

The Protests That Aren't Going Away

City authorities struggle to contain growing resentment with their demolition program.

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Mikhail Dzhabaridze / TASS

If the sheer numbers of demonstrators against Moscow's massive housing demolition scheme are anything to go by, Muscovites are not ready to give up any time soon.

On May 27–28, two more protests authorized by city authorities gathered 6,000 people. The number was less than the 20,000 who rallied May 14, but the fact another weekend saw further protests was in itself significant.

In the years after the 2011–12 Bolotnaya rallies, which gathered tens of thousands, authorities suppressed street activity. Opposition leaders were persecuted. Draconian protest laws were passed. Prison terms for protesting were handed down. But the brutal tactics worked and political protests all but vanished.

There were exceptions to the rule. Firebrand opposition leader Alexei Navalny could still gather rather large crowds. But few expected that demolitions could become a rallying cry, particularly in the absence of a charismatic leader, like Navalny.

But according to political analyst Abbas Gallyamov, the protest has the potential to grow into something much bigger than the Bolotnaya protests.

“Then, people fought for abstract elections. This time round, their property is at stake,” Gallyamov says. “You would expect people to fight much harder for something they hold dear.”

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Conflict in progress

In the aftermath of protest, authorities are already making concessions. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin pushed a new law through the City Duma on May 17 promising “additional guarantees” for residents of buildings slated for demolition.

Replacement apartments would be the “same market value” as demolished apartments — as opposed to simply being the same size as previously proposed. They would be located in the same district. Financial compensation would be an alternative to relocation.

City Hall also launched a vote for residents to decide the fate of their buildings. If over one-third of apartment owners vote against demolition, the building remains.

“Authorities have demonstrated that they’re ready to listen to the people,” Gallyamov says.

Still, Muscovites are returning to the streets. Social networks are buzzing with reports of fraud in the voting process. Residents are still skeptical of the program as a whole — The federal law that outlines the program is still waiting to pass through parliament.

On paper, there is no program, no rules, no conditions. “But we’re already asked to vote for participating in it,” says Olga, owner of an apartment in a building up for demolition. “So we vote now and they decided on the conditions later? No way.”

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Resolving conflict

Authorities have approved three rallies so far on one condition: that they are apolitical. Organizers of the May 28 demonstration told journalists that police officers were confiscated banners that mentioned Sobyenin and Putin.

But ahead of September’s municipal elections and presidential and Moscow mayoral elections next year, it will be hard to keep demolition protests separate from politics. The opposition are already trying to score big points with these rallies.

The May 28 protest was organized by PARNAS opposition party, a struggling political force founded by the slain politician Boris Nemtsov. Dmitry Gudkov, an opposition politician running for mayor, has been collecting signatures at the rallies. The centrist Yabloko party has also been campaigning at the protests.

Denis Volkov of the independent Levada pollster says most demonstrators aren't politically motivated. They "want to reach an agreement with authorities," he told The Moscow Times. "They have a very specific problem and they want it solved."

Volkov says if Moscow authorities are smart, they will extinguish the flames of protest by guaranteeing Muscovites their rights. Otherwise, says Volkov, "the situation is explosive."

But responding to the most recent protests, Mayor Sobyanin only fanned the flames: "Are you sure that only people who live in five-story buildings took to the street? I doubt it."

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