

Garden Ring Hosts Opposing Rallies

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February 19, 2012



The polarizing effect of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's campaign to regain the presidency is evident in ongoing rallies such as the two this weekend. In two weeks, voters decide Dmitry Medvedev's successor.
Igor Tabakov

Two weeks before the March 4 presidential election, supporters and critics of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin came out on foot, in cars and even on ice skates.

Moscow's Garden Ring saw two rallies on wheels over the weekend, the first for Putin and his bid to become president again, the second against him.

More than a thousand pro-Putin motorists took to the street Saturday from 11 p.m. onward, circling the major city ring road counterclockwise and blocking crossroads for more than 15 minutes.

A Moscow Times reporter spotted expensive limousines and sport utility vehicles as well as battered Ladas taking part in the rally.

Vehicles were plastered with Russian flags, and many displayed portraits of the prime minister and slogans such as "For Putin. That's all" and "Putin Rules."

Much rarer were flags of Putin's United Russia party and of his All-Russia People's Front.

Some cars displayed lavish light shows, including a [colorful blinking Christmas tree fixed on the roof of a Chevrolet](#).

Others were blaring Putin's performance of "Blueberry Hill" from their car stereo, Gazeta.ru reported.

Police reported no incidents during the rally and said more than 2,000 cars took part. However, the organizers, a group called Network of Putin Supporters, [put the figure on their website](#) at 5,000 and claimed that they managed to cover the whole ring road.

The idea of a political motorcade was introduced by opposition protesters, who first staged a Garden Ring rally Jan. 29.

On Sunday afternoon, they took to the streets again, claiming to bring out more than 2,000 cars, many flying white ribbons and balloons, the symbols of the peaceful protests against Putin and for free elections.

That rally was dogged with mutual accusations. Police put the protesting motorists' number at "a few hundred" and [said](#) participants were blocking traffic, while organizers [said](#) authorities tried to thwart them with deliberate street closures, roadside checks and even staged accidents.

Pyotr Shkumatov of the Blue Buckets motorist movement told Gazeta.ru that participants in Saturday's pro-Putin rally had provoked protesters by cutting into their lane and swearing at them.

Saturday also saw gatherings of Putin supporters around the country. Among the biggest was a rally outside St. Petersburg's Oktyabrsky concert hall, which organizers claimed was attended by some 60,000. Reporters for Fontanka.ru put the figure at less than 15,000.

A similar rally in the southern city of Lipetsk attracted some 17,000, while some 5,000 people in Kostroma, northeast of Moscow, turned out on ice skates to support Putin's candidacy, United Russia [said on its website](#).

The capital will see more protests this week. On Thursday's Defenders of the Fatherland holiday, Putin supporters expect up to 40,000 participants for a march and rally at Luzhniki Stadium.

Opposition groups are planning two more mass protests Sunday, first a silent [human chain around the Garden Ring](#) and then a rally called "[Farewell to Putin's Political Winter](#)."

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/02/19/garden-ring-hosts-opposing-rallies-a12743>