party leader Sergei Mitrokhin, were roughly arrested on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Tuesday evening, witnesses said. The opposition announced a new protest for Saturday.

Hundreds of activists from four pro-Kremlin youth groups — Nashi, Stal, Mestniye and

Young Guard — descended on the downtown square ahead of the unsanctioned opposition rally at 7 p.m. Tuesday. Many carried drums and proceeded to vigorously beat them. The drummers, many sporting red-and-white uniform jackets, appeared very young, some in their early teens.

“The authorities don’t know what to do and have brought out kids. I’m afraid there is no compromising with them,” said Viktor, a protester in his 20s who wore a pin denouncing “the party of crooks and thieves.”

The line has become a catchphrase for United Russia, which won Sunday’s elections amid a flurry of fraud allegations. Viktor said he witnessed vote-rigging first hand as a vote monitor but could not prevent it.

Many protesters shouted “whores” and “bastards” at the pro-Kremlin activists, who resorted to cheering on the police as they swept down on the opposition.

The total number of protesters on Tuesday was hard to estimate because they were dispersed around Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, whose center was occupied by drummers and their allies and its perimeter was flooded by police.

Police said the combined crowd numbered 5,000, while Gazeta.ru put the figure at 1,500.

At least 200 opposition activists were detained, a law enforcement official told Interfax.

In addition to Mitrokhin, of Yabloko, police detained Parnas co-leader Boris Nemtsov and Other Russia leader Eduard Limonov.

Novaya Gazeta reporter Yelena Kostyuchenko, who was also detained, wrote on her Twitter that riot police were ramming the detainees headfirst into the metal walls of their vans before shipping them off to police stations.

About 300 people were detained after a sanctioned rally near the Chistiye Prudy metro station on Monday. The rally, which denounced vote-rigging, was the biggest in years, attracting between 5,000 and 15,000 participants, by various estimates.

Police did not intervene with the rally but cracked down on several hundred protesters who attempted to march down the street from the Chistiye Prudy station.

Among them was Alexei Navalny, perhaps the country’s best-known nonparliamentary opposition activist, whose whereabouts were unknown throughout most of Tuesday.

He eventually popped up in the Tverskoi District Court, but his sentence was not pronounced until the Triumfalnaya Ploshchad rally started in the evening, a delay that looked like an attempt to avoid fueling tensions.

Navalny was jailed for 15 days for disobeying lawful police orders, a sentence he shared with the organizer of the Monday rally, Ilya Yashin, who was convicted at a separate hearing Tuesday.

Both were tried by Judge Olga Borovkova, infamous in opposition circles for her lengthy

record of convicting anti-Kremlin activists on misdemeanor charges.

United Russia's youth wing, Young Guard, demanded that a criminal case be opened against Navalny for inciting riots, punishable with up to two years in prison. Officials did not comment on the appeal.

'Torture' in Jail

Moscow judges toiled all day Tuesday, imposing fines and short jail sentences on participants detained Monday. But many detainees were left to spend the whole day in overcrowded, stuffy cells without food or water, a treatment decried by rights activists as an intimidation campaign.

Forbes Russia reporter Alexei Kamensky was briefly hospitalized with a nervous breakdown blamed on claustrophobia after spending almost 24 hours in a crowded detention cell, Gazeta.ru said.

Kamensky, who went to Chistiye Prudy to cover the rally, not participate in it, was put back in the cell after a visit to the doctor, the report said. His cellmates started a dry hunger strike in protest.

Police said the protesters had to spend hours in pretrial detention because the courts could not keep up with their sheer number, Grigory Punanov, head of Forbes Russia's web site, told Gazeta.ru.

But rights activist Lev Ponomarev called the treatment an attempt to intimidate the dissenters, Interfax reported.

His stance was echoed by Sergei Kanayev of the Federation of Russian Car Owners, a motorist group that is growing increasingly political. Several of its members were held at Chistiye Prudy on Monday. "We're convinced that people were deliberately placed in torture-like conditions," Kanayev said.

Talk of a Crackdown

Reports circulated Tuesday that authorities were anticipating further protests and preparing an all-out crackdown.

Photos appeared on social networks of long columns of military trucks bringing Interior Ministry troops to the city center. Vesti state television reported that among them is the Dzerzhinsky division, which specializes in suppressing mass protests.

The ministry denied in a statement that it was bringing reinforcements into the city, saying the public had witnessed a normal troop rotation.

But it confirmed that extra troops were brought into the city on Dec. 1 ahead of the Duma vote and would remain deployed in the streets until the official results come out Saturday.

City authorities have allowed the Solidarity opposition group to hold a new rally to protest the Duma vote Saturday. It will take place on Ploshchad Revolyutsii, or Revolution Square.

The troops are in the city with the sole task of ensuring the populace's safety, an Interior Ministry spokesman said.

Water cannons and special Punisher-model anti-riot vans were deployed downtown, Gazeta.ru reported. They were not used Tuesday.

A police officer from outside the capital told The Moscow Times that there was no police mobilization in the regions.

"The number of protesters isn't significant and can be contained with local police forces," said the officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

But retired KGB Colonel Gennady Gudkov, a member of the A Just Russia opposition party, said the authorities were trying to turn the police "into an instrument for political fights," the Rosbalt news agency reported.

"I know that many police officers feel solidarity with the protesters but, being military men, are compelled to obey orders," he told Interfax in a separate interview.

So far, the police appear more amused than politically charged. Officers observed by The Moscow Times on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Tuesday smiled and cracked jokes at the Nashi activists rallying there.

Perhaps they had a reason to treat the young people lightly. A Nashi activist told another in a conversation overheard by a reporter that he had only come to the square because he had been paid 500 rubles (\$16).

Some pro-Kremlin youth activists, meanwhile, were deadly serious about their work. "They want tens of thousands of victims and a state coup like in Libya," Makar Vikhlyantsev, of the Stal movement, said about the opposition in a statement on Nashi's web site.

Some policemen who participated in Monday's detentions were actually told that the opposition protesters had been paid to rally, a news report said. "Each of them got 1,000 rubles. I know, I was told," one officer told The Wall Street Journal.

But half a dozen participants at Monday's rally interviewed by The Moscow Times insisted that they were driven by their civic duty, not profit.

"I have never gone to a rally before. But I'm angry about how they rigged the elections and pretend everything is fine," said Andrei, an engineering student.

"Many of my friends and colleagues — apolitical people who don't normally attend such events — are also here tonight," he said. Like many participants at the anti-government rallies, he declined to give his last name.

"We came here because we agree with what is happening here, just like everyone here," said another protester.

A third asked with a smile: "Oh, will we see an Orange Revolution soon?"

The 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which stopped a fraudulent vote from ushering the handpicked successor of President Leonid Kuchma to power, is a specter that has haunted the Kremlin and is blamed for a severe crackdown on the opposition.

Putin Responds

The main target of the protesters, Putin, denied election fraud during a meeting with the leaders of United Russia's regional branches Tuesday. His comments, however, came as implicit recognition of the gravity of the situation because Putin rarely responds to criticism.

Corruption and embezzlement "are not a cliché for the ruling party, they are a cliché for the authorities" in general, Putin said.

"Think back to Soviet times and the people who were in power back then. All of them were also called thieves and bribe-takers," Putin said, in a clear nod to United Russia's reputation as the "party of crooks and thieves," Interfax reported.

The opposition says United Russia only managed to win its 49.3 percent of the vote, down from 64.1 percent in 2007, through administrative pressure and vote-rigging, with thousands of electoral violations reported throughout the country.

Putin called United Russia's setback "inevitable" because "it has been shouldering the burden of responsibility for the country for years."

But he also promised a major reshuffle in the government and among regional leaders after the March presidential vote, which he is expected to win. He named no names of officials who might be removed.

Putin did not speak directly about the public protests targeting him and his party. But his spokesman Dmitry Peskov said police needed to stop all unsanctioned rallies.

The RTS stock exchange dropped 4.72 percent and the MICEX fell 3.95 percent on Tuesday, largely on the post-election unrest, market players said. (see [story](#))

What's Next?

Analysts said the protests reflect a deepening rift between the country's leadership and certain parts of the population. But they also said it remains to be seen how big a threat they will be to Putin and United Russia.

"So far it is just a threat to the election result's legitimacy," said Yelena Pozdnyakova, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies, a think tank.

Pozdnyakova said that even if the protests continued, their organizers lacked the resources to mobilize society on a scale necessary to topple the government.

"They still only represent a narrow group," she said of the liberal, pro-Western opposition.

The Internet, abuzz with opposition chatter, is misleading in this context because it is populated mainly by liberals, while the country's majority remains offline, Pozdnyakova said

by telephone.

But Andrei Piontkovsky, a veteran analyst and member of the liberal Yabloko party, said that while a street revolution was still far away, Putin's position was rapidly deteriorating.

He pointed out that the protests were mainly carried out by young people, hitherto being described as apolitical. This, he said, was fed by anger that had built up since Putin's announcement to return to the Kremlin. "People were shocked by not just by the stupidity of the fact but by the cynical way it was done," he said.

Putin and Medvedev had told a Sept. 24 United Russia convention that they had made the decision to swap jobs in 2012 already four years ago.

Piontkovsky said the mounting evidence of massive falsifications in Sunday's Duma elections, swiftly distributed online thanks to smartphones, had added insult to injury.

"These two shocks sped up the process of a colossal loss of respect for the government," he said.

At the same time, Putin was doubly humiliated, first when he was booed by a crowd of young sports fans at a wrestling show in Moscow's Olimpiisky stadium on Nov. 27, and second when his United Russia performed relatively poorly at the elections Sunday.

"He has been woken up to reality," Piontkovsky said, adding that the race for the presidential election could get competitive if a serious opposition figure like A Just Russia's Gennady Gudkov stood against him. "Then we can expect a second round of elections," he said.

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