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In a First, Enemies March Side by Side

By Alexandra Odynova

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In the hours before Saturday's rally, fears were voiced that police might detain people who arrived at the initially authorized venue, Ploshchad Revolyutsii, instead of Bolotnaya Ploshchad, which was hastily approved a day before the demonstration.

But no crackdown occurred.

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 platform of the Ploshchad Revolyutsii metro station to meet and redirect people unaware of the venue change.

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 metro 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 site: 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 and nationalists on the right. Both groups followed Chirikova and human rights champion Lev Ponomaryov in a march to Bolotnaya, where thousands of people had already gathered.

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

Limonov also urged the milling 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 a driving force behind the usually unsanctioned Strategy 31 rallies, held on the last day of months with 31 days to call attention to Article 31 of the Constitution that guarantees freedom of assembly.

The Strategy 31 protests, 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 began following Chirikova to Bolotnaya along a cordoned-off route, ignoring Limonov, who drove away after it became evident that there would be no crackdown. He did not appear on Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

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!"

Marchers booed one another's slogans. But they nonetheless marched along side by side, representing the whole of Russia's political spectrum — an event unheard of in modern history.

Stone-faced policemen lined up by the hundreds along the 3-kilometer walk between the two 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 Dzerzhinskaya division of the Interior Troops, known as 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 officers 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 resembled the 30,000-member event promised by the organizers' Facebook page. People thronged on three nearby bridges and on the riverbank opposite the rally location, undeterred by a stiff 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 asked 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 throng's heads.

The Bolotnaya crowd was regularly roused into angry chants targeting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov, and the Kremlin. The event also offered a wide 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, said he was a frequent participant in 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 was 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.

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