

Moscow Ready for Dueling Protests

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Forecasts say the temperature in Moscow will be about minus 16 degrees Celsius Saturday when tens of thousands of people will take to the streets, both in support of and in opposition to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's run for the presidency.

At least four rallies are planned. The largest will be the opposition march from the Oktyabrskaya metro station toward Bolotnaya Ploshchad, followed by a short rally.

It will start at 1 p.m. Some 27,000 people have signed up on Facebook to take part in the protest under anti-Putin slogans to demand fair elections.

It will be the third mass rally sanctioned by city authorities since accusations of widespread violations during December's State Duma elections sparked public outrage.

On Thursday, about 6,000 volunteers held single-person pickets around Moscow and distributed hundreds of thousands of leaflets calling on people to join the opposition march.

The Saturday rally will be the first this year, and it will be held just a month before the presidential election, which Putin is widely expected to win.

The Liberal Democratic Party, whose leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, is also running for president, is planning its own separate opposition rally on Pushkinskaya Ploshchad in downtown Moscow at noon.

Afterwards, participants will join the march and rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

Another liberal flank of the opposition movement will hold a rally at Prospekt Akademika Sakharova starting at 2 p.m. The organizers, Konstantin Borovoi and Valeria Novodvorskaya, said they decided to split from the main opposition demonstrations because they want a rally “without Nazis and Communists.”

More than 1,500 people had [signed up](#) on Facebook to join their protest as of Thursday afternoon.

Putin supporters are meeting in Poklonnaya Gora in southwestern Moscow. The rally will unite a motley crew of conservative television pundits, the editor of a fervent nationalist newspaper and a popular guest of television quiz shows.

The formal organizer is the Patriots of Russia, a small left-wing outsider led by Gennady Semigin, who got less than 1 percent of the vote during the parliamentary elections.

A former businessman with ties to the Kremlin, Semigin was expelled from the Communist Party in 2004 after being accused by leader Gennady Zyuganov of trying to divide the party.

“This is not the meeting for the authorities. This is a meeting against the Orange Revolution backers,” Sergei Kurginyan, one of the rally's scheduled speakers, said Wednesday during a talk show he hosted on the Rossia-1 television channel.

Kurginyan was referring to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, which started as a protest of an election won by the pro-Russian candidate, Viktor Yanukovich.

The rally logo features a fist squeezing an orange snake. Organizers pledged to draw 15,000 people to the demonstration.

Kurginyan has also called on television viewers not to come to the meeting under duress, responding to criticism from the opposition that state employees are being forced by their bosses to take part.

The Public Chamber, which opened a hotline for teachers to report efforts to blackmail them to attend the gathering, received at least 50 anonymous calls complaining of pressure.

Among the participants are conservative television pundits Mikhail Leontyev and Andrei Karaulov, known for their staunch Kremlin support.

They will be joined by Alexander Prokhanov, editor of newspaper Zavtra, a nationalist mouthpiece that has published articles critical of Putin.

The rally will also be attended by Anatoly Vasserman, a self-styled political expert who achieved a cult following from participation in popular television quiz shows.

“Some of us support the authorities, some do not, but we are all united by the feeling of the threat,” Kurginyan was quoted by Izvestia as saying Thursday.

Trying to scare off potential participants of an opposition rally, Rossiiskaya Gazeta published an article written by Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

The paper sought to draw parallels to anti-tsarist sentiment in 1917, which galvanized the Bolshevik revolt led by Vladimir Lenin.

“Will Solzhenitsyn be heard in offices and on the squares?” the paper asked.

Concerns that opposition protests might lead to more radical events are shared by many officials in the ruling United Russia party.

“There will be no winners or losers in this. It will be a war of all sides on each other,” United Russia's deputy speaker Oleg Morozov told reporters last week.

Russian medical officials also weighed in on the planned gatherings.

Chief sanitary doctor Gennady Onishchenko said Thursday that “no tea or warm drinks will save” participants who decide to brave the extreme cold.

Onishchenko, who heads the Federal Consumer Protection Service said he “categorically does not recommend taking part in these demonstrations,” Interfax reported.

To withstand more than an hour in the conditions expected Saturday, protesters would need to dress in an unfamiliar way, he said. That includes warm shoes and socks, “which no one wears,” Onishchenko said.

“Find grandma's *valenki* and sheepskin coats that haven't been eaten by moths yet, which were the signs of the incredibly well-off in the 1980s, and go to a rally of any side,” Onishchenko advised young people thinking about attending, Interfax reported.

How to stay warm during the rally:

- Have a nutritious warm meal before leaving.
- Wear warm clothes, the more the better. Don't forget a scarf and hat (better with ear flaps). Also, it's better to wear warm mittens instead of gloves.
- Take some chocolates or sweets.
- Do not drink alcohol before going out. It will speed up your heat loss. Better to drink it shortly before you leave the rally.

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