

Big-Name Writers Lead Protest Rally of 10,000

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Author Grigory Chkhartishvili, aka Boris Akunin, center, speaking to a crowd during a writers' march lead by opposition literary activists Sunday. **Maxim Shemetov**

A week after bloody clashes between radical youths and riot police tarnished the first major protest rally in months, the moderate middle-class opposition appeared to re-assert itself Sunday with an unexpectedly large march of thousands led by some of Russia's most prominent writers.

Organizers said about 10,000 marched peacefully from Pushkin Square to Chistiye Prudy, where they merged with a four-day-old open-air camp that has become the headquarters of the fledgling street movement to oust President Vladimir Putin. Police put the number of marchers at 2,000.

Unlike the May 6 rally, police presence was minimal, and there were no reports of violence or detentions.

Prominent opposition-minded writers, including Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Dmitry Bykov, Lev Rubinshtein and crime novelist Grigory Chkhartishvili, who writes under the pseudonym Boris Akunin, took center stage at Sunday's unsanctioned Test March, which doubled as a book-signing event for many.

"It's great that the protest movement is taking various forms and genres, that it's changing and mutating but isn't dying down," said Rubinshtein, a poet. "The fact that so many people showed up is also evidence that literature still carries some weight in our society."

The event was called the Test March to see whether anti-Kremlin activists could walk around freely. Last week, people were detained for just wearing white ribbons — the symbol of the protesters, or for no clear reason at all. "We are now fighting for our right to walk where we want to," satirist Viktor Shenderovich said.

As the crowds walked on Rozhdestvensky Bulvar, which slopes a down hill, cheers began whenever a new group reached the top of the hill. The mass of people on the street was a striking contrast to the empty city on the day of Putin's inauguration.

Mathematician Fyodor, 63, held up an electronic reader with the words, "If you come up against a lie, use it," a quote he attributed to Thomas Carlyle, the 19th-century Scottish writer.

Under a statue of 19th-century poet Alexander Griboyedov, poet Dmitry Bykov recited Griboyedov's verse and collected manuscripts from aspiring authors in a plastic bag.

Marchers said they were appalled by the violence at the May 6 rally and welcomed the authors' march. "It was scary. It seemed like a completely different group from the one that had been going to the rallies," said Ksenia Velembovskaya, 60, editor of an academic journal. "Today, I feel great. These are our people."

Unlike the mass police presence last week, the peaceful march was epitomized by a policeman who stood near the Pushkin Square cinema and shouted at the crowd, "Careful, there are steps ahead!"

Dozens of protesters at the opposition base camp at Chistiye Prudy braved chilly weather and rain on Saturday night, wrapping themselves in blankets under plastic sheets and umbrellas, thereby ensuring the continuation of the nonstop protest that began early last week.

Opposition activists say the government has initiated a propaganda campaign to portray the camp as an unsanitary nuisance, perhaps to build public support for a potentially bloody operation to clear it. On Friday, Channel One broadcast complaints by an elderly "local" who accused the protesters of, among other things, defecating "wherever and however they want."

Protesters denied the charges, and bloggers say they've unmasked the woman, Nina Toporova, as a United Russia loyalist who doesn't live on Chistiye Prudy. Socialite and opposition supporter Ksenia Sobchak raised the possibility of filing libel charges.

Protest leaders also appear to be coming under increasing pressure from the authorities. The authorities are preparing to jail opposition leaders Sergei Udaltsov and Alexei Navalny for two

years, Sobchak tweeted on Saturday night, citing a source close to the Kremlin. She wrote that she hoped the allegation was just a rumor. Both men are currently serving a 15-day prison sentence for disobeying police orders during an opposition rally Tuesday. On Saturday, the Presnensky District Court upheld Navalny's sentence.

Separately, the Investigative Committee opened a preliminary inquiry into allegations that they called for mass riots. Charges, if filed, would carry a punishment of up to three years in prison.

Last week, State Duma Deputy and opposition supporter Dmitry Gudkov said NTV was preparing a documentary on the personal lives of protest leaders. On Sunday, one protester said he saw a group of well-dressed young men handing out money in front of a camera on a street adjacent to Chistiye Prudy.

NTV was roundly criticized by protesters for a previous film that accused them of being paid to attend rallies.

Under the now-familiar statue of Kazakh poet-philosopher Abai Qunanbayuli, a group of newcomers — a much older bunch than those who have occupied the area for the past few days — gathered in a circle singing a mix of Soviet songs, from war ballads to childhood classics. One man played a mouth piano and another accompanied on a harmonica, a direct contrast to the camp's usual mix of young people playing Kino rock songs on an acoustic guitar.

There still appeared to be no consensus on the purpose of the camp at Chistiye Prudy or what should be done next. Activists who frequent the camp and help maintain it appear to have little common ideology aside from their hatred of corruption and Putin, and the camp has not rallied around a single leader or group.

"I wish you could change the political system by playing on the guitar, smiling, wearing white ribbons, and camping out at Chistiye Prudy. But it's a losing proposition," said Mitya Yevseyev, 21, a medical student.

Talk of a split in the opposition between radical and moderate wings has been widespread over the past week. Some have called for more aggressive forms of protest and others for a continuation of the street protests, which began in December, and the gradual appearance of opposition parties and leaders in power.

About a dozen people founded a separate round-the-clock Occupy camp near the Moscow City Court in northeastern Moscow on Friday night. The handful of activists broke from the main camp to demand the release of three purported members of the all-female Pussy Riot punk band who are in custody over a February performance at the Christ the Savior Cathedral. One round-the-clock Occupy camp has been formed at St. Isaac's Square in St. Petersburg, though with fewer people than in Moscow.

Staff writer Alexandra Odynova contributed to this report.

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