

There Were No Bolotnaya Riots, International Experts Say

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An international public commission declared Wednesday that there were no "riots" at the May 2012 opposition protest on Bolotnaya Ploshchad in Moscow, which was dispersed after violence broke out with police, resulting in more than 400 detentions.

The commission's findings were announced as hope lingers that at least some of the 24 demonstrators charged with taking part in "riots" at the protest would be pardoned under an amnesty ordered by President Vladimir Putin and passed by the State Duma on Wednesday.

The so-called "Bolotnoye case" has been heavily criticized by human rights groups as a politicized case designed to scare ordinary people away from participating in opposition street protests. Western governments have also been critical of the case.

Twelve of the 24 protesters are currently standing trial in Moscow, which started in June on charges of taking part in riots and committing violence against police. The defendants face

from three to eight years in prison.

At a news conference in Moscow, two experts from an independent foreign commission created in April at the initiative of eight international human rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, presented preliminary conclusions of the commission's inquiry into the May 2012 protest.

The commission consists of seven independent experts from six countries — Britain, the U.S., Poland, Moldova, Kazakhstan and Ukraine — four of whom are members of the Panel of Experts on Freedom of Assembly at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

The experts studied more than 200 documents and more than 50 hours of video from open sources and provided by witnesses and organizers to reconstruct the course of events at the Bolotnaya rally in detail, said the 74-page report distributed at Wednesday's news conference.

The two experts from the commission, speaking at the office of the Memorial human rights group in downtown Moscow in the presence of about two dozen Russian and foreign reporters, accused Russian police of provoking sporadic violence at the rally by their "unprofessional" actions.

"We understand that in the events on Bolotnaya, the authorities did not observe all the criteria to apply the notion of 'mass riots,'" Serghei Ostaf from Moldova, an expert at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, told the news conference.

The international report said that, according to witnesses, there were separate "agent provocateurs" on Bolotnaya who "instigated" protesters to "enact violence toward" police.

"Instead of dispersing the rally, the authorities should have taken measures to remove the provocateurs," Ostaf said.

Another co-author of the independent foreign inquiry, Oleg Martynenko, an expert in police crime prevention from Ukraine, accused the police working at the Bolotnaya rally of acting "unprofessionally," at the least.

One mistake of the police, Martynenko told the news conference, was the use of fences and metal detectors "without reasonable grounds," which "artificially created a stampede."

Police also failed to communicate with the rally organizers during the protest or warn protesters before using force against them, which "prompted people to defend themselves" against police, Martynenko said.

"The police in essence were the ones who created conditions for participants to break the cordons," he said.

"The forceful dispersal [of the rally] did not leave people the opportunity to leave peacefully," Martynenko said.

But he stopped short of accusing police of "intentionally provoking riots," saying the international commission lacked evidence of that, not least because the police never

replied to inquiries submitted by international experts in February.

Ostaf encouraged the lawyers of the protesters charged with involvement in "riots" on Bolotnaya to use the international commission's findings to defend their case at trial.

The State Duma on Wednesday gave final approval to the Kremlin draft law that would allow amnesty of people suspected, charged or convicted of taking part in or calling for riots. The bill is expected to take effect over a six-month period from the end of the year, and it remains unclear when the Bolotnoye suspects would be released if it is determined that they do fall under the amnesty.

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