

# Smaller Crowd Answers Call to Rally

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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With Vladimir Putin's re-election secured, opposition leaders are trying to decide what they want to do as an encore to Sunday's rally on Novy Arbat. **Vladimir Filonov**

The opposition movement appeared to stumble Saturday as a relatively paltry number of protesters showed up to protest Vladimir Putin's landslide election victory last week.

The rally, which drew between 10,000 and 25,000, also revealed a lack of consensus about how the movement should proceed in pressing its demands for democratic reform, with some leaders calling for continued street protests while others spoke of a hiatus on demonstrations.

Veteran opposition leaders by and large ceded the microphone to election monitors and a group of newly minted municipal council deputies, whose election victory was seen as a concrete achievement for a movement desperate for good news after Sunday's presidential vote.

Unlike Monday's protest on Pushkin Square, which saw hundreds detained, Saturday's rally went by without significant confrontations with riot police, who were out in large numbers.



Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov was detained after he and about 60 supporters set off for Pushkin Square on foot.

The event drew significantly fewer demonstrators than rallies in December and February, which the opposition estimates attracted more than 100,000.

Opposition activists blamed Saturday's relatively low turnout on fatigue linked to Putin's crushing election victory, but they insisted that the smaller crowd did not reflect the strength of the opposition.

"After Putin's victory, people are depressed," said Leo Zisser, 21, a student.

Zisser said the low turnout represented a failure for opposition leaders.

"I'm afraid we're doomed to six more years of Putin," he said.

According to official results, Putin won 64 percent of the vote, trouncing his perennial nearest competitor, Communist Gennady Zyuganov.

"Just because some people didn't show up, it doesn't mean that they're not supporters," said Lyubov Razgonyeva, 37, a waitress.

Some opposition leaders said the rallies, which began as a protest against the results of State Duma elections widely believed to be rigged, would go on hiatus until the spring, when the opposition would try to stage a massive demonstration against Putin's May 7 inauguration.

Gennady Gudkov, a senior State Duma deputy and protest leader, told The Moscow Times at the start of the rally that organizers "will pause" and wait till the weather warms up before staging the next rally.

"People will rest, ... regroup and change slogans," Gudkov said, adding that the movement had not "run out of steam."

"I think there will be a pause after this," said Leonid Parfyonov, a well-known TV host and co-founder of the League of Voters, a grassroots pro-democracy group founded in December.

But Udaltsov gave no hint that the movement would take a breather. He told the crowd that the protest movement had entered a new stage.

"It's no longer 'For honest elections.' Now it's 'For honest, legitimate government,'" he said.

Udaltsov led the crowd in chanting "Putin is a thief" and predicted that in May, 1 million people would protest Putin's inauguration by taking to the streets and refusing to leave.

He was detained by police after he and about 60 followers set off for Pushkin Square on foot.

"Let's gather on Pushkin Square every Saturday at 2 p.m. without any permission slips," he told supporters in front of the historic Khudozhestvenny movie theater, Interfax reported.



Anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, who is perhaps the most popular opposition leader, attended the event but did not speak.

Perhaps the loudest cheers were reserved for several opposition-minded young people who won seats on Moscow municipal councils Sunday.

While the councils are weak compared with City Hall, the election of Maxim Katz, 27, and others gave the opposition some reason for hope.

"They told me I wouldn't win, that voters wouldn't understand me, that I had to change my name and haircut," Katz, a former poker player, said in reference to his shoulder-length black hair and Jewish last name.

Solidarity activist Konstantin Yankauskas, who also won a seat on one of the municipal councils, said he believed that opposition activists' participation in elections at all levels was just as important as their street protests.

Opposition leaders "showed that the protest movement hadn't shrunk but rather enlarged," he said, pointing to the presence of fresh faces on the stage as evidence.

Yankauskas said opposition activists must seek new City Duma elections ahead of schedule and the reinstatement of direct mayoral elections.

Protesters interviewed by The Moscow Times said they weren't sure what the next step would be, but said they would continue to participate in the opposition.

"On the one hand, lots of people still came out, and that's obviously positive. But there's a real sense of 'What's next?'" said Vladimir Katz, a 32-year-old manager who had served as an election observer.

He took a decidedly long-term view.

"In France, it took 80 years after the first steps toward democracy in the revolution before they reached real republican democracy," he said. "If you count from 1991, we've got about 60 years to go. So this doesn't happen overnight."

Vadim Lebedev, 39, said he attended the rally to protest dishonest public officials.

"They say we have good social programs. They lie!" he said, adding that the government has broken multiple promises to support families with children.

"The difference is that these people came honestly," he said.

He said his co-workers at the state-owned Vorbyovy Gory Eco-Center had been threatened, paid 2,000 rubles (\$68) and given a day off in exchange for attending a Putin victory rally on Manezh Square on March 4.

The optimism that was mustered, though, was tempered by uncertainty about the movement's future.

"I don't know what's next," said Grigory Zaichenko, 61, a pensioner. "Maybe there'll be one



more rally. Then it will probably quiet down for a year, maybe two. After that, who knows?"

Staff writer Roland Oliphant contributed to this report.

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