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Udaltsov's Birthday Party Ends in Police Clashes

By Oleg Sukhov

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Radical leftist Sergei Udaltsov trying to catch red balloons released by his supporters Saturday, his birthday. **Yevgeny Feldman**

A gathering of about 70 people outside the southern Moscow apartment of opposition leader and radical leftist Sergei Udaltsov, who is under house arrest on suspicion of plotting to incite riots, ended in violent clashes with police on Saturday, his birthday.

Seventeen people were detained on Zatonnaya Ulitsa, in the neighborhood where Udaltsov, leader of the Left Front movement, grew up and went to school, bringing back childhood memories for some of his friends who attended the so-called birthday party.

The event took place not far from the reconstructed palace of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich in the Kolomenskoye park. The event was perhaps the first protest in the vicinity of Kolomenskoye since an angry crowd surrounded the tsar's residence in 1662, demanding that he hand over boyars they wanted to lynch.

The protesters, ranging from liberal politician Boris Nemtsov to communists to unaffiliated civic activists, held the birthday party outside Udaltsov's apartment building. They also protested against his house arrest, which began on Feb. 9.

At the beginning of the event, a police officer approached the crowd and said the protest was unauthorized. When asked, "What protest?" he replied that he meant Udaltsov's birthday party.

"Unfortunately, he was born on this day," said Violetta Volkova, Udaltsov's lawyer. "His parents couldn't have had [his birth] authorized."

White ribbons — a symbol of the opposition movement — and red ribbons — a leftist attribute — were tied to several trees near the building. Meanwhile, Volkova collected gifts for Udaltsov and put them in a red Santa sack.

An activist joked that the presents were from Givi Targamadze, a Georgian politician accused by Russian investigators of helping Udaltsov orchestrate riots. Another protester, who was carrying an iPad, quipped that she was chatting online with her "[U.S.] State Department supervisor," ridiculing the Kremlin's accusations that the opposition is financed from abroad.

Vyacheslav Zherdev, a Left Front representative, said that instead of neutralizing the Left Front, Udaltsov's arrest had reinvigorated the activists because they had to step up their efforts to meet the challenge.

He said the government had placed the politician under house arrest because it was afraid of the opposition's "spring offensive."

"The authorities can do a lot," he said. "This thieving government has robbed the people. But sooner or later, it will be out of power."

Zherdev also said that Federal Security Service agents had “snooped around” the school and kindergarten that Udaltsov’s children attended, and his wife, Anastasia Udaltsova, had to hide them in Ukraine.

Subsequently, one of Udaltsov's lawyers appeared on the apartment's balcony and said the police had forbidden the politician from speaking to the protesters.

When the opposition leader, wearing stylish sunglasses, came out and displayed a victory sign, the crowd chanted, "Happy birthday!" and, "Free Udaltsov!"

The residents of the neighborhood apparently wondered what was going on. Some people watched the event with curiosity out of their windows. An inebriated elderly man who had passed by the event bantered with an activist, asking him what the protesters' purpose was and whether Udaltsov was the idol of the younger generation. Meanwhile, a baby, accompanied by her mother, gaped with an amazed look.

The police then repeatedly announced that the event was unauthorized and started rounding up the protesters. When one of the officers said, "Your rally is unauthorized, please leave the place of your deployment," the activists mocked him for the bizarre use of the military term.

A reporter was detained after wishing Udaltsov happy birthday and transported into a police bus.

One of the activists was beaten up when he refused to be escorted into the vehicle. He said his arms were dislocated, and his shin was bruised. Another protester was forcefully pushed into the police bus with his legs up, causing cries of indignation from the other detainees. As the vehicle headed to a police station, two of the activists debated whether police officers should be considered human beings or not.

When the detainees arrived at the station, some of them derided a sign that read, "We serve the law and the people," a claim that is not taken for granted by the opposition. Most of them were released by late Saturday.

The press office of the Moscow police department could not be reached by phone on Sunday.

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