

Opposition Faces Rival Feb. 4 Rallies

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

January 26, 2012



Elections chairman Vladimir Churov has become a lightning rod for protesters, but he says he is just a simple bureaucrat and not a political operative. **Igor Tabakov**

After weeks of haggling, City Hall and the opposition struck a compromise deal early Thursday that would allow tens of thousands of protesters to march in central Moscow on Feb. 4. But the event might face competition from other demonstrations, including a pro-Kremlin counter-rally.

The opposition demonstration, which comes six weeks after the last rally and will likely take place in the freezing cold, will test enthusiasm for the movement, whose leaders have taken steps to organize opposition-minded voters in the run-up to the March 4 presidential election.

But that didn't stop march organizers from celebrating Thursday.

"The march has been approved! Excellent!" anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny wrote on Twitter.

Navalny's arrest during an unsanctioned Dec. 5 protest against disputed State Duma elections helped galvanize voters for two unprecedented — and authorized — rallies later that month.

"Many thanks to our negotiators who so effectively got approval for the Feb. 4 march," Khimki forest defender Yevgenia Chirikova tweeted.

The organizers said protesters' determination to march with or without permission caused officials to give in to their demands.

But Alexei Mukhin, an analyst with the Center for Political Information, said City Hall's desire to avoid clashes was the decisive factor behind the compromise. "City Hall took the path of least resistance," he said.

Under the terms of the agreement, a copy of which was posted online, City Hall gave permission for 50,000 people to attend the march from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. in central Moscow, followed by a rally from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. The route begins near the Oktyabrskaya metro station and runs north on Bolshaya Yakimanka, continuing on Bolshaya Polyanka and crossing the Bolshoi Kamenny Bridge before ending at Bolotnaya Ploshchad, where the rally will take place.

The opposition had wanted to start at Oktyabrskaya metro and march down the Garden Ring to the Kremlin's walls. City Hall, citing traffic and public safety concerns, wanted to change the date of the protest or move it out of the city center all together.

By late Thursday, about 23,000 people had signed up to attend the Feb. 4 event on its Facebook page.

But opposition-minded voters might not be the only ones taking to the streets on Feb. 4, a Saturday, as conflicting reports on Thursday hinted that a pro-Putin counter-rally was in the works. Contacted by The Moscow Times, representatives with the All-Russia People's Front, Putin's election campaign and United Russia said they had no information about a possible Feb. 4 rally.

But an official with the Patriots of Russia party [told](#) Itar-Tass that the All-Russia People's Front had already submitted an application to City Hall for a 30,000-member march from Dorogomilovskaya Zastava near the Kievskaya metro station to Poklonnaya Gora near the Vorobyovy Gory metro station, several kilometers from Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

As if the political temperature on Feb. 4 won't be high enough, the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party announced Wednesday that it would hold a rally dubbed "For an Honest and Fair Democracy" on Pushkin Square that day. A representative said the party had already received permission from City Hall and expected 1,500 supporters to attend.

Flamboyant party boss Vladimir Zhirinovsky is running for president for a fourth time this year.

But cold weather could cause potential marchers on all sides to stay home. Daytime highs of minus 11 to minus 15 degrees Celsius are expected through Feb. 1, according to the federal weather bureau.

The opposition and City Hall had traded a number of proposals for the Feb. 4 event in recent weeks, with organizers pushing for a march through the city center on Feb. 4 — exactly one month before the presidential election that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is expected to win. But organizers held fast to Feb. 4, the symbolic 22nd anniversary of a massive rally against Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, which had guaranteed one-party rule. United Russia's control over the Duma and regional legislatures has led critics to compare it to the Soviet-era Communist Party.

Journalist Sergei Parkhomenko and opposition leaders Vladimir Ryzhkov and Gennady Gudkov led negotiations with City Hall on behalf of the loosely organized For Honest Elections movement, whose organizing committee includes well-known members of the nonparliamentary opposition such as Navalny, Parnas co-leader Boris Nemtsov and Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov.

On his blog, Parkhomenko described a marathon session of negotiations that began with an 8:30 p.m. telephone call and ended at 12:30 a.m. The deal was reached after a "very difficult round of negotiations," he said.

The march will be the third sanctioned demonstration against the results of the Dec. 4 Duma elections. Tens of thousands of people protested on Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova last month, chanting for new elections and Putin's resignation.

In an effort to organize the movement, a group of prominent opposition members last week unveiled the League of Voters, an Internet-based grassroots group dedicated to fighting election fraud. So far, about 2,500 volunteers and 165 working groups have registered on the site, which is designed to improve coordination and spread know-how among activists.

In one project organized through the League of Voters, activists on Sunday will attempt to encircle the city center in a ring of cars decorated with white — the color of the fledgling movement.

The opposition was dealt a blow earlier this week when it emerged that Grigory Yavlinsky, the leader of the liberal Yabloko party, will likely not be allowed to participate in the presidential election after the Central Elections Commission said many of the signatures submitted with his registration application were inadmissible.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/01/26/opposition-faces-rival-feb-4-rallies-a12198>