

Tear Gas and Twin Rallies Divide Astrakhan

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A rally in support of Oleg Shein **Alexandra Odynova**

Two rallies shook downtown Astrakhan over the weekend as demonstrators took to the streets to support opposing candidates sparring over the contentious mayoral race that has garnered national attention after a month-long hunger strike.

A rally in support of the victor in the Astrakhan mayoral race, United Russia candidate Mikhail Stolyarov, was attended by more than 5,500 people Saturday, police said, Vedomosti reported.

Activists spoke to people with red and blue balloons from a stage constructed for the event in support of Stolyarov, who won 60 percent of the vote. At least 10 people were arrested for starting fights or handing out flyers.

A Just Russia mayoral candidate Oleg Shein, who won only 30 percent of the vote, has been holding a hunger strike since March 16 to protest the results of the election and has found growing support among opposition figures from around the country. Shein says massive fraud marred the results of the election.

A group of demonstrators held a rally in support of Shein Saturday and later tried to make their way to City Hall, but were prevented by police, who used tear gas while making arrests, Kommersant said. At least seven people were detained, police told the newspaper. Police put the number of participants in the rally at 400 people, though organizers said 10 times that number participated, RIA-Novosti said.

At the beginning of the rally, A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov, who arrived from Moscow early Thursday to support Shein, called for the former candidate to cease his hunger strike and said it was necessary to call for a referendum on confidence in Stolyarov.

"If the majority of citizens of Astrakhan say they are confident in the leader, then that's it — the question is settled," Mironov said. "If not, then this will be the basis for holding another election," he said, RIA-Novosti reported.

With Mironov's help, Central Election Commission head Vladimir Churov agreed to review footage from web cameras taken at election polling locations, which earned a sip of juice from Shein in a softening of his hunger strike in appreciation Thursday.

Shein said earlier that the videos would partially help to prove significant voting fraud during the election. But comments from election commission officials make the impact of the tapes unclear.

"These videos are currently available on YouTube, and by the evaluation of specialists, there are several signs that scenes have been spliced together or altered," deputy head of the Central Election Commission Leonid Ivlev said, Interfax reported. He also noted that these videos do not match those taken from the web cameras.

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