

Navalny, Dozens Others Detained at Rallies

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

March 05, 2012



Anti-Putin demonstrators voicing their anger at the Pushkin Square rally. **Igor Tabakov**

The opposition showed its resilience on Monday night, drawing thousands to a Pushkin Square rally in the freezing cold to protest Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's landslide victory in the weekend presidential election.

The rally, addressed by opposition leaders and presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov, was peaceful. But a crowd of 400 to 500 people, including journalists, refused to leave afterward, and a wall of OMON riot police officers swooped down on them, roughly herding them into the nearby metro.

Police detained about 250 people during the rallies, including anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny and Left Front [leader](#) Sergei Udaltsov. All detained demonstrators have been released, police said, Interfax reported.

Police also held Other Russia opposition leader Eduard Limonov and about 50 of his supporters at an unsanctioned rally on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad.

On another downtown square, Manezh, tens of thousands of pro-Putin supporters rallied with banners with a portrait of a stony-faced Putin, while some wore ominous-looking red armbands reading, "Are you ready to kill?" Asked what the slogan meant, one young man said it referred to what would happen to Putin's opponents if they didn't stop their protests. He did not elaborate.

The atmosphere on Pushkin Square was smaller and less cheerful than at past mass opposition rallies, which started in early December to demand free and fair elections. The motley crowd spanned the political spectrum, from Communists to ultranationalists, as well as a group of self-described anarchists, who at one point chanted, "Revolution, revolution!"

"We'll keep gathering until Putin leaves," said Arkady, 60, a pensioner.

The remarks by Arkady, who like many people on the square were reluctant to give their last names, seemed at odds with government predictions that the protest movement would peter out.

"In a proper democracy, the losers should reluctantly or readily accept the obvious, and the results of this election are obvious," said Sergei Ivanov, head of the presidential administration, Interfax reported.

Opposition leaders declared Sunday's vote illegitimate over what they called widespread irregularities. "There were violations at every polling station!" one of them, Yevgenia Chirikova, told the crowd.

Allegations of widespread fraud during the Dec. 4 State Duma elections gave birth to the protest movement, which has since grown into a call for democratic reform.

Navalny is increasingly seen as the leader of the movement, and several protesters said they would have voted for him in Sunday's election.

Navalny punctuated his brief address to the crowd with the rallying cry, "We have the power!" But the crowd didn't unite in chorus as Navalny might have hoped.

After standing outside in the freezing cold in uncomfortably cramped quarters, many had already headed for the exits.

Several participants interviewed by The Moscow Times said they had voted for billionaire Prokhorov.

"There was no alternative," said Konstantin, 47, a businessman.

Prokhorov spoke briefly from the stage, thanking supporters and calling on participants to join his political party, which he has promised to launch this month.

"Welcome, free people of Russia!" he said to a strong chorus of cheers and clapping.

It was unclear, even among protesters, how far they were willing to go to achieve their demands.

Talk of tent cities earlier this week proved unfounded for now, but several participants didn't exclude that possibility when the weather got warmer.

On Sunday, Vladimir Ovchinsky, a former senior Interior Ministry official, warned on Russia state television that Monday's rally and any future ones would not be peaceful.

That prediction also proved incorrect, although protesters conceded that radicals in the opposition movement might eventually resort to violence.

The protesters maintained, however, that the government would bear responsible for any bloodshed.

"Power changes hands either through elections or through revolution," said Sergei, 30, a manager, adding that at this point it was the government's choice.

Valery, 38, a builder, said he didn't know what was next for the opposition but that he would continue to protest on behalf of his wife and four children.

"If there's violence, we'll have civil war. But if Putin doesn't leave peacefully, we'll also have civil war," he said.

Anton Glotov, a 40-year-old artist, attended the rally in a cage. "I'm freer in here than out there," he said. "It's all a matter of perspective." He added that violent clashes were unlikely.

About 12,000 Interior Ministry troops were in Moscow providing security, including 6,300 who were brought in from surrounding regions, Interfax said.

A total of 6,000 regional OMON riot police officers — about a quarter of all OMON in Russia — will be in Moscow through March 9 to assist local riot police, Novaya Gazeta [reported](#) Friday.

The rally on Pushkin Square was one of several that took place on Monday.

About a kilometer from Pushkin Square, more than 50,000 people gathered at a Young Guard-organized rally on Manezh Square to support Putin, police said. A reporter saw that the square was packed and police were turning people away, saying there was no room.

People at the rally spoke highly of Putin. "The only man whom I can believe and respect is Putin," said Roman, 65, a retired driver who was bused in from Tambov by rally organizers.

Others said they were bused in from Ryazan and other cities near the capital.

"I support Putin because I remember how it was under the Communists when I was small, but now my son can have anything that he wants," said Irina, 30, from Moscow.

She added, though, that she holds two jobs to make ends meet. She said the people who back the opposition didn't work.

After the rally, demonstrators listened to a free concert by the Ukrainian pop duo Potap

and Nastya.

The square filled up quickly as young people who were not associated with the rally but attracted by the music pleaded with police officers guarding the perimeter to be let in to listen.

Meanwhile, police detained at least 50 Other Russia opposition activists, including the group's leader Eduard Limonov, as they tried to stage an unsanctioned rally near the Central Elections Commission headquarters on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad, Interfax reported.

A police officer declared, "Respected citizens, your event is not sanctioned," and then began grabbing people, said a Moscow Times reporter at the scene. There were at least 100 people on the square, but at least a third were journalists, many of them with cameras. Every time police went to detain someone, a frenzy of media would immediately appear around them.

Earlier Limonov [wrote](#) on his blog that the rally was to "defend the opposition's honor" after opposition leaders contributed to Putin's overwhelming election victory.

"Putin's presidential campaign didn't have a theme before December. Then it appeared: The revolt of the pro-Western elite against the Russian people and their chief, Putin," he wrote.

Scattered pro-Putin and opposition rallies were held around the country. In St. Petersburg, police detained about 70 opposition activists at a unsanctioned gathering of 800 to 2,000 people on St. Isaac's Square, news reports said.

Some politicians said the rallies must end.

"The sooner the rallies stop, the better. There's work to be done," said Sergei Mironov, who placed last in the presidential election, Interfax reported. "I believe Vladimir Putin's victory in the first round was completely objective," he said.

Staff writers Alexandra Odynova and Ken Martinez contributed to this report.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/03/05/navalny-dozens-others-detained-at-rallies-a13088>