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Live Blog: Defender of the Fatherland Day Rallies

By Ken Martinez

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on stage at a rally in support of his presidential candidacy. **Vasily Maximov**

Hello, everyone. We're going to be following the action at the four major rallies taking place on this Defender of the Fatherland Day here in Moscow. The events are:

- a pro-Putin march with a rally at Luzhniki stadium, expected to draw up to 100,000 people;
- a Liberal Democratic Party event at Pushkin Square;
- a rally sponsored by the Communist Party and opposition group Left Front at Teatralnaya Ploshchad;

- and an "anti-orange" event at the All-Russia Exhibition Center.

Refresh the page regularly to see the latest updates.

3:27 p.m.: Today's rallies have wrapped up, and so we will sign off. Check back this evening for an article that will summarize the day's events. Thanks for reading.

3:06 p.m., pro-Putin rally: In his seven-minute speech today, Putin kept things general and repeated familiar themes. He urged unity in the country and denounced external interference, echoing the name of the rally, We Will Defend the Country.

Judging from a video recording of the speech, the crowd cheered during much of his address — though there was one moment when boos are clearly audible. It came after Putin said, "The main thing is that we are together — we are a multi-ethnic but united and powerful people, the Russian people. We won't push anyone away; on the contrary, we welcome everyone." There is a pro-ethnic-Russian streak among some Putin supporters, and the boos may have come from people in the crowd who do not share the prime minister's enthusiasm for Russia's diversity.

2:33 p.m., anti-orange rally: Twitter user @sovkusomsahara is blogging from the anti-orange rally hosted by political scientist Sergei Kurginyan. The blogger posted a photo of a sign held by one participant that denounces opposition leaders: "Orange scum: Nemtsovs, Ryzhkovs, Sobchaks! No to destabilization." She wrote that Kurginyan sang a song to guitar music.

2:17 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Novaya Gazeta reporter Yevgeny Feldman, who live-blogged from the pro-Putin event, said fake applause was played on speakers when Vladimir Putin arrived on stage and that the crowd greeted him "with restraint." Bloggers have begun repeating Feldman's claim on Twitter, but no one else in attendance has confirmed it.

2:08 p.m., Communist Party rally: As the pro-Putin rally at Luzhniki seems to be winding up, the Communist Party event is still ongoing. Police said that around 2,000 people were at Teatralnaya Ploshchad for the event at its appointed start time, 1 p.m., Interfax reported. Organizers estimated the crowd at 10,000 people. Party leader Gennady Zyuganov gave a speech, urging voters to turn out on election day to make it more likely that there will be a second round of voting — implying that he assumes no one candidate will gain a majority of votes in the first round on March 4. Candidate Vladimir Putin is currently polling around the 50 percent mark.

1:56 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Journalists are starting to weigh in on Putin's appearance at the rally. On Twitter, New Yorker writer Julia Ioffe wrote, "Does anyone else hear booing?" The Times correspondent in Moscow Tony Halpin wrote, "That was least secure environment I've ever seen Putin in — spoke from open stage in centre of stadium with no security screens." Putin's visit to the rally was not announced ahead of time, and bloggers speculated about whether he would show up. His time on stage lasted no more than 20 minutes.

1:48 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Putin's speech has ended, and Lenta.ru is reporting that many people are leaving the stadium. From the live feed on RIA-Novosti, the seating looks sparse; perhaps about 30 percent of the seats are still filled.

1:40 p.m., pro-Putin rally: The man himself, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, has taken the stage and is addressing the crowd. Kommersant-FM correspondent Natalya Zhdanova quoted him on Twitter as saying, "I dream that everyone will have hope for a better fate and that everyone will be happy."

Young Guard leader Vladimir Burmatov posted a video of him arriving on Twitter:

1:24 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Interfax is reporting that the stadium is full and the entrances are closed. People who did not make it inside are walking away from the stadium.

On stage, Mayor Sergei Sobyanin is addressing the crowd.

1:15 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Head of pro-Kremlin youth group Young Guard Vladimir Burmatov posted a dizzying video of the crowds at Luzhniki, with the Russian national anthem playing in the background:

1:13 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Police have just said there are 130,000 people at Luzhniki. The estimates from police have increased rapidly; as the Interfax.ru editor-in-chief tweeted, "At 12:56 police say that at Luzh 100,000-115,000 people. At 13:03 already 130,000."

1:03 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Some participants of the last major pro-Putin rally in Moscow — held on the same day as a major opposition event, on Feb. 4 — were reportedly forced or paid to attend. Today, reports have varied as to the reasons people are attending the event. New Yorker journalist Julia Ioffe tweeted, "First guy I stopped says they made him go at work," while Sky News reporter Amanda Walker wrote on her Twitter account, "One woman tells us she thought she was coming to a music concert." Guardian correspondent Miriam Elder tweeted, "First person I talked to was city worker who said work 'invited' her to come to rally."

12:52 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Kommersant-FM reporter Nik Batalov tweeted that he sees groups of people heading out of Luzhniki stadium toward the metro, before, he notes, the official start of the rally.

Meanwhile, the Putin campaign is estimating 93,000 people in attendance at the event, Interfax reported.

12:40 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Luzhniki stadium is gradually filling up. Seats in the stadium appear to be almost completely full, and the field appears to be about 40 percent covered with people. Musical performers have been taking a stage in the center of the field, including singer Denis Maidonov and pop group A'Studio, who gave a rendition of their hit "Fly Away" ("Uletayu").

12:32 p.m., pro-Putin rally: A few links for you: a live video feed of the event is being run by RIA-Novosti, and photographs are being posted regularly by blogger Ilya Varlamov on his Twitter account.

12:25 p.m., LDPR rally: The rally in support of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party has begun at Pushkin Square. From an image of the event posted by a Twitter user, there appear to be several hundred people in attendance.

12:23 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Demonstrators have been photographed holding a variety of signs, with messages that range from the straightforward to the iconoclastic, including "We are for Putin and Stalin," "Honestly for Putin" — perhaps a play on the opposition slogan of "For Honest Elections" — and "Our voice for Putin." From photographs posted by Twitter users at the event, it seems many attendees are carrying Russian flags.

12:13 p.m., pro-Putin rally: Moscow police said around 70 people have been detained, mostly citizens of Uzbekistan, for receiving money to attend the rally, Interfax reported. Groups of non-ethnic Russian migrants have been spotted at other recent pro-Putin events, prompting speculation that they were coerced or paid to attend.

12:00 p.m., pro-Putin rally: The PR battle over attendance numbers has already begun. At 11:30 a.m. the first attendance estimate came in from the Moscow police, who said there were 30,000 people. In response, opposition activist Oleg Kozlovsky said on Twitter, "It seems the puting [pro-Putin rally] has failed. Even by the (clearly inflated) police estimate, they have 30,000 people instead of the promised 200[,000]."

In fact, organizers said the march would be limited to 30,000 people and the rally to 100,000. Kozlovsky seems to be referring to the number of people the Putin campaign originally said it wanted to bring out, to a march on Tverskaya Ulitsa, an idea nixed by City Hall.

11:50 a.m., pro-Putin rally: Leader of opposition group Left Front Sergei Udaltsov said on Twitter that 10 activists from his group have been detained by police at Frunzenskaya Naberezhnaya, the site of the pro-Putin march, and are being questioned in a nearby bus. He said they were simply talking with march participants.

11:46 a.m., pro-Putin rally: The event has started. Organizers have turned on patriotic music, people are cheering "Hoorah!" and waving flags and balloons. Movement toward the destination, Luzhniki stadium, has begun.

Approximately 10,000 people have gathered so far, deputy head of Vladimir Putin's campaign staff told Interfax.

11:38 a.m., pro-Putin rally: Another update from Interfax. The news agency reports that a solid flow of people are streaming out of Frunzenskaya metro station now. Free tea, cookies, pancakes, and other items are being given out at large tents at the rally site, Luzhniki stadium, where people have begun to gather.

On the way to Luzhniki, several people were noticed distributing white ribbons, the symbol of the "For Honest Elections" movement, as well as booklets entitled "Putin. Corruption."

11:29 a.m., pro-Putin rally: Large groups have been gathering on Frunzenskaya Naberezhnaya, the starting point for the pro-Putin rally, since about 10 a.m., Interfax reported.

Police at metro station Frunzenskaya are using loudspeakers to ask people to leave the platform and move toward the exit as they arrive at the station. Around the metro are several buses for police, as well as ambulances.

Businesses near the starting point are crowded, with long lines and no free tables.

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