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Opposition to Putin Overcomes Distance

By Jonathan Earle

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Dozens of cities around the globe saw miniversions of Saturday's For Honest Elections rally over the weekend as opposition-minded Russian expats gathered to show solidarity, educate locals and network in an extension of Russia's remarkable winter of political activism.

Gatherings in London, New York and other centers of the Russian diaspora drew between 100 and 200, a faint echo of the tens of thousands who marched to Bolotnaya Ploshchad in central Moscow to demand political reform, while thousands more attended a rally several kilometers away to support Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's presidential campaign.

The expat protesters waved handmade signs, shouted slogans and sang songs, their demands by now familiar: fair elections and political liberalization. They staked out public squares and stood outside Russian consulates, excoriating the officials inside while chatting with curious passersby.

In London, self-exiled businessman Yevgeny Chichvarkin joined about 100 protesters across from Prime Minister David Cameron's official residence at 10 Downing Street. The gathering

concluded with the delivery of a written appeal urging Cameron to reject "illegitimate" elections and help muster the international community behind the opposition.

"My friends in Russia tell me that our protests make a difference. ... They can feel our support," Andrei Sidelnikov, an organizer of the London rally, said by telephone. Sidelnikov said he left Russia against his will and would like to return — something he doesn't think is possible as long as Putin is in power.

Maria Gaidar, daughter of Yeltsin-era reformer Yegor Gaidar, and dozens of others protested outside the Russian consulate in New York, where they held white balloons and neatly printed signs with slogans such as "Russians demand fair elections."

Protesters said it was difficult to influence events in Russia from abroad, but they maintained the importance of taking to the streets, even in small numbers.

The organizers of a dozen-person rally in Kansas City, Kansas, wrote on their Facebook page that by demonstrating in Middle America, they were emboldening protesters back home and reminding those responsible for alleged vote fraud during the Dec. 4 State Duma elections that "around the world, wherever they go, there are people who hate them."

Facebook played a prominent role in the diaspora protests, as it has domestically. Local organizers created dedicated pages for each event.

And as the political season has brought new organizations, such as the League of Voters, to mobilize opposition-minded voters, so have diaspora Russians jumped to harness what they perceive as widespread discontent with the prospect of Putin's widely expected victory in the March 4 presidential election.

But despite the appearance of organizations with names like Raise Your Voice! and WakeUpRussia! the movement is still self-consciously amateur.

"We're doing everything by intuition and learning on the fly," wrote the co-organizer of Saturday's Paris rally on the event's Facebook page. "We're hoping and counting on our human values and laws."

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