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Police Using Sledgehammers to Crack Nuts

By Andrei Soldatov

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The March 5 protest rally on Pushkin Square revealed how government security forces were unprepared to respond properly to what should have been a very predictable situation.

The 55th Division of OMON riot police, heavily equipped with helmets, body armor, batons and shields was on hand to ensure order at the rally. This stood in sharp contrast to the lightly equipped force of mostly cadets deployed to keep the peace at previous anti-Putin rallies on Prospekt Sakharova and Bolshaya Yakimanka.

According to the Moscow police, about 12,000 police officers, Interior Ministry troops and auxiliary guards were deployed to maintain order on March 5. Officers also monitored the crowd from helicopters and atop a nearby construction crane. In addition, convoys of trucks and snowplows were brought in to block off adjacent streets. Far more equipment and force was deployed than necessary.

The lack of preparedness by the police immediately became apparent when they set up metal detectors in such a way that large bottlenecks of people formed waiting to enter the square. For some reason, individual officers wearing full riot gear were interspersed among the crowd. Had the mob turned violent, the officers would have been unable to respond quickly or appropriately. What's more, the number of demonstrators was well within the limit of 10,000 that organizers and city authorities had agreed to, providing no excuse for the lack of professionalism demonstrated by operational headquarters.

Soon after the rally began, a group of pro-government demonstrators crossed the perimeter and shouted provocative slogans. But they quit after opposition protesters threw snowballs at them and took away their posters. The Interior Ministry troops failed to intervene quickly enough and were unable to effectively separate the two groups holding opposing views.

At the conclusion of the protest rally, the participants divided into three groups. As the largest attempted to quietly leave the square for the nearest metro station, they were again forced into a crush of bodies when the police provided only a narrow corridor for their exit. Security forces let a second group leave unmolested to march along Tverskaya Ulitsa.

Meanwhile, the third and smallest group decided to remain on Pushkin Square. That group was the least threatening and presented the simplest logistical challenge because it was neither coming nor going, but stationary. Neutralizing that group did not require mobility, a quick response or additional troops. Nevertheless, officers used excessive force in making a number of detentions: protesters were beaten with billy clubs, some were dragged along the ground and activist Alyona Popova's arm was broken.

The mishandling of Monday's protest demonstrated the unprofessionalism of the riot police and its operational headquarters. These troops were supposed to have received extensive training on how to maintain order at large-scale events and to detain people without causing injury — even when protesters use ordinary objects such as stones, pieces of metal or other things to resist. The OMON officers on Pushkin Square arrested a stationary group of individuals offering no resistance and still inflicted injury on them.

Apparently, the authorities either fail to see these shortcomings in the police's work, or else they consider it an acceptable level of violence. In fact, President-elect Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov was quick to declare that the police had "shown a high level of professionalism" during the rally.

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