The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# Foes Walk Side by Side to Rally Against Kremlin

By Alexandra Odynova

December 09, 2011

A protester taking up a rare free space at Saturday's protest. Her sign says, "You didn't want to hear us. We will make you see us!" **Jonathan Earle**

Skeptics had said ahead of Saturday's protest that even if authorities allowed people to gather on Bolotnaya Ploshchad, they would crack down on those who arrived, deliberately or unwittingly, at the initial venue, Ploshchad Revolyutsii, which was replaced a mere day before the event.

But that didn't happen. Instead, Ploshchad Revolyutsii offered a rare scene: activists of all stripes, including those who usually come to blows at the sight of each other, marching unhappily but peacefully in a sort of "water truce" to an anti-Kremlin rally.

"It is a great day in the history of Russia," environmental and opposition activist Yevgenia Chirikova told reporters as she waited on the station platform of the Ploshchad Revolyutsii metro to meet and redirect people unaware of the venue change.

Some 80 cities across the country have backed the Moscow demonstration by holding their own protests, Chirikova said.

Chirikova didn't get to talk long on the platform: A policeman showed up soon and told television reporters that they couldn't film in the subway without a special permit.

"We live in a law-based society," the policeman chided them, only to have a pensioner cut him short. "Oh, please, we are years away from that!" the older man said.

Chirikova urged reporters to comply with police orders, however, noting that organizers wanted a "peaceful demonstration."

Minutes later, the group moved aboveground to the eponymous plaza, whose name translates as Revolution Square. The name is what likely prompted city authorities to propose the tongue-in-cheek alternative: the name Bolotnaya Ploshchad comes from the Russian word "boloto," or swamp, a term widely used to describe apathetic Russian voters.

By the time Chirikova and her entourage arrived at Ploshchad Revolyutsii, hundreds of people had already drifted through metal detectors to get there, with anarchists waiting on the left of a bronze Karl Marx (who else?) and nationalists on the right. Both groups followed Chirikova and human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov in a march to Bolotnaya, where thousands had already gathered.

At the far side of Ploshchad Revolyutsii, the radical opposition leader Eduard Limonov of The Other Russia and, earlier, the banned National Bolshevik Party, was chanting his heart out, shouting "Russia without Putin!"

Limonov also called on the crowd "not to cave in" to authorities and to stay on Ploshchad Revolyutsii.

"It was a compromise made by bourgeois politicians," shouted Limonov, who was the driving force behind the Strategy 31 rallies, for which activists held meetings, unsanctioned by Moscow authorities, to support freedom of assembly.

Those events, which rarely attracted even several hundred participants, regularly ended in police crackdowns, prompting fears that Ploshchad Revolyutsii would see similar attacks on activists by "cosmonauts," as riot police are known for their stormtrooper-like black helmets.

But the crowd had already headed to Bolotnaya along a cordoned-off corridor, ignoring Limonov, who drove away after it became evident there would be no crackdown. He did not appear on Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

Meanwhile, bitter political enemies marched together behind Chirikova under many different flags. There was the black, yellow and white "imperial" flag of the nationalists, the Jolly Roger of the unregistered Pirate Party and the red-and-black flag of leftist activists. Chants sounded along party lines, ranging from "Go, Russians!" and "Stop Feeding the Caucasus" to "Freedom, Equality, Communism!"

They booed one another's slogans. But these political activists nonetheless marched along

side by side, representing the whole of Russia's political spectrum — an event unheard of and alone sufficient to justify the Saturday rally that brought them together.

Stone-faced policemen were lined up by the hundreds along the 3-kilometer walk between the squares, watching the procession. Some nationalists shouted out to them, "Come on guys, join us." But that was, of course, to no avail.

The police ranks swelled to three lines deep near the Kremlin, one formed by the famous Dzerzhinskaya division of Interior Troops, who are masters at suppressing urban protests. Many policemen were relatively high-ranking officers, such as majors and lieutenants, and hundreds more huddled in trucks parked along the way and around Red Square.

Media reports said more than 50,000 police were deployed in Moscow on Saturday. Unlike during rallies on Monday and Tuesday, however, no mass detentions were reported.

At last the two rallies merged into one, and it truly looked like the 30,000-strong event promised by the organizers' Facebook page. People thronged on three nearby bridges and on the riverbank opposite the rally location, undeterred by a December wind from the river and wet snow. The crowd was big enough that people far from the stage regularly shouted out to speakers to speak louder.

At one point, organizers had to ask people to move off one of the bridges, saying there was a risk that it might collapse. The request "Move!" prompted the ironic advice "Jump!" elsewhere in the crowd.

Many in the crowd wore white ribbons or carried white flowers to symbolize the rally's peaceful nature. A couple of flares were fired over the nationalists' flags, melting in the chilly gray sky above the crowd's heads.

The Bolotnaya crowd was regularly roused into angry chants targeting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov, as well as Kremlin in general. The event also offered a delightful variety of political posters, many of them ironic and some ironically obscene. The perhaps most laconic one read simply: "The Tsar is a Fraud."

Vladimir Tirkov, a 46-year-old engineer at the Bolotnaya protest, said that he is a frequent visitor to opposition demonstrations, but "this is the first time I saw so many people."

"Maybe it won't change much, but it's an important message for the authorities," Tirkov said. He added that Russia is better off without a presidential post altogether, but if he were to pick the best person for the job, it would be jailed ex-Yukos owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

"There is simply no one else to choose," Tirkov said.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/12/09/foes-walk-side-by-side-to-rally-against-kremlin-a11332