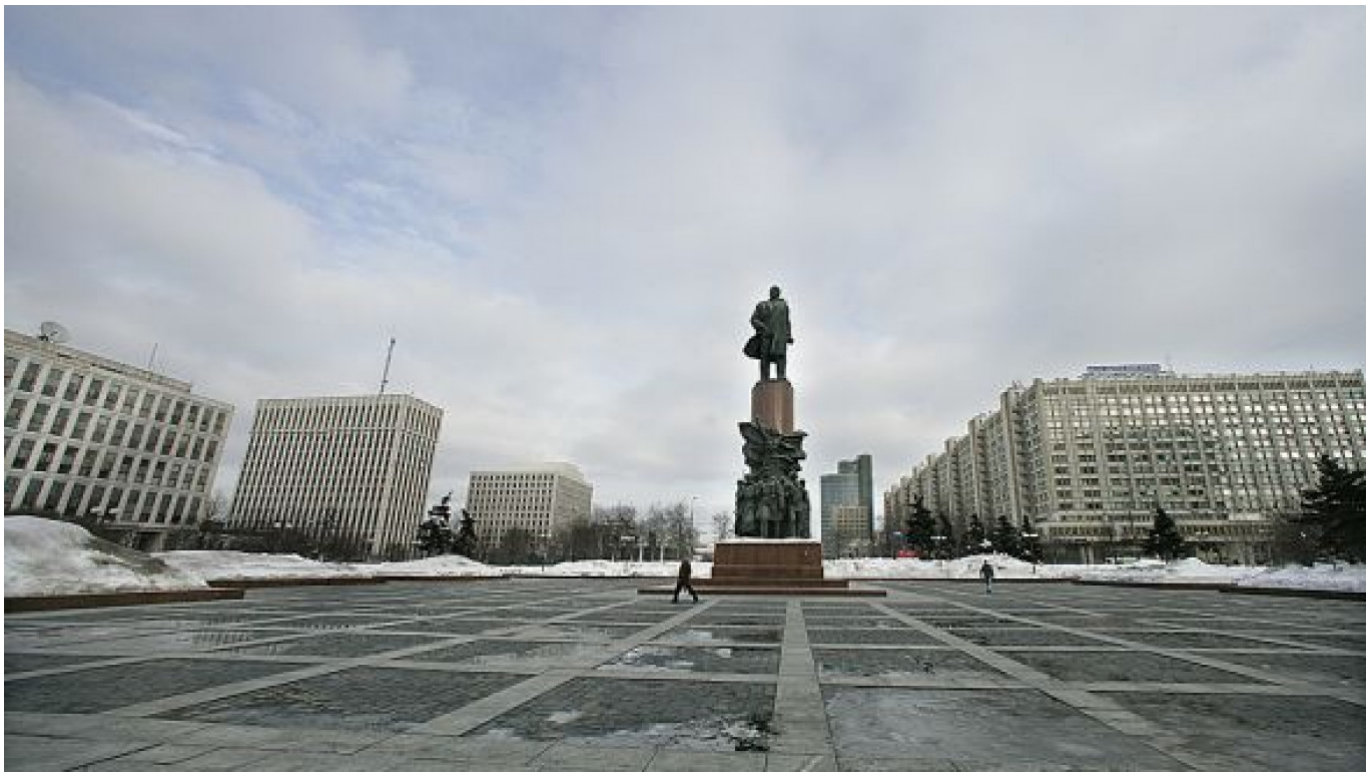
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VimpelCom to Boost Service at Rally

By Roland Oliphant

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Lenin’s statue will welcome protest participants Saturday to what was once known as Oktyabrskaya Ploshchad. **Igor Tabakov**

Besides the bitter cold, demonstrators and observers at Saturday's opposition rally could once again be facing quality issues with telecommunication services.

Mobile networks saw traffic leap as much as tenfold at previous demonstrations on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Dec. 10 and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova on Dec. 24, leaving many protesters and reporters unable to make calls, send SMS messages or access mobile Internet services for hours at a time.

But only one of the major networks contacted by The Moscow Times said it would be taking extra measures to ensure mobile access on Saturday.

VimpelCom's Beeline network will again deploy a mobile base station in a bid to increase network capacity during the mass meeting.

"For strengthening network capacity during the rally we plan to establish a mobile base station — we're currently in the process of agreeing on its placement. We changed the settings at base stations for the [Dec. 10] demonstration at Bolotnaya, so our network is already prepared for the growth in traffic," Beeline said in e-mailed comments.

MegaFon said it was not planning any special measures for Saturday's meeting, saying only that all operators face problems connecting calls and sending SMS messages during "demonstrations, football matches and other large gatherings."

The company said its policy in such cases is to give priority to voice calls and SMS messages at the expense of data transmission, but that it had "no plans" to turn off its 3G coverage all together.

MTS did not respond to several requests to comment on their plans.

Beeline deployed a mobile base station — basically a big truck with a cellular transmitter inside — at the Dec. 24 rally as a direct response to the overload on Bolotnaya on Dec. 10.

Anecdotal evidence gathered by The Moscow Times suggests that this and other attempts to improve phone service during the second protest at Prospekt Akademika Sakharova met with patchy success, with users of all networks reporting either slow but functional service, or a complete shutdown.

Opposition demonstrators plan to gather starting at noon near the Oktyabrskaya metro station on Ulitsa Bolshaya Yakimanka on Saturday before marching to Bolotnaya Ploshchad, where they will listen to speeches before dispersing.

As well as dressing warmly, marchers may want to make sure their mobile phones are fully charged. Mobile batteries tend to run down more quickly in the cold.

Beeline and MegaFon both said the cold would have no impact on signal transmission or operation of base stations.

For those who need to recharge or access the Internet, the Starlite diner on Bolotnaya Ploshchad will be open and has Wi-Fi and electrical sockets available.

The William Bass restaurant, on the corner of Ulitsa Malaya Yakimanka and Ulitsa Bolshaya Yakimanka, is also Wi-Fi- and receptacle-equipped and will be open for business as the protesters pass.

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