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# Braving Cold, Thousands March for and Against the Kremlin

By Jonathan Earle

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Thousands of people marching in snow flurries Saturday in central Moscow at a pro-Kremlin rally organized under the slogan "Russia Without Orphans." **Vladimir Filonov**

Ignoring snow flurries and a sharp drop in the temperature, thousands of people hit Moscow's streets Saturday for the first major political marches in nearly two months. The larger rally consisted of pro-Kremlin demonstrators supporting the Russian ban on U.S. child adoptions, and a smaller gathering deplored rising utility prices and low pensions and student stipends.

The marches — the first since tens of thousands of opposition-minded people unexpectedly showed up Jan. 13 for a march along the Boulevard Ring to decry the adoption ban — were significantly smaller than the earlier event and unfolded peacefully under the watchful eyes of a host of police officers.

As at previous pro-Kremlin rallies, suspicions ran high that Saturday's participants had been

either forced or paid to attend.

Some 12,000 to 20,000 people marched down Gogolevsky Bulvar to Pushkin Square under the slogan “Russia Without Orphans” at an event organized by Russian Mothers, a pro-Kremlin group calling for the government to make it easier for Russians to adopt following the January death of 3-year-old Max Shatto, a Russian boy adopted by a Texas family last year.

“Today they say that Maxim himself allegedly used a blunt object to inflict fatal injuries, that he himself damaged his internal organs,” Russian Mothers leader Irina Berset said from a stage on Pushkin Square. “This is a slap in the face to our country and our people. So we have before us now the mission to bring Maxim’s brother, Kirill, back to his motherland. We demand that Kirill be returned to Russia.”

On Friday, U.S. investigators said that Shatto had died of accidental trauma and that reports of bruising to his body were “consistent with self injury” linked to a diagnosed behavioral disorder. The Russian Investigative Committee said Saturday afternoon that it had requested from the U.S. all materials from the investigation into the death of Shatto, whom Russian authorities call by his Russian name, Maxim Kuzmin.

A diverse crowd of bundled-up pensioners, middle-class workers and students took part in the pro-Kremlin march, with a heavy contingent from outside Moscow, including a group of elderly people bussed in from Khimki. After days of mild weather, snow flurries broke out late last week and continued Saturday, with the temperature dropping from about zero degrees Celsius to the low teens.

Protesters approached by The Moscow Times reporters expressed not so much specific demands or concerns as much as a general sense that all was not well with Russia's children.

"I don't have any demands. I just want to express my opinion, so that people start paying attention to children's issues," said Yuliana Makarova, 29, an account manager at Mastercard.

Some, but not all, said they supported the government's decision to ban U.S. adoptions.

Vyacheslav Yartsev, 32, an electrical engineer, went one step further, saying all international adoptions should be outlawed. "I want Russian children to stay in Russia," he said.

A United Russia member who refused to give his name said he wanted to "protect children from arbitrariness." When asked from whose arbitrariness they should be protected, he said the subject was too profound to be expressed in a few sentences.

Another United Russia member, said he came to the rally because "the party ordered me to." Asked whether he had any personal reason for attending, he shook his head.

In the run-up to the rally, a number of bloggers, including Andrei Malgin, posted screenshots of online advertisements promising 300 to 700 rubles ($10 to $23) per person for participation in the pro-Kremlin rally, as well as letters to public sector organizations instructing their employees to attend. Demonstrators queried by The Moscow Times denied accepting payment.

But police said several complaints had been filed by protesters who said they had been

promised money but not been paid, RIA-Novosti reported, without specifying which rally that protesters had attended. Malgin, the blogger, said the police were referring to the pro-Kremlin march and published a scanned list of the 49 participants who supposedly filed the complaint and their photographs.

Speakers at Pushkin Square included Vyacheslav Bocharyov, a decorated Federal Security Service colonel, who urged lawmakers to ban international adoptions entirely. Bocharyov participated in a bloody operation to free children and teachers held hostage by Islamist separatists at a school in the town of Beslan in 2004.

Alexander Karelin, a State Duma deputy and former champion wrestler, called for conditions to be improved for Russian orphans.

The only disturbance occurred further away from the march, near the Kropotkinskaya metro station, when an anti-Kremlin activist shouted that children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov, who backed the pro-Kremlin march, owned a house in Monaco and that Patriarch Kirill had established a cemetery for orphans. Police subsequently detained two other opposition activists outside the metro for illegally picketing.

Across town, a few thousand opposition supporters, many of them waving the red flags of leftist groups, came out for a simultaneous march under the slogan "For the Social Rights of Muscovites."

Whereas at past anti-Kremlin rallies opposition leaders have addressed the crowd on stadium-style stages, the platform at Saturday's event was about 5 meters long, attached to the back of a truck.

Authorities said that about 1,000 people took part in the march from Strastnoi Bulvar to Prospekt Akademika Sakharova, while organizers estimated at least twice that number.

The march was organized by the Left Front movement, although liberal political parties, civic organizations and other activist groups also supported the event.

At least one nationalist, prominent St. Petersburg activist Nikolai Bondarik, came to the march as well. "I don't share leftist ideas, but I support the demands of the rally, as all normal people do," he said.

Many people carried leftist posters calling for free medicine and education and cuts to the prices for housing and public utilities, and they chanted, "Reds in the city," "Down with capitalist ministers," "capitalism is [expletive]," and "all power to the Soviets!"

Others held aloft anti-Kremlin posters like "Include Putin on the Magnitsky list!" and "Throw the Ozero Cooperative into the Moscow River!" — a reference to a group founded by Putin and his closest associates in the 1990s. Resistance, a group of civic activists, shouted, "Putin, go to hell! Russia, join Europe!"

Many participants were pensioners demanding an increase in state payments, which are currently around 10,000 rubles a month for most Muscovites. The average salary in Moscow is around 45,000 rubles a month.

Students and university professors also made a good turnout. Arseny Vagunts, a 17-year-old student at Moscow State University, said he came not only to demand an increase to student stipends but also because students and professors faced pressure not to participate in rallies.

Some people in the crowd complained about the turnout, saying more people could have gathered, but opposition-minded State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov said more people had shown up compared to previous leftist rallies.

"That means we're on the right track," he said.

He also said the rally's demands fully corresponded to the positions of his party, A Just Russia, which earlier this year demanded that Ponomaryov leave a leadership post at Left Front or quit the party.

Many participants held posters that said their apartment buildings had been handed over to commercial enterprises and that they had been unlawfully evicted from their apartments.

"I don't think this particular march will solve the problem, but it shows the people that there are thousands of people with a similar problem, and they can join their forces and fight against crooked officials together," said Zinaida Ivanitskaya, a representative for pensioners who had lost their homes.

Among the opposition leaders in the crowd was Anastasia Udaltsova, wife of Sergei Udaltsov, who is currently under house arrest awaiting trial on charges of plotting unrest but who helped organize the march.

Udaltsova said the march should set a good example for other regions of Russia, a sentiment echoed by Ponomaryov.

"I know that similar events will be held in a majority of Russian regions in March," Ponomaryov said.

Left Front activist Alexei Baikov said he didn't believe that authorities would listen to the rally's demands. "Of course authorities won't implement any of our demands. They must be implemented by those who will replace these authorities, which is why we are here," he said.

Ponomaryov said he hoped the demonstration's local focus would help rally support for opposition candidates in Moscow elections next year.

"We're starting to prepare for Moscow City Duma elections, and our aim is to create a joint coalition that would be based on these very demands," he said. "All who share them, no matter what their political views, must join and gain the majority of seats."

Yabloko leader Sergei Mitrokhin said from the stage that half of his party's candidates in the elections would be from various opposition movements.

The rally didn't end without an incident. A dispute erupted between Left Front and gay rights activists and after a female protester raised a rainbow flag despite the organizers' ban on gay symbols. Organizers asked her to lower the flag, and she snapped back, "Fascists!" She ultimately was allowed to march with the flag.

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