

Putin Bids for Kremlin Amid Protests

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Vladimir Putin on Wednesday attending an identification check as he submits documents to officially register for the presidential election in March. **Ivan Sekretarev**

Helicopters patrolled the skies above Moscow on Wednesday as Prime Minister Vladimir Putin marched into the Central Elections Commission to file paperwork declaring himself a candidate for president.

The electoral formality came after several uneasy days in the capital with 850-plus people detained in street protests amid charges of widespread vote-rigging in Sunday's parliamentary elections.

Though the protests were the largest of their kind in years, Putin downplayed them Tuesday night, touring a Caravaggio exhibit at the Pushkin Museum while police beat and detained protesters on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad.

Putin won two presidential elections in 2000 and 2004, but this was the first time he filed the papers in person, Interfax reported. Election authorities have until Dec. 17 to approve or

reject his bid.

Meanwhile, armored vehicles and trucks carrying Interior Troops amassed by Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, causing traffic jams downtown, several media outlets reported.

Neither police nor City Hall commented Wednesday on the troop movements or the military helicopters hovering in the Moscow sky, one of which was seen landing on the roof of the Federal Security Service building on Ulitsa Lubyanka.

The night before, Triumfalnaya Ploshchad was home to a heated, if mostly one-sided, battle, when riot police arrested 569 people at an unsanctioned rally.

The detainees had taken to the street in protest of the State Duma vote results, which they say were only won by Putin's party, United Russia, through massive violations.

Some of the people detained Tuesday, including glitterati reporter Bozhena Rynska and Yabloko party head Sergei Mitrokhin, were soon released without any charges or explanation.

But many participants remain in pretrial detention, most accused of disobeying police, a charge punishable with fines or up to 15 days in prison. No figures for how many have been convicted were available Wednesday.

The crackdown "demonstrated the flagrant double standards of the ruling regime ... and that the gulf separating the authorities and the people is insurmountable," Mitrokhin, who helped organize the rally, said at a news conference Wednesday.

In messages sent from police vans or crowded jail cells and posted on the web, many of the detained accused police of beating protesters before arresting them.

Police vans were turned into "torture chambers," Ksenia Avdeyeva, a spokeswoman for the Institute of Globalization Programs think-tank, said in an e-mailed statement Wednesday.

Several people, including composer Alexander Manotskov and the editor-in-chief of the leftist online [newspaper](http://forum.msk.ru) Forum.msk.ru, Anatoly Baranov, reported being abused in vans.

"The beatings were cruel and indiscriminate — kicks and punches to the head, face and stomach. Only after that were we distributed among police precincts," Baranov said in comments posted on his web site.

Kommersant staffer Alexander Chernykh reported two officers throwing him down in a van and jumping on his chest — ignoring his press ID.

Yabloko's Mitrokhin also accused authorities of "practically torturing" those detained Tuesday, and said hundreds of "political prisoners" were now behind bars.

"I realized that riot police were ordered to act as vicious as they could for maximum intimidation, and to do as much harm to the detained as possible," journalist Sergei Parkhomenko [wrote](#) on his Facebook page.

"They're showing off, grunting, howling and swearing as they twist people's arms, tear their jackets, trample their feet and fingers and drag them facedown on the asphalt," Parkhomenko wrote.

Police said officers committed no serious violations and accused the protesters of pelting cops with bottles, state-owned radio Mayak [reported](#).

Hundreds of members of pro-Kremlin youth groups also gathered in Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Tuesday, which authorities used as a reason to ban the opposition rally in the same place.

It remained unclear whether the pro-government rally was sanctioned, but no mass crackdown on its participants was reported.

Meanwhile, the Tverskoi District Court threw out appeals Wednesday by opposition leaders Ilya Yashin and Alexei Navalny, who were both jailed for 15 days after a separate rally on Monday.

Human Rights Watch named both Yashin and Navalny "prisoners of conscience" on Wednesday.

Between 5,000 and 15,000 protesters had rallied that night by the Chistiye Prudy metro station to protest the Duma vote.

The event was sanctioned, but police cracked down on participants after they tried to march to the neighboring Lubyanka metro station. About 300 people were detained.

Navalny and Yashin were convicted of disobeying police, along with many other protesters.

"Most lawyers haven't been permitted to visit their clients," said Nadezhda Yermolayeva, a lawyer from Musayev & Partners who represented five detainees from the Monday rally. "I was lucky."

Yermolayeva told The Moscow Times by telephone Wednesday that a kind-hearted police officer allowed her to speak with her clients, who included four students and a member of the Moscow Writer's Union snatched trying to document events.

The police took four of the detainees peacefully, but threw the fifth on the ground and stomped on him, she said. They have been held since Monday night and Yermolayeva plans to take the case to the European Court of Human Rights.

As the crackdown turned ugly on the street, Putin toured the Caravaggio exhibit, spending particular time studying a painting of biblical shepherds worshipping a newborn Christ titled, "Adoration of the Shepherds," Kommersant reporter Andrei Kolesnikov [said](#).

But Putin — whose approval rating dropped to a mere 30 percent in a Levada poll in late November — still found words for the protesters, playing down their significance during a meeting with supporters earlier that day.

"Well, millions rally in the streets in Europe and the [rest of the] world," Putin was cited by Kolesnikov as saying about unrest in Moscow.

The opposition plans nationwide protests on Saturday, when official results of the Duma vote are to be announced. About 13,000 had signed up on Facebook as of late Wednesday, announcing their intention to attend the rally, in Moscow, which authorities have sanctioned for Ploshchad Revolyutsii next to the Kremlin.

The New Times magazine [reported](#) Wednesday that Deputy Mayor Dmitry Biryukov had ordered emergency repair work in the square, rendering it unfit for public events, but City Hall denied the report later.

Of political heavyweights, only Yabloko's Mitrokhin voiced plans to attend the Saturday rally. But he stressed that his party is standing for peaceful protest.

"Revolutionary actions are unacceptable for us," Mitrokhin said. "Our task is to show that there is a real demand for change."

Yabloko has also submitted a request to city authorities to stage another protest against electoral manipulation on Pushkin Square on Dec. 17.

About 30 people, mostly activists of the unregistered The Other Russia group, came to Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Wednesday, RIA-Novosti reported. At least 10 of them were detained, police said.

Unsanctioned protests also continued for the fourth day in a row by Gostiny Dvor in St. Petersburg, where about 200 were arrested Tuesday.

Police cracked down on protesters, as in previous days, ignoring chants of "Shame!" The number of participants or detainees remained unclear Wednesday.

President Dmitry Medvedev caused shock and jeers Wednesday after retweeting an obscene insult directed at political opponents on his official microblog, MedvedevRussia.

"It has become clear that if a person writes the expression 'party of swindlers and thieves' in their blog, then they are a stupid sheep getting [expletive] in the mouth :)" the post read.

The Kremlin blamed an unidentified official for having interfered with the feed. "The guilty party will be punished," it said in a statement.

(Reuters)

Staff writer Alexander Winning and intern Justin Varilek contributed to this report.

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