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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

‘I’m Scared I’ll Die Working'

Across the country on Sunday, Russians of all political stripes protested the new retirement ages.

By Evan Gershkovich

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Vladimir Smirnov / TASS

TVER — It was raining so heavily on Sunday afternoon that the clutch of umbrellas gathered in central Tver did little to prevent those huddled under them from being soaked through.

Still, at a main square in the small city some 180 kilometers northwest of Moscow, nearly 200 people weathered the summer shower to protest against their government’s plan to raise the pension age.

“I don’t think I’ll make it to the new retirement age,” said Vasily, a 50-year-old engineer, who declined to give his last name. “I want to travel and see some of the world before I die. Now I’m scared I’ll die working.”

Set at 60 for men and 55 for women under Josef Stalin, economists have long been urging for the age to be raised. But officials have also known that doing so could set off a firestorm. Indeed, the last time major changes were made, in 2005 — when a host of benefits were converted to cash payments — protests erupted en masse. Back then, President Vladimir Putin promised the age would not be raised so long as he was president.

So on the eve of the World Cup, on June 14, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev announced a rise in the ages, from 60 to 65 for men by 2028 and 55 to 63 for women by 2034. The authorities hoped, it seemed, that the festive football atmosphere would dampen the impact of the bad news.

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It doesn't appear to have worked. Nearly 2.6 million people have since signed an online petition against the decision, and Putin, whose fourth term only just got underway, has seen a steep fall in his approval rating: Over the course of a single week in June, it dropped from 72 to 63 percent, according to the state-funded VTsIOM pollster.

Calls for protests have come from the full political spectrum. They include the Communist Party, which has additionally called for a referendum; the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, which is under the control of authorities responsible for the pension reforms; and opposition politician Alexei Navalny, among others.

Many of those protests were scheduled this past weekend, from Vladivostok in the Far East, to Omsk in Siberia — where a reported 4,500 people attended — to Tver. Here, the protest was organized by Open Russia, a political movement founded by exiled oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky. It was also supported by Navalny's volunteers.

The main goal of the protest, said Artyom Vazhenkov, an Open Russia representative, was to see Medvedev fired. To that end, organizers started a petition and made World Cup-themed T-shirts that read: "A Red Card for Medvedev."

Even though the protest movement is only starting to gain steam, the divides between the different parties involved — which include those funded, supported or co-opted by the Kremlin itself — are already on display.

Vazhenkov said that he had written to the Communist Party, which is planning its own protest in Tver, so that they could also participate, but he didn't get a response.

"It's because they're part of the plan," argued Andrei Prokudin, the 27-year-old coordinator of Navalny's volunteers in Tver.

"First Putin hides behind Medvedev, then he gets the fake opposition to organize some protests so people feel like they have a voice," Prokudin said. "Soon, he'll make the reforms less harsh so people think he's actually the good guy," he added. "You'll see."

With about two dozen police officers looking on, locals gathered at the square took turns explaining why they were against the reforms. They also discussed what action they should take. Some signed Open Russia's petitions, and others sporadically chanted: "Medvedev

should resign" and "Russia without Putin."

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Young people, too, were worried, though they were years away from leaving the workforce. "Our government doesn't act in our interests," said Vitaly, 16, explaining why he'd come to the protest. "We have no prospects for a future here."

Organizers were pleased that so many people had turned up, despite heavy rain. "There are more people here today than on May 5," said Navalny volunteer Dima Boronov, 27, referring to the protests in advance of Putin's inauguration.

Whether the protests can bring change, though, is up in the air. "Today is definitely an important moment," said political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky. "But we need to see if this unhappiness becomes a trend."

He pointed to mass protests last summer against planned demolitions of apartment buildings as part of an urban renewal project. "That was a big protest movement, but it faded after about a month," said Pavlovsky. "We'll have to see whether these protests can maintain their energy."

On Sunday, the energy faded quickly. After about an hour, those who had gathered headed home.

"I'm soaked through and couldn't hear a thing over the sound of the rain," said Elena, 51. "But at least I signed that petition."

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