

Moscow Police Squash Opposition Protest Over Navalny Verdict

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Policemen detain a supporter of Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny during an opposition rally in Moscow, Dec. 30, 2014.

More than a thousand people gathered on Moscow's Manezh Square on Tuesday in a show of support for convicted opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his brother Oleg, but the turnout fell short of the 18,000 people who had signed up on social media and riot police quickly suppressed those who did brave the bitter cold.

At least 132 people had been detained two hours into the protest, according to OVD-Info, an independent website that monitors detentions at opposition rallies. Among those detained was Navalny himself, who violated his house arrest to attend the unsanctioned rally.

Earlier in the day, a Moscow court had issued its verdict in the embezzlement case against the brothers after bumping up the initial hearing date from Jan. 15 to Dec. 30. The court sentenced Navalny and his brother to three and a half years each, though the anti-corruption

fighter got off with a suspended sentence while Oleg was taken into custody and hit with prison time.

After the decision, Navalny denounced the Russian authorities for, in his view, targeting his brother to punish him. "These authorities don't deserve to exist," he said to journalists assembled outside the court building.

Lawyers for the Navalny brothers said that they would appeal the verdict. Prosecutors also told Russian media they would appeal and seek a harsher sentence for Alexei.

Throughout the day, calls to protest the conviction abounded on social media. Many of Navalny's supporters even heralded the rally as a "second Maidan," referencing the protests in Kiev earlier this year that toppled former Russia-backed President Viktor Yanukovich following months of violence.

The protest on Manezh Square — which was hurriedly organized by Navalny supporters after authorities abruptly switched the date of sentencing — failed to live up to the hype. Moscow police put turnout at 1,500, according to Interfax.

A similar protest in St. Petersburg drew about 2,000 protesters, Dozhd TV reported.

Although turnout was lower than activists had hoped for, many Navalny supporters proved willing to brave bitter temperatures of minus 15 degrees Celsius to call attention to their political grievances.

"We are here because we don't want to live in a country that uses selective justice. Navalny and his brother get convicted of these crimes that they may not even have committed, and government officials do far worse and get away with it with not even a slap on the wrist," said Dmitry, a student who declined to provide his surname.

However, many others interviewed had no idea there was even a protest going on, telling a Moscow Times reporter they had come to the square to find out why there was such a large police presence.

As the crowd surged at one point, with everyone looking toward a giant lit-up ornament installed for the holidays, onlookers asked, "What is going on? Who is over there?"

At that moment, demonstrators began to chant, "All for one and one for all! For the Navalnys!"

As soon as it became clear what the fuss was all about, a stream of people sighed and left, with one boy shouting, "Oh man! I thought it was Santa Claus."

Santa Claus may not have shown up, but Navalny came pretty close. The activist tweeted that he was on his way as the protest was beginning around 6 p.m., only to be detained by police near the Ritz Carlton hotel and whisked away for breaking his house arrest.

"I didn't make it to Manezh. But that doesn't mean that you can't," Navalny wrote on Twitter after his detention.

Navalny's words seemed to lend some small burst of energy to the protest, which was noticeably deflated without a leader organizing the charge.

The abrupt rescheduling of the verdict seemed to have accomplished precisely what many believed the authorities had hoped for: a protest with the wind knocked out of it. Some of those who were planning to come had likely already left Moscow for the holidays, organizers had little time to prepare and many Muscovites were more concerned with getting ready for the New Year than hashing out political differences.

At around 9:15 p.m., riot police began to push the hundreds of demonstrators that remained in the square into the metro, where many continued to chant "Freedom."

Demonstrators' calls throughout the protest were not limited to the Navalny brothers. Some chanted "Ukraine, we're with you!" while others shouted "Putin is a thief!" and "Enough lying!"

With no one to lead the protest, however, most of the chanting just trailed off as demonstrators grew weary — with either the lack of direction in the rally, the cold, or both.

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