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NTV Film Provokes Opposition Fury

By Alexandra Odynova

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Opposition activists laying flowers and cookies at NTV's offices at Ostankino on Sunday over a film that said they took money and cookies to protest. **Sergey Ponomarev**

Dozens of people were detained over the weekend in a series of Moscow protests fueled by a pro-Kremlin documentary on state-run NTV television that suggested protesters have been paid to take part in opposition rallies.

Hundreds of angry people rallied outside Moscow's Ostankino television tower on Sunday, with police detaining about 100.

The quick and unsanctioned demonstration was spurred by the 36-minute NTV documentary titled "Anatomy of Protest," which premiered on the channel on Thursday night and was rebroadcast during primetime Sunday. The program claims that key opposition rally organizers had to hire people to participate during the unprecedented recent demonstrations of tens of thousands of people that have called for fair elections and the resignation of President-elect Vladimir Putin.

Some 1,000 people came to the Ostankino tower on Sunday, and about 100 were detained, Gazeta.ru reported. The anti-NTV rally also attracted some pro-Kremlin youth activists, who rallied against the opposition.

Many of the opposition activists brought cookies and posters reading, "NTV Lies" — a reference to a claim in the documentary that the protesters were "driven by hearts, money or cookies." Some also placed flowers in front of Ostankino in a mock funeral for the channel, which is part of the state-controlled Gazprom-Media holding.

Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov was among those detained, Udaltsov's wife wrote on Twitter. Udaltsov was only freed on Friday after a Moscow court reversed a ruling on his 10-day arrest for participating in another unsanctioned rally.

"I brought cookies for NTV journalists to pay back 'the debt,'" Udaltsov told RIA-Novosti after his detention. He was taken into police custody with the cookies and released later in the day.

Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was also detained, Gazeta.ru reported.

On Saturday, a smaller protest was held on Ploshchad Revolyutsii, near the Kremlin walls, by activists demonstrating against the arrest of fellow activist and environmentalist Suren Gazaryan in the Krasnodar region. It wasn't sanctioned, and more than 20 people were detained.

Separately, some 300 people rallied on Pushkin Square on Saturday, in part to protest the NTV documentary.

The gathering — which was billed as a meeting with State Duma Deputies Gennady and Dmitry Gudkov of A Just Russia to avoid a police crackdown — was initially called to protest last week's arrest of Udaltsov and imprisonment of businessman Alexei Kozlov. His five-year sentence, handed down Thursday, is widely seen as revenge for the protest activities of his wife, prominent journalist Olga Romanova.

But the NTV documentary sparked a new wave of discontent, making it another point of contention for protesters. Police said two people were detained for chanting slogans, which is not allowed at unauthorized rallies.

Demonstrators at recent pro-Putin rallies have told The Moscow Times that they were paid to attend.

NTV entered the top 10 worldwide trends on Twitter on Thursday evening, after drawing the ire of bloggers who slammed the channel for airing the documentary.

The broadcast also speculated that the demonstrations were funded by the United States to undermine the rule of Putin, who won the presidency with a large margin on March 4.

After the program aired, bloggers took to LiveJournal and Twitter en masse, with the hashtag "NTVlzhyot," or "NTV lies," becoming one of the top trending topics on Twitter.

"NTV, what kind of professional journalists are you? Lies, nonsense," Twitter user

@Dimich_O wrote.

Pro-Kremlin bloggers snapped back that the program had simply exposed rally organizers.

"Watched the sensational NTV program that I appeared in myself. Very cute: [U.S. Ambassador Michael] McFaul's liberals and office workers are outraged that they were caught red-handed," tweeted Putin-friendly blogger and author Eduard Bagirov.

Valery Fadeyev, editor-in-chief of Expert magazine, who was interviewed for the film, said his quotes were used out of context. "I gave NTV commentary for an analytical program, not for propaganda," Fadeyev said. He pledged not to speak to NTV journalists again, while the magazine's parent company, Expert holding, announced that it would not work with the channel.

A former co-chairman of the Right Cause party, Boris Nadezhdin, wrote in his blog Sunday that he had filed a defamation lawsuit against NTV and called on more people to follow his lead. He said he felt libeled because the documentary uses the word "opposition" to describe the leaders of the protests without specifying their names, and he considers himself to be an opposition leader.

NTV is notorious for its political documentaries, which have included mudslinging at Golos, the country's only independent elections watchdog, ahead of December's Duma elections, a show suggesting that Washington was attempting to influence Russia's political situation, and previous programs criticizing former Mayor Yury Luzhkov and Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny declared that the protest group behind the recent rallies, For Fair Elections, will no longer work with City Hall in planning anti-government protests, Kommersant reported Friday. "I no longer see any point in discussions with the mayor's office," he said.

Navalny, Udaltsov and several other opposition activists earlier voiced their readiness for more radical steps in their protests, even though they would face a harsh reaction from the authorities.

At the Pushkin Square rally on Saturday, the opposition decided that the next mass rally, dubbed "March of a Million," will be held on May 6 in Moscow.

Outside of Moscow, a police crackdown is spreading on opposition protests. Nine participants of an unauthorized march against vote fraud in Nizhny Novgorod on March 10 have been sentenced to between one and 10 days in jail, and a 10th was fined 1,000 rubles ($34), the Novy Region news agency reported Friday.

City authorities refused permission for the rally on the grounds that organizers had only submitted their request on Feb. 29 — which officials said was nine days before the rally, one day short of the 10 days required by law.

About 200 people gathered for the March 10 rally, and about 100 attempted a march, rally organizer Nizhny Novgorod Civil Council said in its blog.

The Civil Council blog accused police of beating one 47-year-old participant "with their hands and feet," causing him a grave concussion. He remained hospitalized and was "hardly" able to speak Thursday.

Police detained 85 participants, and about 30 of them spent the night in cells and in buses in front of the courthouse the next day, the group said in its blog. The detainees were not given any food or water and were only allowed to use the bathroom once during the day, the site said.

Many participants were detained on procedural violations, and the court did not count the 33 hours that they had already spent in detention toward their sentences, Novy Region reported.

Max de Haldevang, and Ezekiel Pfeifer contributed to this report.

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