

Silliness, Civic Activism Merge at Record Rally

By [Alexey Eremenko](#)

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A protester at the Saturday rally climbing a lamppost for a better view of the crowded square. Between 25,000 and 100,000 attended the event. **Vladimir Filonov**

Nobody quite knows what "Upyachka" is, either in Russian or in English. But it was important enough for some people to mention on protest posters next to "Freedom" and "Equality."

A dadaist Internet meme is not something you'd normally expect at a political rally, but there were many of these kinds of words on Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Saturday, where tens of thousands of people braved the December chill to protest the State Duma election results.

The joking was not incidental: The driving force of the protests is educated urbanites who have long satirized the ruling regime in web site comments but are now taking the irony offline.

The organizers of the rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad set forth serious demands, too: a rerun of the elections and the release of all protesters detained at rallies over the past week. The organizers gave the authorities two weeks to act or face another large rally on Dec. 24.

President Dmitry Medvedev said Sunday that he disagreed with the slogans and public speeches at the rally, but he promised an investigation into allegations of vote fraud.

The number of demonstrators ranged from a conservative estimate of 25,000 by the police to 80,000 to 100,000 by organizers. A geodesic calculation by Youreporter.ru put the figure at 60,000 based on the space filled up by protesters, while seven Moscow Times journalists on the square said it was closer to 30,000 to 40,000.

In any case, the protest was the biggest of its kind in Moscow since 1993 unrest when hundreds of thousands rallied in the streets. The most recent rally of comparable size took place in 2001, when about 20,000 protested the state's takeover of private television station NTV.

"There is no freedom here, I'm so sick of it," said protester Sofia Gatina, 30.

She added that it was the first time in her life that she had attended a rally. "Nobody asked me to come, [but] I'm here. I could have been sitting in my warm home," said Gatina, who works for a film company.

The demonstrators, who remained cheerful and polite on a gray, cold day with intermittent snow, chanted, "Putin is a thief," "Re-elections!" and "A Russia free of Putin!" during the four-hour rally. "Bear, leave!" — a play on Medvedev's last name — also sounded out to laughter from the crowd.

Political movements, from the leftist Solidarity to the nationalists, did not miss out their chance to wave their flags, but homemade signs such as "Freedom! Equality! Upyachka!" were more abundant.

"Father Frost against corruption!" read a sign carried by Vasily Sukhov, 26, who sported a costume of the Russian version of Santa Claus, complete with a floppy red hat and full white beard.

"I thought it would be nice to come here and cheer up the people," Sukhov said, adding that he had come because "of my own political position against United Russia and Mr. Putin and all these guys."

One man simply held up a copy of the Russian Esquire, which features a photo of whistle blower Alexei Navalny on the cover of its latest issue. Another showed off a sign reading, "I didn't vote for these bastards!! I voted for different bastards!! Recount!"

Regroup, Recount, Revote

United Russia, the political party of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, the country's long-standing leader, won 49.3 percent of the Dec. 4 vote, according to final results released Friday.

But opponents and independent observers complained that the results were achieved through

administrative pressure and outright vote rigging. Thousands of violations were reported throughout the country, only to be dismissed on Friday by the Central Elections Commission, headed by Vladimir Churov, a staunch Putin loyalist.

"It's like setting a wolf to guard the sheep. What do you expect to happen then?" said a protester who gave only her first name, Tamara.

Churov and Putin were prime targets of the protesters on Bolotnaya Ploshchad, located across the Moscow River from the Kremlin.

The event capped a tense week that saw thousands of people gather for two earlier rallies in Moscow and police cracking down on them, detaining at least 1,000, including Navalny, the darling of the nonparliamentary opposition. He was jailed until Dec. 21 on charges of disobeying police orders, and the indignation snowballed. About 35,000 signed up on Facebook for Saturday's rally, which was initially scheduled for Ploshchad Revolyutsii but moved at the last minute to Bolotnaya Ploshchad, a larger and more remote venue.

Expectations rode as high as worries on the eve of the rally, with pessimists warning about provocateurs in the Kremlin's hire or Chechen troops being moved to Moscow to spare local riot police from having to crack down on fellow city residents.

But in the end, police only reported detaining one protest-goer, who was fined 500 rubles (\$16) for disobeying their orders after the rally and released, Interfax said.

However, dozens were detained at demonstrations that took place in 130 other Russian cities. The biggest event outside Moscow, on St. Petersburg's Pionerskaya Ploshchad, gathered 7,000 to 10,000 participants.

They Said

The lineup of speakers at Moscow's rally was full of big names, but most of them were either nonparliamentary opposition or nonpolitical figures. The Communist Party and A Just Russia dispatched a number of officials, including Gennady Gudkov and Oksana Dmitriyeva, but no party leaders.

Navalny, obviously, could not attend, nor could staunch opposition activist Sergei Udaltsov, who was detained by police on election day and remains in custody.

On Saturday, a group of police officers oversaw Udaltsov's hospitalization in an intensive care ward in connection with a recent hunger strike, his wife Anastasia Udaltsova told Bolotnaya Ploshchad. She said he had strongly denied having health problems, but the authorities had ignored him. On hearing this, the protesters on the square broke out in a round of chants of "Free political prisoners!"

The Yabloko party, which won 3 percent of the vote but insists that another 3 percent was stolen from it, dispatched both of its leaders, Sergei Mitrokhin and Grigory Yavlinsky.

Perhaps the loudest greeting was reserved for politically conscious rapper Noize MC. But warm welcomes also went to television stars Tatyana Lazareva and Leonid Parfyonov, writers Dmitry Bykov and Boris Akunin and Khimki forest defender Yevgenia Chirikova.

The majority of speakers rehashed the same themes about political prisoners, a rigged vote and corruption in the Kremlin. Most also appeared unaccustomed to speaking at rallies, which resulted in the public's reaction at times being more dutiful than roused.

One exception was perhaps Boris Nemtsov, co-leader of the unregistered Parnas party, who growled his speech into the microphone, a technique that he also used at a Dec. 5 rally near the Chistiye Prudy metro station. Still, some protesters giggled and imitated him.

Even nationalist leader Konstantin Krylov appeared at the microphone in a rarely seen bid for unity and reportedly lobbied for by Navalny. Krylov, however, lapsed into promoting "the Russian revolution" and was rewarded with the loudest round of boos.

At the end of the rally, Parnas co-founder Vladimir Ryzhkov called for new protest on Dec. 24 if the demands were not met and predicted twice as many people would attend.

We, the People

Protesters were jovial, buoyant and even silly. But each time that a speaker chanted out a slogan like "Putin is a thief!" or "We are not slaves!" the crowd repeated it several times. Admittedly, some chants, such as "The elections are illegitimate!" proved a mouthful and sparked less enthusiasm.

"I was very impressed by how polite everybody was. It was clear that people did not come to start a revolution but to show that they aren't indifferent to what's happening in the country," said Alexandra Kondakova, 23, who works in marketing.

"The people have woken up," said Maria Suslova, 26, a student at the Higher School of Economics.

Many protesters interviewed by The Moscow Times said this was their first time at a rally — which might have been expected given that no public events of a similar magnitude had been staged over the last decade. They also said they came to Bolotnaya Ploshchad to protest the way the government is treating them, not to support any political group.

"I'm not here because my life's bad," said Alexander Kudryashov, 59, an astrophysicist, "but because of justice. I desire justice."

"The more we wait, the worse things will get," said Margarita Zelenina, 22, who studies at the State University of Management in Moscow. She added that many of her friends were observers at the elections and had witnessed violations firsthand.

"We want it to be better for our children," said a young couple, Ivan, 26, and Yekaterina, 21. They did not give their last name.

"Something has changed in the country, and everything will be in our hands," said Ivan, who has yet to become a father.

Irina Pokrovskaya, a geography researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences, said this was the first time in 12 years she had attended a rally, this time accompanying her teenage son and his classmates.

"We are seeing our kids getting involved. We were ashamed to face them, so we came to the protest," said Pokrovskaya, a woman in her 40s.

Anton Shumskikh, 16, said he and his friends wanted their votes to be counted. "OK, I can't vote," he admitted, but he said he cared about the issue.

"We came here because we wanted to make friends with people, to be one society," said his friend Savva Dudin, an 18-year-old with black Harry Potter-style glasses.

One woman refused to give even her first name, saying she did not want to represent herself but the idea she stood for. The idea was scrawled across the sign in her hands, reading, "You didn't want to hear us. Now we're making you see us!" ☒

"I believe that they've attacked our human dignity," the woman said.

Outside the Rally

One thing that appeared to impress the rally participants was the behavior of the police, who numbered more than 50,000 throughout the city on Saturday.

Law enforcement agencies are despised or feared by much of the populace, but the rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad showed that the sentiment could be changed, with the crowd erupting at one point with shouts of "Thank you, police!"

Bloggers urged female participants before the rally to bring flowers to present to police officers as a sign of their peaceful intentions. Well-wishers who took food packages to people detained during the rallies earlier in the week reported splitting the food with the detainees and equally hungry police officers.

However, dismay and surprise spread over the face of a policeman when a male Moscow Times reporter offered him an apple. He rejected it.

Still, some Moscow residents who did not attend the rally expressed doubt that the police could act courteously.

"It will probably be bloody," said Alina Chelnikova, 18, a student from Moscow State University as she walked on Red Square.

"I am concerned with politics too, but [rallying] is not the answer. In order to change something, the government must do something," Chelnikova said.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Saturday night that the government was "continuing to listen" to the protesters, but gave no hint about how it might react.

Sergei, a private security guard at the Petrovsko-Razumovskaya train station in the city's northeast, learned about the Bolotnaya Ploshchad rally from a Moscow Times reporter on Saturday evening.

He was also unaware that Putin was running for president again, but expressed indignation upon learning that Putin had registered his Kremlin bid Thursday.

"It makes sense that he needs to stay — they're in control of Gazprom and all that stuff," Sergei said, before launching into a lengthy litany about gasoline in Belarus being cheaper than in Russia that was interrupted by the arrival of a train.

Staff writers Jonathan Earle, Khristina Narizhnaya and Rachel Nielsen and intern Justin Varilek contributed to this report.

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