

Chased by Police, Protesters Try to Keep a Round-the-Clock Vigil

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Protesters walking in a park near Kitai Gorod metro station, near the monument to Saints Cyril and Methodius, toward Ilinka Ploshchad, around 4:15 a.m. Tuesday. **Howard Amos**

A long day of wandering Moscow's streets for a place to protest turned into an even longer night as hundreds of demonstrators led by anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny and leftist activist Sergei Udaltsov attempted to kick-start a nonstop protest.

Anti-government demonstrators did not stage a sit-in or an occupation but a strange hybrid, moving from place to place in central Moscow and followed constantly by huge trucks filled with riot police — a familiar sight in the city since a mass protest Sunday at Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

"We call on people to come and meet us here," Navalny, speaking a few hours after being released Tuesday morning from his second detention in as many days, told a crowd of a few dozen people on Chistoprudny Bulvar. "We will be here for however long is possible

and however long is needed."

Numbers remained small, however, with no more than 500 protesters during the night and not much more than 200 on Tuesday. The latest round of protests started on the eve of President Vladimir Putin's inauguration to a third term on Monday.

"We call on people in other cities to go to [public] squares," said Left Front leader Udaltsov, who together with Navalny has taken control of the wandering group.

Having been pushed from place to place all Monday, the demonstrators were called to the Kitai Gorod neighborhood in the late evening and joined there by Navalny and Udaltsov, released from jail that afternoon. Surprisingly, police allowed the group to settle on a square around a 19th-century chapel dedicated to heroes of Plevna, a town in Bulgaria that was the site of a key battle in the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-78. Although they were on the square near Kitai Gorod metro, the protesters used the rallying cry of "Occupy Old Square," referring to the adjacent Staraya Ploshchad, where the presidential administration is located.

Navalny's message for the rest of the night was "We are walking," using the Russian verb "gulyat," which implies a festive activity. He told protesters to get up and leave if police moved in, as they did on a number of occasions throughout the night.

Police tactics varied from a welcoming attitude to cunning, if obvious, bureaucratic intervention: Just as some demonstrators settled down to sleep around 2:30 a.m., they were forced to move as water trucks arrived to clean the square, followed by the police.

Before then, a local police colonel, Oleg Sigunov, wandered cheerfully among protesters, standing and listening to them sing songs in English and tapping his foot. The feeling in the square was of a small music festival.

"I give the orders here, and I don't see any violations," Sigunov said, adding that he was in charge until sunrise. "It's a good atmosphere."

That all changed when the street-cleaning trucks arrived and the police took over the square. Navalny led demonstrators up Ulitsa Maroseyka and Ulitsa Pokrovka and then along Chistoprudny Bulvar to the sound of beeping car horns and the bizarre sight of Dozhd television host Pavel Lobkov riding in a red convertible with the Soviet national anthem blasting from speakers.

Around 500 people, carrying water, camping mats to sleep on and supplies donated via an Internet appeal, migrated to the next venue, this time an area near a statue of a Kazakh poet on Chistoprudny Bulvar. After the return to the boulevard, the "Groundhog Day"-like scene continued: Navalny spoke to the crowd, police caught up and blocked off the boulevard, and the crowd moved on, somewhat depleted and dissipated.

It was a long night, but the atmosphere remained light and committed.

"The cops will drive the protesters away. But they'll gather again," said Pavel Kostamarov, 36, a film director. "It's like water: You have to find the pores, the little streams, the chinks in the armor. Then you soak through and form a big mass in the ocean. When we have an ocean, all the rats will drown."

"I'm very tired," said Asya Tsturyan, 21, who works for the independent Levada Center pollster. "I've been in the thick of this all day. ... When they open the metro and replacements come, I'm going to sleep."

The circle completed itself just past 4 a.m., when the demonstrators ended up back at the square near the Kitai Gorod metro, camping by the chapel.

"Hurray! Moscow night walks with the OMON!" one of the demonstrators cried, using the Russian acronym for the riot police, as the group returned to the square.

Around 300 people made it back to the square, where police detained, once again, Navalny and Udaltsov. But the protesters were allowed to camp out, and by early morning, with the sun beating down, two young women were playing badminton and a game of charades was in full swing in front of the chapel. Somebody had scrawled, "Putin is a thief!" and "Freedom forever" onto the statue's base.

A few minutes later, the police swarmed in, snapping up 10 or so protesters and sending the rest on their peripatetic journey once more.

"The number is not important. It is the participation," said Anton Kasimov, 34, a musician who turned up Tuesday morning. "People are not indifferent to what is happening now, and they are brave enough to come out onto the square. I understood that today it was impossible to sit at home and read the Internet and not take part myself."

About 200 people remained on the square late Tuesday afternoon, even after a downpour drenched the city, and were cheered up by a visit by socialite Ksenia Sobchak.

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