

Hopes Are High for May 6 Protest

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The opposition is gearing up for a major anti-Kremlin rally on Monday to mark the one-year anniversary of the protest on Bolotnaya Ploshchad that ended with violent clashes between police and protesters and led to mass arrests.

More than 400 people were detained at that protest, and nearly 30 are now facing criminal charges in connection with what has been dubbed "the Bolotnoye case," including opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov, who is currently under house arrest over accusations of plotting mass riots.

As the main slogan for the rally, organizers chose "For Freedom," referring to the freedom of those who were charged with participating in mass riots, which is what police say happened last May 6.

"Our main demand is to immediately release all Bolotnoye prisoners and other political prisoners," Boris Nemtsov, a member of the opposition's Coordination Council, wrote on his blog.

"We also demand amendments to the Constitution so that one person can't be president more than twice ... and the investigation of all corruption cases involving top officials, including that of the theft of billions during the construction of Olympic facilities in Sochi."

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny, currently facing fraud charges in a case that many see as politically motivated, announced on Twitter that he would be attending Monday's event.

Although the Coordination Council began planning this year's protest march back in January, it was not able to come to an agreement with city authorities on the planned route. Organizers wanted to repeat the route used by demonstrators in last year's protest march, but it was not approved by City Hall.

Alexei Mayorov, head of the city's regional security department, said the march could not be approved because clearing the streets of traffic on a weekday would paralyze the city. Last year's march was held on a Sunday.

Participation of no more than 30,000 people was approved by authorities, though organizers expect a bigger turnout and asked authorities to expand the area for the rally.

According to Alexander Ryklin, a member of Solidarity and one of the rally's organizers, people will be allowed to use pedestrian zones on Bolotnaya Ulitsa and a nearby garden square.

Monday's rally is scheduled to start at 7 p.m. and to last for about two hours. Organizers have encouraged people to arrive at 6 p.m., warning that there may be queues at the entrance to Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

A recent opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center showed that the number of people ready to take part in an anti-Kremlin demonstration climbed 6 percent since last year. On the "For Freedom" rally's Facebook page, nearly 6,000 people said they were planning to attend, and on Vkontakte, some 13,000 expressed a desire to participate.

Observers, however, note that due to escalating disunity within the opposition, significantly fewer people will attend Monday's rally. Organizers said some 100,000 people took part in the protest last year, though independent observers put the figure at about 60,000.

Left Front member Konstantin Lebedev, who was arrested last October on the same charges as Udaltsov, was sentenced last month to 2.5 years behind bars after pleading guilty to charges that Udaltsov denies, a move that produced even more discord within the opposition movement.

That discord was evident in a separate opposition rally held on Sunday by some activists who did not make it into the Coordination Council and subsequently formed their own so-called expert council.

Ryklin called the expert council's rally a "provocation and an attempt to wash out the protest movement" in comments carried by Interfax earlier.

For Sunday's rally, authorities allowed organizers to use the route from last year's march and hold a rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad. About 400 people attended, Interfax reported, citing

police.

Arkady Babchenko, a member of the expert council, told Kommersant late last month that he did not expect many people to attend either of the rallies, saying the turnout would be "bits and pieces" of last year's opposition movement.

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