The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

40,000 Sign Up for Saturday's Rally on Sakharova

By Alexandra Odynova

December 22, 2011



Follow live coverage from Moscow Times reporters on Twitter with @moscowtimes Don't have a Twitter account? Then use our Twitter web page*.*

They are expected to come with balloons and ribbons, carrying hot tea in thermoses and pastries to a stage rivaling that of a rock show or a corporate party. But it will be no holiday gathering. The people will protest against the government and demand fair elections — again.

More than 40,000 people have signed up on Facebook for a follow-up protest rally against violations at the Dec. 4 State Duma elections on Prospekt Akademika Sakharova on Saturday.

The scale of the protests is unheard of since the early 1990s. But in a first, they are driven by the newly emergent middle class, which gives its own flavor to grassroots activism.

During the two weeks since the previous rally on Dec. 10, volunteers have been busy preparing for the event in a way that recalls the New Year's festivities at a big company.

The Facebook page for the event was flooded with announcements such as: "We have printed a million leaflets. Ready to grab!" and "We have made 3,000 balloons!" and "Volunteers are needed to stick leaflets around the city."

The demonstrators also plan to bring photos of the late Czech leader Vaclav Havel to show that they — unlike the Russian government, which inexplicably has failed to offer condolences following Havel's death on Sunday — are sad about his passing.

Dozens of prominent public figures have posted videos on the rally's YouTube channel, WakeUpR, calling for the public to come out and demand fair elections.

One characteristic example has Tatyana Lazareva, the host of comic television shows, holding a note reading "Mother of three" and saying: "I'm laughing. I'm laughing at those who say we won't succeed."

A donation drive to fund the grassroots rally has raised 3 million rubles ($100,000) in less than two weeks, journalist Olga Romanova, who is overseeing the rally's funding, wrote on her own Facebook page on Thursday.

Organizers said the money would allow them to rent a big stage, powerful sound and light equipment and video screens, organize an online broadcast and afford a sufficient number of portable toilets.

"There will be sound and video screens. Hot tea and pastries. You can bring thermoses with hot tea," Vladimir Ryzhkov, a co-organizer and opposition leader, advised on Facebook.

The Dec. 10 rally was a more amateurish affair, with a small stage tucked in a corner of Bolotnaya Ploshchad and obscured by party flags and homemade posters. The often-humorous posters provided more entertainment than the actual speakers to many, given that the sound was weak and much of the crowd, estimated at 30,000 to 60,000, was stretched along the square and the neighboring embankment, far away from the stage.

The event came a week after the Duma elections, which were won by the ruling United Russia party. Opposition activists and hundreds of election monitors across the nation said the result was only achieved through massive fraud, a charge stubbornly denied by the Central Elections Commission.

Though authorities have been reluctant to sanction opposition events in the 2000s, they allowed both the Dec. 10 and the Dec. 24 events, though shifting the latter to Prospekt Akademika Sakharova, several metro stations away from the Kremlin. Bolotnaya Ploshchad is across the Moscow River from the Kremlin.

Prospekt Akademika Sakharova was previously favored by pro-Kremlin youth groups, which was ironic, given that it bears the name of prominent Soviet-era dissident, rights advocate and opposition activist Andrei Sakharov.

Organizers of Saturday's event include many prominent politicians and public activists, but

they have gone to great lengths to try to ensure that the rally is not dominated by a single political group and remains representative of the general public mood. Even the speakers are being elected by an online vote — led, as of Thursday evening, by anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, journalist Leonid Parfyonov, former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, writer Boris Akunin, musician Yury Shevchuk and opposition leader Boris Nemtsov.

Despite the lighthearted banners and white ribbons, a symbol of the peaceful protests, the mood is expected to be tense because the authorities have not met demands put forward at the Dec. 10 rally, including new elections and the sacking of elections chief Vladimir Churov.

But after Saturday, no additional protests will likely be held this year given the upcoming New Year's festivities and the extended public holiday that accompanies them.

But many observers believe that the lull will be temporary and protests will return for the presidential election in March.

Whatever the case, many Russians appear no longer ready to sit quietly at home.

"The level of protest activity has significantly increased" after the Duma vote, the Public Chamber said in its annual report.

On Thursday evening, dozens of prospective protesters gathered at the Masterskaya theater and cafe near the Lubyanka metro station to grab leaflets and stickers promoting the rally.

As some activists were cutting white ribbons to size for distribution, others were in the process of preparing flashmobs aimed at getting people to work as vote monitors at the March election.

Sergei Yakovlev, 29, who designs iPhone applications in his day job, said it is the first time in his life that he has become so politically active. His contribution was a whopping nine kilometers of white ribbon that he brought to Masterskaya to have cut.

"When I saw all those reports and videos on the violations, I realized that I couldn't leave it like that," he told The Moscow Times. He participated in an earlier, unsanctioned, protest on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, only to be detained by police along with hundreds of others.

"I met a lot of nice people in the police van: an actor, businessman, an employee of a culture center. ... Now we are together," Yakovlev said.

He believes that their activism will not go to waste.

"We need to gradually root out the cynicism that settled deep over recent years," Yakovlev said.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/12/22/40000-sign-up-for-saturdays-rally-on-sakharova-a11622