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Police Break Up Women's Day Rallies

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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A policeman holding a “Freedom to Alyokhina” poster as a Pussy Riot supporter is detained on Women’s Day. **Sergei Karpukhin**

Three opposition rallies in support of women's rights were held around town on Friday, International Women's Day. Two of the events ended in a wave of detentions.

At least seven demonstrators were detained after "provocateurs" crashed a single-person picket against the imprisonment of Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, Tolokonnikova's husband, Pyotr Verzilov, said after the event.

Verzilov, a leader of the Voina performance art group, organized the event as a series of single-person pickets to avoid having to get approval from City Hall. But, he said, "provocateurs decided to hold a demonstration close to us, which is prohibited, and that was a signal for police to detain everyone."

"Later, a police officer came to me and apologized that they had to detain people," Verzilov said. The demonstration's main goal, he said, was to ask authorities to release Tolokonnikova

and Alyokhina on parole.

Tolokonnikova's lawyers last week submitted a request for her release on parole. Alyokhina's lawyers are planning to make the same request sometime soon.

Fellow Pussy Riot activist Yekaterina Samutsevich, who was released last fall, also took part in the demonstration, held outside the Federal Prison Service headquarters.

"Today is a day of solidarity and a fight for women's rights, and it totally coincides with Maria's and Nadezhda's fight for their rights," she said. "One of the aspects of our verdict was our involvement in feminism movement, it's an important aspect for us, as our action in the Christ the Savior Cathedral was politico-feminist."

Lyudmila, a 57-year-old pensioner who declined to give her last name, said she came out to support Pussy Riot and oppose "the criminal authorities," who arrest without reason.

Meanwhile, opposite Pushkin Square, seventeen activists were detained at a sanctioned rally organized by the Yabloko party and in support of social and economic equality for women.

The demonstration turned violent when police detained a man who was distributing the feminist newspaper Volya ("Will") and later a woman who was holding an anarchist poster saying, "freedom or death." The rally was shut down about an hour and a half after it had started.

After the initial detentions, a group of people made a dash for police truck where the detainees had been put. People shouted "Shame!" and "Freedom!" and police proceeded to detain everyone close to the truck. People in the crowd cried out, "What are you doing? It's March 8!"

Galina Mikhalyova, head of Yabloko's women's rights faction, said the main problems concerning women in Russia were relatively poor salaries, a lack of women in the government and the absence of a government body that would ensure their rights.

"We have no other protection except the Constitution's Article 19, which states equal rights and equal opportunities," she said, adding that only 12 percent of the State Duma deputies were women, and of 83 governors in Russia only one was woman. She also emphasized the problem with home violence, saying some 14,000 women die every year after being beaten at home.

"March 8 is traditionally a day of fight for women's rights. That is why every year we organize a rally to call attention to discrimination against women in every sphere of life, because the situation with women's rights continues to worsen in Russia," she said. "The number of detentions shows that our authorities are afraid of feminist topics."

According to police, about a hundred people came to the rally. Representatives of the LGBT movement, anarchists, and leftist and feminist organizations were among those who took part. Participants of the unsanctioned "Feminism Is Liberation" march also joined in.

"The Moscow administration is afraid of feminists and women who fight for their rights. That is why the march was banned, and we had to join the Yabloko rally," said Tatyana Sukhareva, an organizer of the banned march.

The only demonstration where there were no detentions was held on Novodevichy Square. Wives, mothers and sisters of jailed opposition activists came to support their relatives arrested at a May 6 rally in protest of President Vladimir Putin's inauguration. They held posters of their loved ones and of those they blamed for their arrests.

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