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Moscow Police Detain 13 Protesters at Rally in Support of Navalny

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Policemen detain a protester in Moscow on Jan. 15, 2015.

Police have detained more than a dozen demonstrators who gathered in central Moscow to protest the recent sentencing of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his brother, only to be met by a much larger force of Kremlin loyalists.

The face-off on Manezhnaya Ploshchad on Thursday appears to mark the first altercation between opposition demonstrators and members of a recently created pro-Kremlin movement whose leaders have pledged to quell street demonstrations of dissent.

About 100 opposition protesters gathered on Manezhnaya Ploshchad on Thursday to support the Navalny brothers, the Grani.ru news site reported. The rally took place despite an Ekho Moskvy radio appeal by Alexei Navalny a day earlier to reschedule the protest in order to prepare for a major demonstration in February.

According to Grani.ru, the protesters encountered an opposing rally of about 500 Kremlin loyalists, wearing orange-and-black St. George ribbons — a Russian symbol of military valor that was popularized by Kremlin supporters during the annexation of Crimea and insurgency of pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine.

In a reference to Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti Square — the center and symbol of street protests that toppled Ukraine's Moscow-backed administration last February — pro-Kremlin demonstrators shouted: "Maidan won't pass," as they tried to push back opposition protesters, Grani.ru reported

Navalny supporters responded with their own chant: "If there is no freedom, there will be Maidan," the report said.

Amid the Kremlin's apparent concerns over political protests in Russia, a member of the ruling United Russia party, Dmitry Sablin, and of fellow activists have organized an "Anti-Maidan" political movement to thwart opposition demonstrations, the TASS news agency reported Thursday.

The group, which was also joined by Cossack leaders, was planning to dispatch its men to confront the Thursday rally of Navalny supporters, the report said.

During the rally on Manezhnaya Square, police detained 13 opposition protesters, according to the OVD-Info news site, which monitors police actions. Three pro-Kremlin demonstrators were also detained, but released after being briefly held in police vans, the report added.

Halfway across the country, another opposition rally, held Thursday in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, also ran into a counter-demonstration by pro-Kremlin activists, RFE/RL's Russian Service reported.

The opposition rally called for the resignation of President Vladimir Putin, the report said, adding that speakers also criticized the government for the recent rise of food prices in the country.

Pro-Kremlin activists confronted the gathering with loud jeers and whistles during the opposition speeches, shouting that they would not allow a Maidan in Russia and arguing that reports about inflation were a "lie," RFE/RL reported.

Police looked on without interfering while the gathering deteriorated into a shouting match, the report said, adding that no demonstrators were detained.

Alexei Navalny and his brother Oleg were found guilty on Dec. 30 in their trial on embezzlement charges. The court handed down a 3.5-year suspended sentence to the opposition leader, and a prison term of the same length to his brother.

The verdict announcement was rescheduled at the last moment for Dec. 30 from its planned date of Jan. 15, in what was widely seen as an attempt to derail opposition plans for a large-scale rally on the day of the sentencing.

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