

Tensions Rise as Opposition Leaders are Freed

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Navalny walking out of the detention center where he was held for 15 days. **Anton Tushin**

Two of the opposition's most popular leaders emerged from prison Thursday, vowing to ratchet up street demonstrations while a rare, dramatic standoff erupted at a State Duma hearing over a bill that would significantly raise fines for illegal protests.

Sergei Udaltsov and Alexei Navalny, who have electrified the opposition in recent months, struck a defiant tone after 15 days in prison, assuring cheering supporters of eventual victory and announcing vague plans for the future of the protest movement.

"They won't scare us with iron beds and government porridge. If we have to go to prison two more times or 22 more times, we'll do it," Navalny said, adding that he would take part in the next large rally, scheduled for June 12.

Both congratulated opposition activists, who have maintained a small, roving protest camp

despite frequent police raids since shortly after Vladimir Putin's inauguration on May 7.

The two also announced plans for scaling up the protests. Navalny called for activists to prepare for nationwide demonstrations in the beginning of September, while Udaltsov said protesters should stage a continuous protest outside the White House.

Their release came hours before a group of opposition leaders stormed out of an "open forum" debate in a State Duma hearing on Thursday over a proposed bill to increase fines to tens of thousands of dollars for staging and taking part in illegal protests.

The bill narrowly passed the first round on Tuesday and is slated for a second — and possibly a final — reading on June 5.

The group left to protest not being given the floor for about 90 minutes, while pundits and lawmakers loyal to the Kremlin were allowed to defend the fines and even went so far as to accuse the opposition of attempting to mount a coup d'état.

"There is a monologue that for some reason authorities view as a dialogue," noted socialite and prominent anti-government protester, Ksenia Sobchak, said after marching out of the event.

"Although there are [opposition-minded] people who are open to discussion and have come here, all we see is a pack of pundits muttering that opposition is always to blame for everything and citing conspiracy theories," she said.

Sobchak was joined in the walkout by environmentalists Yevgenia Chirikova, Oleg Mitvol, blogger Marina Litvinovich, rally organizer Alyona Popova and A Just Russia Duma Deputy Dmitry Gudkov.

They were followed later by opposition politicians Irina Khakamada, Yabloko party leader Sergei Mitrokhin, Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov and Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

Gudkov complained that it was "wrong" that he wasn't given the floor "as a participant, while various journalists took the floor." He was later given a chance to speak at the end of the discussion after most participants and journalists had left.

"It is impossible to stop the protests by force, but only through dialogue and reforms," Gudkov told the round-table group.

"It is absolutely clear that when there are no reforms and no dialogue, the protest will radicalize. This is not a threat, this is the way life is," he added.

Gudkov said his party planned to "shower the bill with amendments" in order to delay its passing "for weeks."

Following the walkout, political analyst Sergei Chernyakhovsky told the round table that "there can be no dialogue by 80 percent [of the population] with 10 percent [of it.]"

"We have to see why they are doing this," Chernyakhovsky said of the opposition rallies'

organizers. “Their goal is a coup d’etat.”

Oleg Morozov, the senior United Russia Duma deputy who presided over the event, said at end of the discussion — some 40 minutes after the walkout — that the opposition “shouldn’t have left” because they “would have had a chance to speak.”

He defended the order of speakers, citing “traditions” and the need for some participants to leave early.

Current fines for illegal protests are 2,000 rubles (\$65) for participants and 5,000 rubles for organizers. The proposed changes, as they stand, would raise the fine for participants to 1 million rubles (\$32,400) and 1.5 million rubles for organizers.

Morozov and United Russia Deputy Vladimir Pligin, who are both preparing the bill for the second reading, said the proposed fines would have to be reduced from the amounts spelled out in the current draft of the bill.

Morozov said the current figures were “excessive” but said the fines for illegal protests should be “felt” and “mustn’t be laughable.”

Udaltsov and Navalny had been detained and released multiple times during several days of protests before and after President Vladimir Putin’s May 7 inauguration.

The two were sentenced to 15 days in jail each after being arrested on the night of May 8-9 during one of the so-called “people’s strolls” and charged with disobeying police orders.

Another opposition leader, Solidarity’s Ilya Yashin, is scheduled to be released from prison on May 27 after having served a 10-day term.

Udaltsov was released shortly after midnight and Navalny about 10 hours later. After his release, Udaltsov set out for the current location of the roving protest camp, near a statue of Soviet-era bard Bulat Okudzhava on the Arbat, the epicenter of perestroika-era counterculture, where he spoke with those gathered there.

But storm clouds appeared to be gathering over the both men, with fresh official inquiries pending into both their activities that supporters say are politically motivated.

On Friday, Udaltsov is scheduled to appear in court in Ulyanovsk, where a pro-Kremlin youth activist has accused him of assaulting her during a rally in April. He denies the charges.

Navalny’s financing is facing a probe by the FSB and Federal Financial Monitoring Service after a United Russia Duma deputy charged that he might be accepting laundered money sent to the several Yandex.Money accounts he uses to drive his anti-corruption projects.

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