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Thousands Rally as Political Forces Vie for Advantage

By Alec Luhn

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Over 100,000 demonstrators took to the bitterly cold streets of Moscow on Saturday to rally at competing events both for and against longtime leader Vladimir Putin.

On a day when temperatures dipped as low as minus 19 C, tens of thousands bundled up to attend two main events in different parts of the city: an opposition march from Kaluzhskaya Ploshchad to Bolotnaya Ploshchad and an "anti-orange" rally at Poklonnaya Gora in support of Putin.

Police and event organizers differed widely in their estimates of the rallies' attendance. Moscow police said the opposition event drew around 38,000 and the pro-Putin rally as many as 140,000, while organizers of the opposition event claimed attendance of 120,000, RIA-Novosti reported.

But a reporter for The Moscow Times at the pro-Putin event estimated the crowd as being far

smaller than the police's measurement, saying it likely numbered no more than 25,000 people. A reporter for The Moscow Times at the opposition event estimated at least 50,000 people were in attendance.

The huge disparities in the figures signaled a public relations battle being waged by the authorities and the opposition to demonstrate public support for their causes as the country gears up for the March 4 presidential election.

Speaking through an icy beard, student Aleksei Belakov, 24, said that turnout at the opposition march was smaller than at the previous two opposition rallies this winter, which he also attended. Crowd estimates for the Dec. 24 rally on Prospekt Sakharova ranged as high as 80,000 people.

"There were fewer people but, considering the cold, I'm impressed" with how many came Saturday, Belakov said.

About 10,000 members of law enforcement agencies were also on hand to keep order at various events around the city, Vedomosti reported. The only arrests reported over the course of the day were of a group of nationalists carrying flares, who were detained by police after they discovered the group was "planning provocations" along the march route, Itar-Tass reported.

All forms of opposition

The opposition march was the first to begin, with demonstrators gathering at noon at Kaluzhskaya Ploshchad with homemade signs, white balloons, and many different flags, under the umbrella slogan "For Fair Elections." The march concluded with a rally at Bolotnaya Ploshchad, the site of a major rally in December protesting falsifications in the State Duma elections.

Attendees proclaimed various messages and represented a wide array of movements and organizations, including a number of fringe groups not affiliated with the liberal opposition movement. Among the groups represented were the opposition parties Yabloko, Parnas and Left Front; the Communist Party; liberal political movement Solidarity; and the feminist, anarchist and nationalist movements, with members of the last marching with white, black and yellow imperial Russian flags.

Supporters of lesser-known groups, such as the Pirate Party and a group calling itself the Great Russian Empire, also marched. One group of protesters carried rainbow flags, prompting a Times of London reporter to tweet, "this may be Moscow's first official Gay Pride march."

Elsewhere in the mass of people, some protesters shouted anti-semitic slogans.

Protesters came not just from Moscow but also from surrounding regions. One protester carried a sign identifying herself as a resident of Arkhangelsk region in the far north.

They came for a variety of reasons, but many of the chants and signs called for Vladimir Putin to relinquish power. Belakov marched holding a homemade horse head, saying even a horse could run the country better than Putin has.

Several protesters said they would vote in the March 4 presidential elections for someone besides Putin but were not sure for whom.

Teacher Sergei Shilayev, 45, also speaking through icy facial hair, said Saturday's march showed that discontent with the regime is not limited to the upper middle class, or to Moscow. Shilayev and companion Alexander Kondratiyev, 35, came to the protest from their homes in Sergiev Posad, a Golden Ring city about 75 kilometers from Moscow.

"Sometimes they call this kind of protest a 'revolution of fur coats.' That's not correct," Shilayev said.

"I'm a lower-class person against Putin," he added.

Speakers at the rally included well-established figures from the opposition movement, including Solidarity leader Sergei Udaltsov, environmental activist Yevgeniya Chirikova and Yabloko party member Grigory Yavlinsky.

One of the organizers, liberal politician Vladimir Ryzhkov, reiterated the opposition's demands for the release of political prisoners, the resignation of Central Elections Commission chair Vladimir Churov and the annulment of last year's Duma election results, Interfax reported.

"Protest participants are troubled by the fact that the authorities have not fulfilled the demands of previous large protests," Ryzhkov said.

The only presidential candidate to attend any of Saturday's rallies was tycoon Mikhail Prokhorov, who marched with supporters dressed in white on Bolshaya Yakimanka.

"I'm in the very center of the rally, talking with people. It's cold, but they're not letting me out, and that's heartening—it means [I'm] needed," Prokhorov tweeted during the rally.

Opposition events were also held in cities across Russia and around the world Saturday.

"Anti-Orange" warnings

Across town at Poklonnaya Gora, an "anti-orange" rally was held at the same time as the opposition event and also drew a diverse crowd of demonstrators, including pensioners, Cossacks dressed in fatigues, and members of pro-Putin youth movement Nashi.

A crush of demonstrators arrived at metro station Park Pobedy to attend the event, causing the station to close temporarily while they exited. A long line of buses also ferried people to the event, parking along nearby Kutuzovsky Prospekt.

There was little unity among demonstrators regarding why they came. A group of pensioners said when asked that they came to express their support for Putin. But many younger demonstrators refused to speak to a Moscow Times reporter when approached.

One young demonstrator said under condition of anonymity that he had been paid to attend the event, though he would not say from whom he had received money.

There were widespread reports in recent days of people being pressured to attend the event by their employers. Putin said Friday that "there is nothing good" about such tactics and suggested the reports might be exaggerated, Interfax reported.

Demonstrators held signs with anti-Western slogans like "West, get your hands off Russia," while speakers from a temporary stage led the crowd in chants of "Glory to Russia." Some of the signs held by event-goers appeared to be mass-made.

Not everyone in attendance was a devoted Putin supporter, though. One group dressed in bright red jackets handed out leaflets advertising a movement called "USSR 2.0" that claimed to be both anti-Kremlin and "anti-orange." And among the speakers were vocal Kremlin critics Alexander Prokhanov and Sergei Kurginyan, both of whom have pronounced grave warnings regarding the possibility of a movement similar to Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution.

Two smaller rallies were also held Saturday: a Liberal Democratic Party event at Pushkin Square that police said was attended by 1,000 demonstrators, and an event "for fair elections and democracy" at Prospekt Akademika Sakharova that drew 150, RIA-Novosti reported.

Staff writers Alexander Bratersky, Kevin O'Flynn, Roland Oliphant, Justin Varilek and Alex Winning, and interns Chloe Cranston and Jemma Buckley contributed to this report.

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