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Protesters Detained at Moscow Birthday Rally for Jailed Ukrainian Pilot Savchenko

By Anna Dolgov

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Ukrainian military pilot Nadezhda Savchenko (L) reacts while being escorted inside a court building in Moscow, Russia, May 6, 2015.

More than a dozen people, including at least four journalists, have been detained during rallies in Moscow marking the birthday of jailed Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko, news reports said.

Activists gathered at central Moscow's Lubyanka Square and outside Matrosskaya Tishina prison on the pilot's 34th birthday Monday, only to be quickly rounded up by police for attending unauthorized gatherings, several news portals reported.

On Lubyanka Square, six activists held blue-and-yellow Ukrainian flags and a sign that read:

“Happy Birthday, Nadia,” according to a video posted online by Grani.ru.

For the few minutes the rally lasted, the activists held hands and chanted “Free Nadezhda Savchenko,” and “Glory to Ukraine, Glory to Heroes” before trying to flee.

Road police officers who showed up at the scene apprehended four of the activists while two got away, Grani.ru reported.

Police also detained three journalists from pro-opposition news portals — Andrei Novichkov from Grani.ru, and Filipp Kireyev and Alexei Belkin from Open Russia — along with some unidentified women who were taking photographs of the rally, the report said.

Police “deleted all pictures from Belkin's flash card,” Kireyev said via Twitter. Officials also tore up Novichkov's press card, Grani.ru reported.

During another rally outside Matrosskaya Tishina, police also detained a journalist for leading Ukrainian newspaper Ukrainska Pravda, Anastasia Ringis, her employer reported.

“I did not shout any slogans, I was not holding any banners. They detained me for nothing,” Ringis was quoted by Ukrainska Pravda as saying by phone from a police van where she was placed along with several other detainees.

Ringis was released later in the day, Savchenko's lawyer Mark Feigin said via Twitter, without providing details.

Moscow accuses Savchenko of abetting the killing of two Russian journalists in eastern Ukraine last summer. She was seized by Moscow forces in eastern Ukraine and handed over to Russia.

But the Russian protesters described her as a “hero of independent Ukraine and of Russia,” stressing that some Russians oppose President Vladimir Putin's policies, according to their statement announcing plans for the Lubyanka rally.

“Russia is not Putin,” the statement read, adding: “Death to the fascist empire of Putin.”

“Fascism” is the term Moscow uses to describe its opponents in Ukraine. The Kremlin has cited the supposed rise of “fascists” across the border as the guise for annexing Crimea and supporting separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine.

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