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Nationalists Hold Annual Russian March

By Alexander Bratersky

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Nationalists, some waving imperialist yellow-and-black flags, march along a central embankment Sunday. **Igor Tabakov**

Nationalists walked along a downtown embankment Sunday shouting anti-Kremlin slogans in the annual Russian March, which was beset by low turnout and occasionally dangerous antics, including an attempt to shoot at a police helicopter with a flare gun.

The march, which took place on the National Unity Day holiday, saw some 6,000 people representing various nationalist groups, from moderate to far-right, walk along the Moscow River across from the Kremlin waving yellow-black-and-white imperial flags. The event concluded with a rally near the Central House of Artists.

Police detained a group of rally participants who tried to fire a flare gun at a helicopter, news agency RBC reported, citing police. About 25 others wearing black overcoats with swastikas were arrested near metro Tretyakovskaya, near the march's starting point, police said in a statement.

Alexander Belov, the leader of the banned Movement Against Illegal Immigration, was met by applause when he called President Vladimir Putin an "enemy" at the rally.

"He will continue to drink our blood before he is thrown out of the Kremlin," Belov said.

Putin created National Unity Day in 2005, and it replaces commemorations of the Bolshevik Revolution. The holiday now marks a 1612 uprising against Polish invaders that led to their expulsion from the country.

On Sunday, Putin laid flowers at the monument to militia head Kuzma Minin and Prince Dmitry Pozharsky, the leaders of that uprising. The Associated Press reported Sunday that Putin walked slowly but without assistance. Recent media reports have speculated that he has been suffering from debilitating back pain.

Standing alongside Putin were leaders of the biggest religious faiths in the nation — Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist, the presidential press service said.

Nationalist leaders who attended Sunday's march, including Belov, have also participated in opposition rallies, a fact that has unsettled some human rights activists and members of the protest movement.

Last year's Russian March was attended by opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who addressed the crowd on stage. Navalny is known for his "Stop Feeding the Caucasus" slogan, aimed at halting major federal subsidies to the North Caucasus republics.

Navalny was not seen in the crowd at this year's event and did not speak at the rally.

Sunday marked the first time the annual Russian March was held in central Moscow and not in Lyublino, a working-class neighborhood in the capital's southeastern outskirts.

"For us, it was of fundamental importance to get out of the captivity of the bedroom districts," Ivan Mironov, deputy head of Sergei Baburin's All-Russia Union, told website Nakanune.ru on Friday.

But one Russian nationalist who gave his name only as Andrei said he was disappointed by the march because of the low attendance. As many as 10,000 people have attended past events, while this year's drew about 6,000 participants, police said.

"The Russian people are in a state of dormancy. I believe it is because we still have not repented for killing the tsar," he said, referring to the killing of Russia's last tsar, Nicholas II, in 1918 by the Bolsheviks.

Anti-immigrant sentiments were strong among the young participants of the rally, some of whom made Nazi-style salutes as they stood with their shoulders covered by an imperial flag.

"We are against the non-Russians who are occupying Moscow," said one of the teenagers, who said he was a member of a fan club for the Avangard football club. There are large numbers of nationalists among young Russian football fans.

"We can get them away only with a white terror," said another teenager standing nearby.

The presence of the far-right groups at the rally was noted with distaste by leaders of the more moderate nationalist parties, whose members appeared to distance themselves from such groups.

"Those youngsters don't understand anything, and they are led by leaders who don't explain anything to them," said Yevgeny Vasilyev, a member of the Forgotten Regiment organization of former paratroopers.

"People are fed up with hearing about the unification of the Russian race. They want to hear about the unification of every Russian against the regime," Vasilyev said.

According to a recent Levada Center poll, 13 percent of Muscovites said they would support a nationalist party in Moscow City Duma elections scheduled for 2014.

The majority of respondents said the main reason for supporting such a party was dislike of uncontrolled migration from Central Asia and the Caucasus to the capital.

An opposition activist who observed the march complained that police did not react to protesters wearing surgical masks despite a ban on wearing masks of any kind at rallies. The ban has led to the detention of demonstrators at recent opposition rallies.

"Half of the participants were wearing masks! This is a kingdom of double standards. I feel sick," journalist and social activist Karina Melitonyan wrote on her Facebook page Sunday.

Reports of a massive fight at a metro station after the march between nationalists and so-called anti-fascists, who were holding a rally of their own Sunday, were denied by city police. A fight with five participants occurred at metro station Dostoyevskaya, police said, Interfax reported.

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