The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Soul-Searching Starts After Puny Rally

By Jonathan Earle

December 16, 2012



Opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov holding up a sign reading “Russia will be free” in front of a policeman at Saturday’s unsanctioned rally at Lubyanka. **Igor Tabakov**

Hundreds of protesters braved subfreezing temperatures and the threat of detention on Saturday to voice a wide range of grievances against President Vladimir Putin’s government in the first major demonstration to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the street protest movement.

But the event was the smallest major demonstration since mass protests began, a fact that sparked a new round of soul-searching and finger-pointing for a movement that was already struggling to rally disillusioned and distracted sympathizers.

Police estimated the peak number of protesters at 400, while opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov said 5,000 had come and gone from Lubyanskaya Ploshchad, across the street from the former KGB headquarters. Tens of thousands attended a yearlong series of protests sparked by evidence of widespread fraud during State Duma elections in December 2011.

Despite his upbeat assessment, Udaltsov seemed to admit waning interest in street protests, proposing in a Twitter post on Sunday that the next major demonstration take place in the spring.

"We need to persuade people to switch from a spring to a marathon because this fight is going to be long and hard," he said Sunday in separate comments carried by RIA-Novosti.

Udaltsov and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny were quickly detained by police on Saturday. About 40 other activists were detained at the event, which had not been sanctioned by City Hall.

Protesters laid flowers beside the Solovetsky Stone, a monument to the victims of Soviet-era political repression, as a police helicopter buzzed overhead, and the cameras of photographers snapped.

Few slogans were heard until a group formed a circle dance around the stone and chanted familiar denunciations, including "Russia without Putin!" and "Free political prisoners!"

Police officers with megaphones told protesters to disperse, but those who did before police cleared the square appeared to be discouraged primarily by the minus 13 degree Celsius temperature.

Groups of riot police officers made occasional forays into the crowd, which police said was about 40 percent journalists, detaining ostensibly disobedient activists as those nearby shouted "Shame!"

There were no official reports of injuries. A reporter for Ekho Moskvy radio said an officer kicked him three times in the shin, stopping only when the reporter identified himself as a journalist.

Opposition leaders Ksenia Sobchak and Ilya Yashin were among those detained — for being "direct organizers and instigators," police said — but all leaders were quickly released without charges.

The rally was dubbed the "March of Freedom," a reference to a dozen activists in pretrial detention on criminal charges of participating in violent clashes at a protest in May and others whom opposition supporters consider political prisoners.

An elderly woman held one of the few placards, which read, "Free Vladimir Akimenkov, who's going blind in prison." Akimenkov, 25, stands accused of throwing a flag pole at police during the May rally.

Ilya Fainberg, 30, a lawyer, stood near the Solovetsky Stone holding a copy of the Constitution, which he said he had just bought at a nearby bookstore.

"I'm suffering from cognitive dissonance. In the Constitution, it says that people have the right to gather freely. But here, police are detaining people for doing just that," he said.

Alexandra Parena, 42, a homemaker, brought flowers with her husband, Andrei, to lay by the stone. "We're afraid that history will repeat itself," she said, referring to Soviet-era political

crackdowns.

The demonstration was the first major protest to take place without permission from City Hall, after negotiations with organizers about the route and format of the event broke down late last week.

Fear of prosecution under recently harshened laws on unsanctioned public demonstrations appears to have dissuaded some opposition supporters from attending the rally.

Ksenia Andreyeva, a 50-year-old engineer who wore a button that said, "We'll rally again!" said she'd been nervous about coming, but that she'd felt it was her duty to go.

Attendance was important to show "support" for the movement and that "we won't go away," said former lawmaker Gennady Gudkov, who lost his seat in the Duma in September as punishment for supporting the protest movement, he says.

Despite the relatively low turnout, which drew comparisons to pre-December 2011 demonstrations on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad in defense of the freedom of assembly, opposition leaders were publicly upbeat about the event.

"It was freezing outside, it was an unsanctioned event, at which participants were practically guaranteed arrests, detentions and fines, and absolutely guaranteed time in the cold. And nevertheless, lots of people came," Navalny said on Sunday, Interfax reported.

State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov said that holding a peaceful, unsanctioned protest set a "good precedent." He called the flowers he brought a "unifying symbol of opposition to totalitarianism."

But other opposition sympathizers were less complimentary of the decision to hold an unsanctioned protest at a time when opinion polls appear to show waning public enthusiasm for the movement.

"I'm tired of rallying for an idea, even though my conviction about who's right and who's to blame, as well as my opposition spirit, have not diminished at all. It's become obvious to me that the ideologically driven revolution under the banner, 'Russia without Putin,' isn't going to happen," activist and photographer Mitya Aleshkovsky said in a Facebook post.

At a meeting on Sunday, the 45-member opposition Coordination Council appeared to heed Aleshkovsky's and others' demands for more concrete ideas and actions.

Council members approved a document stating that the body's main goal was to realize comprehensive political reforms, including freedom for political prisoners, an end to the "repression" of opposition leaders, rotation in office, reforms of the judiciary and police, Interfax reported.

Staff writer Alexander Winning contributed reporting.

Related articles:

- Taunting and Laughter Fill Opposition Rally
- Investigators Open Criminal Case Against Navalny Brothers
- Forty Detained at Opposition Protest

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/12/16/soul-searching-starts-after-puny-rally-a20214