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Archived Live Blog: Opposition Rally on Novy Arbat

By Ken Martinez

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Activists took to the streets once again on Saturday to protest the March 4 presidential election, which the opposition says was tarnished by fraud, and to call for political reforms. The protest was held on Novy Arbat in central Moscow; attendance estimates ranged from 10,000 by police to 50,000 by some rally speakers. You can read about highlights from the proceedings below.

4:52 p.m., Photo of Udaltsov Being Detained; Blog Signing Off for Now: Blogger and photographer Ilya Varlamov has a great shot of Sergei Udaltsov about to be detained by OMON riot police in their "cosmonaut" headgear over at his blog.

We're signing off for the moment, but we'll be back if there are any other newsworthy developments to report regarding today's opposition activities. Check the website later this evening for an article on the rally by our colleagues Jonathan Earle and Natalya Krainova.

4:34 p.m., Udaltsov Supporters 'Misbehaved': Police have detained around 10 supporters of Sergei Udaltsov after the opposition leader was arrested for not following police orders and leading a crowd in a chant of "Russia without Putin!"

According to Dutch journalist Olaf Koens, who was on the scene, Udaltsov's group may have been in the wrong. "Amazing to see how Udaltsov's guys misbehaved and how the police was kind of friendly," Koens wrote on Twitter.

4:24 p.m., Udaltsov Detained by Police: Left Front leader Sergei Udalstov has been detained by police near metro station Arbatskaya after disobeying police orders, Interfax reported. Udaltsov had announced his intention to lead demonstrators to Pushkin Square, access to which has been blocked by police. The square's fountain, in which opposition leaders Udaltsov, Alexei Navalny, and Ilya Yashin stood yelling slogans on Monday after a rally, has been surrounded by metal fences and police officers.

3:55 p.m., Udaltsov on the March: Gazeta.ru journalist Vyacheslav Kozlov reported that Sergei Udaltsov has begun to march with supporters. They are apparently headed toward Pushkin Square, which has been closely guarded by OMON riot police since Monday's opposition event there that ended in arrests.

3:44 p.m., Video From Overhead: This video posted by a blogger gives a good sense of the crowd size at the event:

3:35 p.m., Sampling of Sign Messages: Opposition rallies have been marked by creative signs, and there were plenty on display at Saturday's event. Here's a small sampling of the messages:

On a sign held by a nationalist demonstrator: "Russian nation — Russian authority!" ("Русская нация — русская власть!")

A pair held two signs with these messages: "Maybe [have to] leave? Sad" ("Все-таки уезжать? Пичалька") and "Putin another 12 years? Sad" ("Путин еще на 12 лет? Пичалька")

A picture of Putin adorned a sign with the message: "Another 12 years? No thanks!" ("Еще 12 лет? Спасибо, нет!")

One demonstrator wore a face mask with the message: "My voice was stolen" ("Мой голос украли")

Some kept it very simple: "Putin is bad" ("Путин плохой")

And there were playful messages as well: "If not Putin, then a cat?" (Если не Путин, то кот?) This played on the Russian word for "who," which has the same letters at the word for "cat."

3:19 p.m., Pussy Riot Lawyer Speaks; Duma Deputy Ponomaryov Optimistic: The lawyer for jailed members of the rock group Pussy Riot spoke at the rally, calling for the women to be freed, along with all other political prisoners, Interfax reported. (See below for more on Pussy Riot.)

Opposition activist and State Duma member Ilya Ponomaryov gave an interview to Novaya Gazeta, saying: "I am leaving the rally in a celebratory mood. Enough people came. The atmosphere was down to business. You could notice that we have gone from just 'slogans' to concreteness. I think plans for future events will crystallize in the coming week and take on definite contours. The wave of rallies is not going to nothing, but taking on a new form."

3:12 p.m., Rally Over; More Speaker Comments, Sign Messages Coming: The rally has officially come to an end, but we will do a few more updates to this blog with comments from speakers and messages from signs held by demonstrators. So, stay with us.

3:05 p.m., Udaltsov Says He's Headed Back to Pushkin Square: Sergei Udaltsov had said he would stay at Novy Arbat after the rally's end, apparently in an effort to get demonstrators to occupy the area. Now, he's said in an interview with journalists that he plans to go to Pushkin Square today and is gathering people to join him. He said the square has become a symbol and that he now plans to go there every week to "talk," Novaya Gazeta reported.

2:59 p.m., Crowd Photos: Here are a few photos of demonstrators from news site Ridus.ru (by Vasily Maximov):





And this activist was collecting money to aid political prisoners (photo by Anton Tushin):



Check out the Ridus site for more.

2:48 p.m., Nationalists Arrested Near Kievskaya Metro: A group of nationalists that left the rally has headed toward Kievskaya metro station. After about 60 activists walked down Kutuzovsky Prospect shouting slogans, police promptly arrived and arrested most of the group, Novaya Gazeta reported. Police are now patrolling the main square near the metro station.

2:45 p.m., Sobchak Lists Reform Priorities; Udaltsov Says He's Not Leaving: Opposition figures are offering ideas for the path they think the opposition movement should take. Kseniya Sobchak said, "We should quickly establish our 'for' — for judicial reform, social improvements for youth, free media, and comprehensive political reform," Interfax reported.

Sergei Udaltsov said that there is an imposter in the Kremlin, that the For Honest Elections campaign has not ended, and that now it is a campaign "for honest government without crooks, thieves and impostors." He also called on opposition-minded citizens to gather a "Million-Person March" before May 7, the day Vladimir Putin is scheduled to be inaugurated as president. He said he doesn't intend to depart from the rally site immediately after it ends. Udaltsov, along with a few hundred demonstrators and opposition leaders, refused to leave Pushkin Square after a rally there Monday and were detained by police.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who is not scheduled to speak at the rally today, wrote on Twitter, "Udaltsov fired things up perfectly."

2:28 p.m., Demonstrators Line Up for Donuts: The Times correspondent in Moscow Tony Halpin tweeted: "Cafes on Novy Arbat doing a roaring trade — never seen such a long line for Dunkin Donuts."

2:21 p.m., 10,000 or 50,000? Police said attendance has reached 10,000 at the rally, while speakers on stage have announced varying numbers, ranging from 25,000 to 50,000.

Pro-Kremlin bloggers are seizing on the differing estimates in their Twitter posts, with one, @politrash, comparing the speakers' count to the opposition's accusations against elections chief Vladimir Churov of having mis-tallied votes in the recent presidential and parliamentary elections: "[Parliamentarian Gennady] Gudkov says that police counted 5,000, though there are '10 times more.' And these people talk about Churov."

New Yorker journalist Julia Ioffe tweeted: "Amazing that, these days, this qualifies as a small crowd."

2:10 p.m., View From Above: News site Ridus.ru has posted a photo taken by blogger Ilya Varlamov across the street from the rally:



2:05 p.m., Nationalists Leaving in Protest: A large group of nationalists are leaving the rally. "Today it has finally become clear that the liberals have blown the protest. We are taking our people away from here and are not planning to participate further," nationalist leader Dmitry Demushkin told Interfax. This also comes after police asked nationalists to roll up an oversized banner of the imperial flag.

Novaya Gazeta reported that 500 nationalist activists are leaving the rally as an act of protest, saying that the opposition organizers are all Jews.

2:01 p.m., Comments From Golos Head, Sobchak: Journalist Glenn Kates tweeted about remarks by Kseniya Sobchak, the media personality and now opposition rally fixture whom the crowd has not always greeted politely: "When Sobchak spoke still plenty of hissing, but also applause. Said movement has said what it's against now must say what it's for."

Kommersant-FM reporter Nikita Batalov quotes election watchdog Golos head Grigory Melkonyants on Twitter: "'There were enough observers only in Moscow, it was here that the results were close to reality. In fact, a second round [of voting in the presidential election] was 100%.'"

1:56 p.m., Traffic Problems on Novy Arbat: As the rally grows, it is starting to affect the flow of traffic on Novy Arbat. Cars heading toward the city center are slowing down and honking in support of the protesters and waving to them, Interfax reported.

Police said the rally now has 8,000 participants. In regard to Udaltsov's statement that 30,000 protesters have gathered at the rally, the police press service said the opposition activist likely has "quadruple vision," Intefax reported.

1:54 p.m., View From the Stage: Blogger and Blue Buckets activist Peter Shkumatov is on the

stage at the rally and posted this photo on his Twitter account:



1:40 p.m., Speakers Talk Demands, Election Fraudsters: Vladimir Ryzhkov opened the rally by saying, "The main thing we said at Pushkin Square and will repeat here: neither [the parliamentary] election nor the [presidential] election was honest and free," Interfax reported. He went on to note that the demands of protesters have not been addressed by authorities.

Actor and director Maxim Vitorgan talked about violations during the election and about participants of carousels (the vote fraud schemes in which voters cast ballots at multiple polling places): "These are not enemies, these are our fellow citizens, who turned out to be weaker than us... we should be patient and stubborn, we should talk and persuade them to expand the borders of their personal influence."

1:32 p.m., Support for Pussy Riot: Moscow Times journalist Kevin O'Flynn is reporting from the scene: "People have had a few days to create things, and there's a lot more creative signs than on Monday. One demonstrator is holding the top half of a bare, white, female mannequin that on the front says 'Femen'" — the name of the Ukraine-based feminist group known for their nude rallies — "and 'Free Pussy Riot' on the back. There are quite a few placards with messages about Pussy Riot," the all-female punk band, two of whose members have been jailed on suspicion of hooliganism for an unsanctioned concert in Christ the Savior Cathedral last month. "There are people still coming in now, so it's still early to say how many people will show. People in the apartment building across the street must have sold out their balconies — they're full of photographers."

1:22 p.m., Police Say 3,000 in Attendance, Provocations Planned: Police said 3,000 demonstrators have come to the rally so far, Kommersant-FM reported. Police also said they have information about provocations planned after the rally, including lighting fires, blocking roads and erecting tent cities, Interfax reported. After the previous opposition event, at Pushkin Square, hundreds of demonstrators were detained after refusing to leave the rally area after the scheduled end time. Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov threatened to remain

there “until Putin left.” He was arrested, along with opposition leaders Alexei Navalny and Ilya Yashin, all of whom were later released.

1:09 p.m., Rally Has Begun; Udaltsov Says 10,000 in Attendance: The rally has begun. Udaltsov announced, “Right now along the whole length of Novy Arbat, from the metal detectors to the stage, there are no less than 10,000 people,” Interfax reported. The main slogan being heard at the rally is, “This is not an election — this is not a president.”

1:06 p.m., Stage Erected; Opposition Groups Arriving: Interfax is reporting on the preparations that have been made for the latest major sanctioned rally, the fifth in the last three months. A stage has been erected, some businesses are closing for the rally — Novy Arbat is lined with restaurants and shopping malls — and metal detectors and large numbers of police are guarding the entrance to the rally area. Ambulances are also standing ready at the scene.

Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov has arrived, as have nationalists carrying imperial flags (yellow, black and white), members of the Yabloko party, activists from the Solidarity movement, the Communist Party, and members of other organizations.

12:58 p.m., 3,000 to 5,000 People in Attendance So Far: Blogger and photographer Ilya Varlamov and Lenta.ru journalist Ilya Azar tweeted a few minutes ago that the crowd is no more than 3,000 to 5,000 people, much fewer than have attended past rallies. The most recent event, at Pushkin Square, drew about 15,000, and the one before that, a march on Bolshaya Yakimanka, drew as many as 100,000 participants. Commentators said in recent days that they expected today's event to draw fewer people.

12:52 p.m., Sparse Crowd, Dylan Soundtrack, 'Robocop': Kommersant-FM journalist Alexey Vorobiev tweeted that the crowd was sparse at about 12:30 p.m.

AFP journalist Maria Antonova, who is tweeting from the rally, says on her microblog: “Strange soundtrack for the rally consisting of Dylan and annoying Arbat infomercials.”

Moscow Times journalist Kevin O'Flynn took this shot of a demonstrator dressed as a “robocop,” the term that some opposition demonstrators adopted for members of the OMON riot police, apparently because of their oversized helmets with visors. (Another term that has been used is “cosmonaut.”)



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