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Taunting and Laughter Fill Opposition Rally

By Oleg Sukhov

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About 40 people including Udaltsov and Navalny were detained Saturday. **Igor Tabakov**

A circus-like atmosphere pervaded a crowd of protesters who joked about the police, Christian believers and even each other as they marked the first anniversary of opposition protests with an unauthorized rally Saturday on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad.

When a police officer lifted up a loudspeaker and tried to declare, "This rally is unauthorized" shortly after the start of the 3 p.m. event, a noisy crowd of protesters and journalists quickly surrounded him.

The officer looked overwhelmed, perhaps even frightened, by the attention, and stopped in mid-sentence. He tried again, and then again, to make the announcement. But he failed every time as the onlookers loudly laughed and mocked him, engaging in what is known among opposition bloggers as "trolling the police."

Other protesters directed their ridicule to headgear worn by some police officers in the bitter winter cold that resembled the balaclavas worn by supporters of the jailed punk group Pussy Riot.

Others quipped that, given the frosty weather, they wanted to be detained and allowed to board a warm police bus.

When a police helicopter started hovering above the square, the protesters coined the term "vertozak" — a mixture of vertolyot (helicopter) and avtozak (police bus).

Protesters also derided a pro-Kremlin Orthodox activist who shouted, "There is no power but of God!" and read other quotes from the Bible.

Another object of opposition humor was a man dressed as an egg who had played the roles of a tank and a male buttocks at previous rallies. This time he carried a poster reading, "I'm an egg man. I don't attend unauthorized rallies. I'm just taking a walk."

Some protesters and journalists climbed on a small building to have a better view of the square, and police officers repeatedly asked them to get off the structure, arguing that the roof was insecure, even though a part of it consisted of massive stone slabs.

Internet-savvy hipsters with iPads in hand protested side by side with middle-aged people commemorating the victims of the Soviet regime and elderly communists flaunting a nostalgia for the Soviet Union. One communist carried a flag with Lenin's portrait and the slogans, "Long live our great Soviet homeland!" and "To the winner of a socialist competition." Another one held a poster saying that communism was the only fair political system.

Elsewhere, a protester carried an anti-government poster reading, "Crooks, thieves and bandits," while a group of people chanted "Freedom to political prisoners" and "Putin is a thief." But banners were few and far between, and most people did not shout any slogans to avoid a confrontation with the authorities.

Police started rounding up people at the beginning of the rally, but around 4:30 p.m. some protesters formed a human chain to make it more difficult for them to be detained. When the police persisted in their efforts, protesters surrounded them and would not let the officers carry the detainees away. In at least one case the protesters managed to snatch a detainee from the hands of the police — a move that was accompanied by loud cheers and cries of victory.

Following one of the arrests, opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, accompanied by a man in a Santa Claus outfit, led a group of protesters to the police station where some of the detainees had been driven.

When the bulk of the people had left the square by 5 p.m., the police formed chains to split those who remained into several isolated groups and began squeezing them out. A cleaning lady shouted "Go home!" to the protesters as the police pushed them toward the metro. Some people said they wanted to use another means of transportation, but their demands were ignored.

The police then proceeded to squeeze the protesters down a staircase leading to the Lubyanka metro station. But the protesters refused to go into the metro and surged up the stairs once the police had retreated. As the police pushed the crowd down once again, a girl fell and screamed. Another protester shouted, "Behold the stupidity of your regime! This is a circus!"

The police then retreated for the second time and abandoned the square as the activists climbed up the stairs again.

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