

City Officials Hint At Reining In Rallies

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Opposition leaders fear that City Hall is working to make it more difficult to organize large street rallies, following an unprecedented wave of protests that have attracted tens of thousands.

The alarm comes after city officials publicly complained about the costs and inconveniences associated with the events, raising the possibility that the laws regulating them could be altered.

The complaints appeared in several news reports on the heels of Saturday's poorly attended protest against the results of the March 4 presidential election, which has caused opposition leaders to put off future rallies until the spring.

Deputy Mayor Pyotr Biryukov wrote in a report to Mayor Sergei Sobyenin that recent demonstrations have hampered city utilities and emergency services, slowing response times and costing the government millions of rubles, Kommersant reported Monday.

Biryukov's report cites opposition rallies this month on Pushkin Square and Novy Arbat, and a massive pro-Putin rally on Feb. 23, and quoted the city gas utility as saying future demonstrations could lead to "various kinds of accidents" with "severe consequences."

Duma Deputy and opposition leader Gennady Gudkov said City Hall could use the report as a pretense for banning future opposition protests.

"If they want to throw up obstacles for us, they will," he said.

Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the liberal-leaning Yabloko party, called the report "nonsense" and an attempt to "curry favor," Izvestia [reported](#) Monday.

There are no mass protests planned for the immediate future. Some opposition leaders have promised to hold a million-person rally in May to protest President-elect Vladimir Putin's inauguration.

In a separate news report, a "high-ranking" city official told Interfax that the city might explore amendments to the laws regulating street protests.

"Perhaps the time has come to think about amending the law," the official said, citing complaints from local residents that the events "disrupt the normal rhythm of life in the city, interfere with transportation and harm local businesses."

Opposition leader Vladimir Ryzhkov said those comments were part of an attempt to violate Russians' constitutional rights and warned that a rally ban would have the opposite effect.

"People will attend demonstrations regardless. This will only exacerbate the situation," he said, Interfax reported.

Political analyst Pavel Salin speculated that the comments by city officials were an attempt to gauge public reaction to a possible crackdown as well as a sign of conflict between hardliners and pragmatists within the government.

"Hardliners think that a crackdown is the only way to stop the government from losing control, like it did in 1991," Salin said.

Utility price hikes scheduled for July could cause opposition ranks to swell, he said, which hardliners emboldened by Putin's overwhelming victory would be eager to contain.

"I'm afraid that a crackdown is inevitable," he said.

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