

Drinking to a Freer Russia in St. Pete Bar

By [Sergey Chernov](#)

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The banner behind the bar says, "We demand honest and free elections!" **Sergey Chernov**

ST. PETERSBURG — St. Petersburg has plenty of very diverse themed bars, but the new Svoboda (Freedom) Bar stands out. It is a cross between a pub and a protest rally.

Launched earlier this month, it uses banners, opposition flags and other paraphernalia in its interiors, while drinks are served by activists who double as bartenders.

"Putin is a thief," chanted opposition leader and anti-state corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny with the crowd, as "Winter, Go Away," a recent documentary chronicling anti-election fraud protests of the late 2011 and early 2012 was shown on two television screens in the main room, when a reporter visited Svoboda Bar on Sunday.

Sunday's screening gathered only a dozen people, but Moscow opposition leader Ilya Yashin packed the place — with its 70 seats occupied and about 30 standing in the aisles — when he came to speak with St. Petersburg audiences on Saturday.

The club would like to invite the popular Navalny — the only Russian to be named in Time magazine's 2012 list of the world's 100 most influential people — in person, but the activist has been banned from leaving Moscow, being the subject of three criminal investigations opened against him after the protests.

Launched with a huge party on Dec. 7, a year since protests against multiple violations during the Dec. 4, 2011 State Duma elections began, Svoboda Bar is in a way a child of the massive anti-fraud rallies and St. Petersburg's answer to Jean-Jacques and Zavtra, the hangouts for activists and intelligentsia in Moscow.

According to Natalya Gryaznevich, the person in charge of the venue's programs who hosted the meeting with Yashin, the bar is operated by activists from Civic Responsibility, the political movement that emerged in the wake of the anti-fraud protests earlier this year — they work here as bartenders or waiters.

Andrei Pivovarov, a member of the Russian Opposition's Coordination Council, Andrei Davydov of the Young Socialists of Russia, and Civic Responsibility's Daniil Ken and Mikhail Lukyanov invested their own savings into the bar. Pivovarov is in charge of the practical aspects.

"The people who created this bar have never been into business like this, that's why everything is done sporadically, with input coming from those who know how to do these things, and new ideas emerging along the way," Gryaznevich said. "As I see it, our activities will flow smoothly into the activities of the bar, where we will be holding events, meetings and debates."

One of the reasons for establishing an opposition bar was the reluctance of regular bars and clubs to hold politically themed events stemming from fears that they would be shut down by the authorities. "We need a place for holding our political events," Gryaznevich said. "Every time such an event is being planned, a problem emerges, because the owners are afraid."

So far, no threats or warnings from the authorities have reached the management, although three police vehicles with police officers were parked outside Svoboda Bar during the meeting with Yashin on Saturday, while men looking like counter-extremism Center E operatives were seen at the opening earlier this month.

"There have been no checks so far, but we are ready," Gryaznevich said. "Perhaps the owners who are not involved in politics are easier to intimidate, but they know that it would not scare us off."

Svoboda Bar does not stay away from street protests. It invited the Dec. 15 March of Freedom participants for a free drink after the rally, and offered a free drink in exchange for a police report for participating in an unauthorized rally in a Twitter announcement on Monday.

"We'd like to see more new faces here — people who have not yet taken part in protests," Gryaznevich said. "For an average person interested in politics, it's easier to come to a bar than to a rally, because taking part in a rally is a decision, because they might be afraid of being detained even if the rally is authorized or getting their photo taken."

Svoboda Bar's nearest events include a Q&A session with Denis Bilunov, the Moscow-based activist and founder of the new Party of December 5, due on Dec. 28, and a New Year party on Dec. 31. The New Year party will feature the year's political roundup, an election for the year's most odious person, the formulation of a list of laws to be abolished over the next year and an alternative presidential television address due to be filmed by the activists themselves.

"We will not play Putin's New Year's address, but we'll put on our own — the one we would like to hear from a real president," Gryaznevich said.

Svoboda Bar operates from noon to 11 p.m. on weekdays and until the last customer leaves on weekends. Location: 219 Naberezhnaya Reki Fontanki. Nearest metro: Tekhnologicheskyy Institut or Sennaya Ploshchad.

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