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Astrakhan Steals Protests' Thunder

By Alexandra Odynova

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ASTRAKHAN — This weekend marked the moment when the post-election opposition movement reached provincial Russia.

Thousands of people rallied in the southern city of Astrakhan on Saturday to support Oleg Shein, the A Just Russia mayoral candidate who has been on hunger strike since March 16 over purported fraud in the recent mayoral election.

"Today Astrakhan has united the hearts of all people who want to live in freedom," Shein told an unprecedented crowd of at least 3,000 people in a local park.

Clinging to a loudspeaker with skinny, wax-colored fingers, Shein led the motley crew of demonstrators from across Russia in chanting opposition slogans and urging a fair election.

The mood in the Astrakhan park recaptured a spirit that has been fading in Moscow after the March 4 presidential election won by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Shein officially

garnered only 30 percent of the vote, losing to United Russia's candidate, Mikhail Stolyarov, with 60 percent. But Shein insists that the mayoral election, held the same day as the presidential vote, was rigged and has demanded a new poll.

Boris Khaikin, 73, a local who regularly attends opposition rallies and has known Shein for several years, said Saturday's event represented the first time so many people had gathered here to voice their discontent. Looking at the park covered with people, he estimated that about 5,000 had come.

"Shein is now a politician on a global level," Khaikin said in an interview.

Yet the protest was minuscule compared to the Moscow winter gatherings that drew tens of thousands of people. But for a city like Astrakhan, with a population of about 500,000, it was something new.

"There have never been so many people on the street," Shein said after the rally.

Police, notorious for underestimating crowd sizes at opposition events, later put the number of people at 350.

The Astrakhan protest appeared less creative and colorful than those in Moscow, and only a few people carried posters. But many had white ribbons — the symbol of the post-election opposition movement that denotes a desire for clean elections.

More than a dozen State Duma deputies with A Just Russia, including party leader Sergei Mironov, flew from Moscow for the protest and wore T-shirts with Shein's portrait reading, "Oleg, we are with you."

On Friday, an unidentified law enforcement official told Interfax that U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul would also fly to Astrakhan with 300 activists. Interfax later quoted the U.S. Embassy as denying the report.

Instead, Astrakhan's rally attracted popular newsmakers such as anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny and television host Ksenia Sobchak. They were joined by hundreds of people from other cities who wanted to show their support.

"With his comrades, Oleg Shein did something almost impossible — he made all of Russia learn about the lawlessness unfolding in Astrakhan," Mironov told the crowd.

Albina Raskolnikova, a 23-year-old resident of Samara, said she alone had helped about 100 people reach the rally from a dozen cities, including Ulyanovsk, Ufa, Yekaterinburg, Volgograd, Cheboksary and Surgut. "There were people who wanted to support the movement but couldn't come, so they donated money for others who needed it to get here," she said in an interview at the rally. "We helped them find one another."

For many out-of-town demonstrators, it took more than a day of driving to get to Astrakhan. Others took the train or flew.

Raskolnikova, with a button for tycoon and former presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov pinned to her jacket, said it was Sobchak who had helped to buy tickets, while Prokhorov did

not reply to her request for assistance.

On Saturday morning, pro-Kremlin authorities staged an "anti-Shein" rally in support of the victorious United Russia candidate, Stolyarov, on a central square. Police said some 5,000 people attended the rally. A Moscow Times reporter was barred from entering the site by the police on the pretext that she didn't have "proper accreditation."

Local bloggers and residents said the crowd consisted of state employees and students bussed in or ordered to take part in the demonstration. Several opposition activists were detained for bringing white balloons and starting a brawl, RIA-Novosti reported. Six other people were detained for handing out leaflets about Saturday's opposition rally.

When the pro-Shein rally was about to start in the same square, the police blocked the way to the venue, and Duma deputies and opposition leaders moved the gathering to a neighboring park. Later on, demonstrators staged an unsanctioned march along the nearby local Kremlin, interrupting traffic.

Several protesters led by Just Russia Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov split off from the march and tried to make their way to City Hall to set up a tent. At least seven people were detained in a subsequent clash with the police that resulted in the officers firing tear gas.

As a result of the clash, the main march was cut short and moved backward to Shein's headquarters. Dozens of people stayed on the street until darkness fell. Streetlights initially came on but then were turned off —a common practice by the authorities in recent days and meant to keep protesters off the street, Shein said.

All the detained have been released, Navalny announced late Saturday.

The main rally was organized as a gathering between lawmakers and citizens and therefore did not require authorization from the authorities. But the march went beyond that mandate and might cost Shein a fine.

Separately, hundreds of people protested in central Moscow in a show of solidarity with Shein. More pickets were held in several European cities, including Paris and Rotterdam.

Shein said he would travel to Moscow on Monday to discuss with Central Elections Commission chief Vladimir Churov a series of video recordings made in polling stations during the mayoral vote.

But he faces an uphill task after elections commission deputy chairman Leonid Ivlev said Friday that YouTube footage showing apparent falsifications "were edited," Interfax reported.

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