The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Opposition Join Hands in Anti-Putin Protest

By Kevin O'Flynn

February 26, 2012



A line of protesters making up a section of the “White Circle” on Sunday that encircled the Kremlin in the final opposition rally before the March 4 vote. **Igor Tabakov**

Thousands of people formed a human chain around the center of Moscow on Sunday as the opposition upped its campaign for honest elections just a week before the presidential vote.

Despite light snow and slush and some skepticism among supporters, the "White Circle" — as the unsanctioned rally was called — saw people stand side-by-side and hand-in-hand all the way round the 16-kilometer-long Garden Ring.

"It is a new kind of protest. We have never had such a kind in this country, in Moscow. It is one of solidarity — a friendly, well-intentioned event," said one of the opposition leaders, Boris Nemtsov as he stood outside Mayakovskaya metro station.

With the clock just a few minutes before 2 p.m., the start time for the demonstration, only a few dozen people could be seen on the Garden Ring near Ulitsa Pokrovka, but quickly more arrived and stood at the edge of the sidewalk.

Some held hands, others waved white ribbons and balloons and the inner side of the road was soon filled with people. There were the odd gaps and places where people were thinly spread, but a drive from Pokrovka to Triumfalnaya Ploshchad saw an impressive line of people all along it. Reporters for The Moscow Times reporters witnessed similar scenes on other parts of the Garden Ring.

"At ten to two, it seemed the circle wouldn't close but then between 2 and 3 there was nowhere to stand," opposition figure Alexei Navalny wrote on Twitter.

The opposition estimated before the event that 34,000 people were needed to complete the chain and claimed 40,000 came on Sunday. With the chain not always complete around the Garden Ring a lower figure was likely more realistic. Police — who routinely offer lowball estimates for opposition rallies — put the figure at 11,000.

It was a festive atmosphere and its success may provide a boost for the opposition's plans for further demonstrations after the March 4 election.

People smiled and spoke with strangers or wore home made costumes like pensioner Tatyana Kulyagina, 59, who came in a hat she had made herself with models of a riot policeman and Vladimir Putin and others perched on top.

"It has been much more successful than I expected," said Alexander, a member of the Solidarnost opposition movement as he handed out white ribbons near Tsvetnoi Bulvar, "I expected far fewer people. It is a wonderful atmosphere."

Attendees stood for more than an hour at the protest as passing motorists honked their horns, slowed down to pick up white ribbons or shouted encouragement.

Many of the cars had white ribbons attached or something white lodged in a window — in one case a nappy, unused, was placed to signal support. In another car, a female passenger opened her window to show a white lap dog to the participants.

People started coming out into the streets to protest after disputed parliamentary elections in December amid accusations of mass fraud. They have also tapped into growing discontent with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin who will likely return as president after the election.

"I see how the government treats us. You can't forgive that. We shouldn't have to humiliate ourselves and ask the government to talk to us," said Maxim Bilyak, 17, a student who attended the protest.

At Triumfalnaya Ploshchad — the site of often violent protests in recent years with police quelling unsanctioned rallies — hundreds packed the sidewalk while police held back.

"The police are very discreet that is inspiring. I think they want to join us. I hope so," Nemtsov said.

Despite the protests, few are in doubt that Putin is heading for victory and a new poll by the independent Levada Center gave the prime minister 66 percent, indicating a first round victory.

The opposition says the election is rigged and is in talks with City Hall for a protest the day after the vote. Negotiations are still ongoing, but Nemtsov said that if a rally is refused, protesters will go ahead anyway.

"There will be a protest meeting on March 5 and 10 and then onwards until we win," he said.

Sunday's event came in answer to a large-scale pro-Putin rally held at Luzhniki Stadium just three days before, which saw more than 100,000 people attend. Many were workers from state-run industries and some said they had been pressured to go by their employers. A large number of banners at the rally also appeared mass produced.

Alexei, 17, who stood outside the foreign ministry building near Smolenskaya metro station, said he was partly spurred to take part Sunday after his university had pressured him and his classmates to attend the pro-Putin event.

Kremlin youth groups faced off with some protesters at the event, Russian media reported, carrying Valentine-style hearts with the words "Putin Loves Everyone" written on them and tearing posters and shouting at people.

A few hundred people gathered near Ploshchad Revolyutsii metro station for a protest organized by Sergei Udaltsov, the leader of the opposition group Left Front later in the afternoon, which saw tussles between pro-Putin supporters and the opposition. Police said 10 people were arrested in the altercation, Interfax reported.

The protest was meant to finish with the burning of a straw effigy of Putin in an aping of a Russian pagan tradition where a doll is burnt to symbolize the end of winter.

Udaltsov and a few dozen supporters, however, were cordoned off by police outside the station and joined hands and spun in circles while shouting "Leave, winter, leave," and "Leave Putin, leave."

No doll was produced or burned.

Dozens of police trucks were in force nearby and a policeman shouted into a microphone by Red Square telling people that it was closed for "technical reasons."

Roland Oliphant and Alec Luhn contributed to this report.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/02/26/opposition-join-hands-in-anti-putin-protest-a12884