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Moscow Grants Rare Approval to Freedom-of-Assembly Protest

By Christopher Brennan

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The Other Russia leader Eduard Limonov at a rally in Moscow in 2011.

In an unexpected move, Moscow authorities have reportedly approved a request by controversial political party The Other Russia to hold a freedom-of-assembly rally in the city center this month.

Party member Alexander Averin announced via his LiveJournal page on Wednesday that city officials had sanctioned a "Strategy 31" event that the party applied to orchestrate. Strategy 31 is an ongoing series of rallies held at the end of each 31-day month. The date was chosen in honor of Article 31 of the Russian Constitution, which guarantees the right to hold peaceful public gatherings.

While Strategy 31 events have been sanctioned in the past, this marks the first occasion when The Other Russia was granted permission to organize the event.

The Other Russia has frequently been denied registration as an official political party. In the past, the Justice Ministry has attributed its refusal to the failure of the party's charter to comply with federal law. The Justice Ministry issued its most recent refusal in January without specifying a reason.

Another party established by The Other Russia leader Eduard Limonov was labeled as extremist and accordingly banned in 2007.

Limonov has organized and carried out Strategy 31 events in the past, albeit without permission, resulting in the arrests of numerous organizers and participants. Limonov himself was detained at the most recent iteration of the event in March.

Interfax reported that previous applications were denied because among the members of their organizing committees were activists who had previously violated the law more than once within the span of a given year.

Averin told the BBC's Russia service on Thursday that the names of Limonov and certain other members of The Other Russia's leadership were excluded from this month's application, which was granted permission to move forward.

This is the first time that Limonov's name has not been included among the list of organizers, he said. News of the authorities' approval of the Strategy 31 came on the heels of the State Duma's approval in the first reading Wednesday of a bill strengthening penalties for organizing unsanctioned protests.

If the bill passes, repeat offenders of the protest law may face criminal, rather than mere administrative penalties, with prison sentences of up to five years. The bill's second and third readings have not yet been scheduled.

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