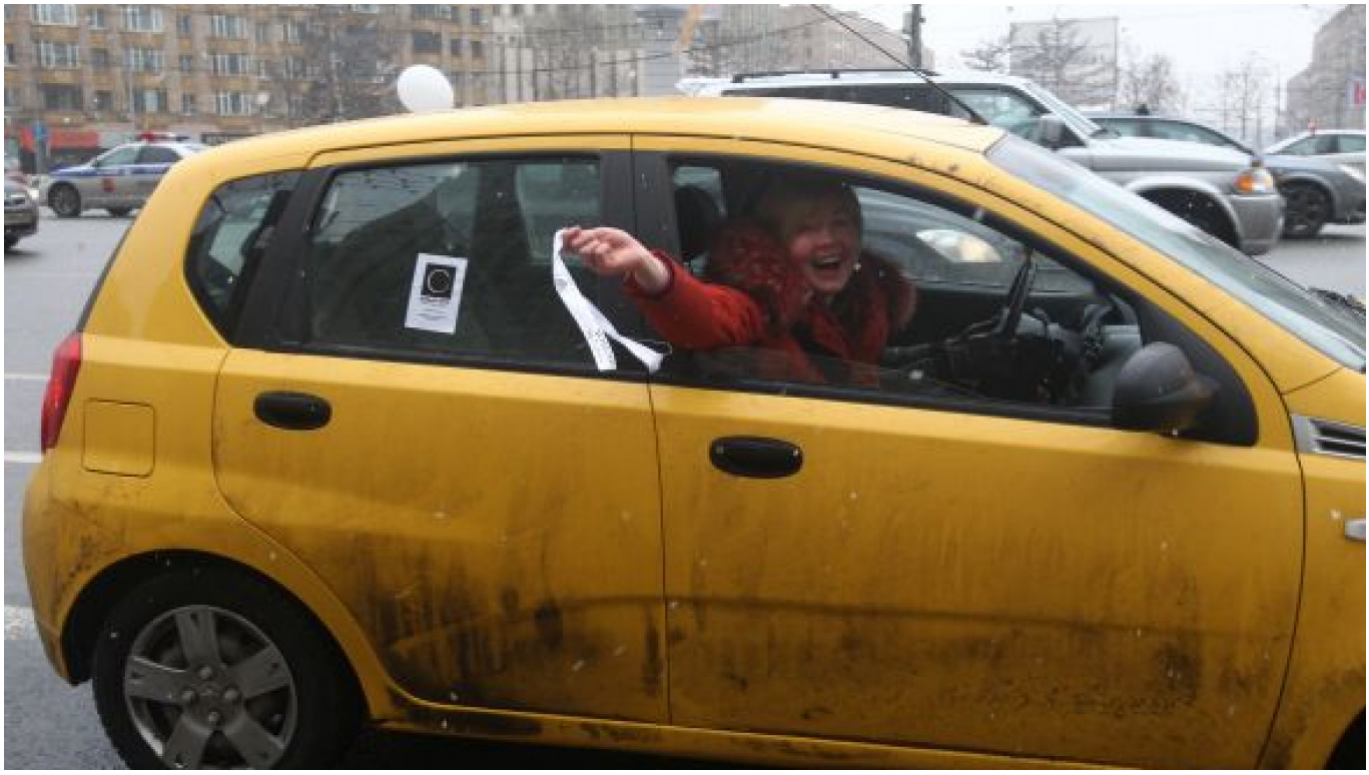
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Opposition Kicks Off Summer Road Rallies

By Jonathan Earle

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An opposition activist waving a white ribbon, a symbol of the protest movement against Putin's rule, at the Big White Circle car rally on the Garden Ring in February.

The opposition has been on the move this summer, with activists shuffling from Pussy Riot pickets in Moscow to electioneering in the Ryazan region to flood relief in the southern city of Krymsk.

On Friday, activists hit the road once again. This time, they hoped to stir up anti-government sentiment along the nation's historic Volga River.

The "White Rally," which takes its name from the white ribbons that have come to symbolize the opposition movement, will see about 25 activists drive from Moscow to Astrakhan and back — more than 3,000 kilometers — stopping in Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Volgograd and other cities to talk politics with locals.

"The purpose of the trip is to empower ordinary people," said activist Semyon Trankovsky, 44, by telephone on Friday as the rally's seven-vehicle convoy idled in traffic between Yaroslavl and Kostroma.

Activists hope the trips will help spur opposition activism beyond the capital, turning what they see as widespread anti-government sentiment into concrete action — larger protests, new civil organizations, fresh candidates for elected office, and renewed calls for reform.

The event is a prelude to a larger auto rally scheduled to begin later this month, when activists plan to drive from Krasnoyarsk, in southern Siberia, to Moscow, arriving in time for the next "March of Millions" opposition assembly on Sept. 15.

Opposition leaders Ilya Ponomaryov, Gennady Gudkov, Boris Nemtsov and Sergei Udaltsov are scheduled to take part in that trip, which is being organized by the March of Millions organizing committee and funded by private donations, White Rally spokeswoman Olga Grigoryeva said.

Trankovsky said the group was politically diverse and included veterans from Moscow's short-lived Occupy movement, as well as a campaign earlier this year to overturn the results of mayoral elections in Astrakhan that the opposition candidate, A Just Russia's Oleg Shein, said were rigged.

In Yaroslavl, the first stop, locals on Friday overwhelmingly welcomed the group with questions and lively conversation, said activist Irina Belacheu, 43, traveling with her 11-year-old daughter.

"I liked how the police reacted. We explained that the Americans sent a robot to Mars for a third of the price of the 48-kilometer Adler-Krasnaya Polyana highway. We reminded them that we were all in this fight together. They listened and accepted our leaflets," she said by telephone.

Asked whether she was afraid to challenge the government so openly, Belacheu, an engineer, repeated what has become a familiar narrative for the country's new crop of middle-class opposition activists.

"When I went to the first Bolotnaya rally [Dec. 10], I was scared. But when I saw the crowds, I realized that we had strength in numbers and ceased to be afraid. The time has come for a person to choose: Either you stay silent, or you act. I've chosen to act, and there's no going back," she said.

Belacheu passed the telephone back to Trankovsky, who said a broken down car was blocking the bridge to Kostroma. He estimated a three-hour wait.

The auto rally is scheduled to arrive in Astrakhan on Aug. 19.

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