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Russian Far East Protesters Turn Out by the Thousands as Crackdown Intensifies

Despite multiple arrests of protesters this week, Khabarovsk saw a fourth consecutive massive rally Saturday.

By Evan Gershkovich

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Local media reported that over 10,000 people attended Saturday's protest in Khabarovsk. **Dmitry Morgulis / TASS**

KHABAROVSK — As the rain beat down, a sea of umbrellas filled the valley that has become part of the well-trodden path protesters take on their daily march around the city of Khabarovsk in Russia's Far East.

Despite a torrential summer downpour, thousands took to the streets for the fourth straight massive Saturday protest, the main event of the daily rallies. There has now been a demonstration for 22 consecutive days since the arrest of governor Sergei Furgal on July 10 on several 15-year-old murder charges his supporters believe are payback for their having voted

a politician who does not represent the ruling United Russia party into office. Furgal is a member of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.

But as the protest movement has taken on an increasingly anti-Kremlin stance over the past two weeks, the authorities have begun to crack down.

This week they handed two protesters week-long prison sentences, slapped fines of 10,000 rubles ($134.4) apiece on another two demonstrators for participating in unsanctioned protests and detained another two on the eve of Saturday's rally, holding them overnight. According to Russian law, demonstrations have to be agreed in advance with the authorities, who have not approved any of the Khabarovsk rallies.

Some local media outlets estimated that over 10,000 people turned up for Saturday's rally — still large in a city of 600,000 but fewer than the previous three and the first time numbers have fallen. While this was the first wet weekend since the protests began, there were also the first signs that the surprising movement may be losing steam.

"Some days are really hard and I think I should rest my legs," said Nikolai, a 30-year-old protester, who walks with the help of a cane after a car accident. He has marched nearly every day since the rallies kicked off last month. "But I plan on continuing to do so until Putin begins treating us with dignity."

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Nikolai, like an increasing number of demonstrators, declined to give his last name over fears of reprisals. That growing unease may partly explain the lower numbers at Saturday's rally.

"I think it's our civic responsibility to keep coming out to show Putin that we are tired of how he treats us," said Alexei Osipov, a 30-year-old line cook, though he expressed doubts as to how committed he will be if the movement fades. "I'll keep going if this many people go, but I'm not sure I will want to go alone."

Local news website DVHab.ru reported that the march was smaller than previous Saturday events, while Khabarovsk authorities announced that 3,000 people attended. Last Saturday, the authorities reported more than double that figure, though estimates from other sources were much higher.

Yet even as the authorities increasingly target individual protesters in a movement that lacks a leader, the Kremlin more generally appears to be taking a wait-and-see approach. State television has ignored the rallies. Furgal's Putin-picked replacement Mikhail Degtyaryov, who has never lived in the region, left Khabarovsk for the second straight Saturday to visit another city. And during the march on Saturday — as at all of the rallies so far — police escorted the marchers throughout their five-kilometer loop around the city without interfering.

Sergei Zuev, a 65-year-old pensioner, believes the Kremlin is playing it correctly.

"Moscow authorities should understand that if they use force this could end in civil war," he said on the eve of Saturday's rally. "If OMON" — riot police — "come here from Moscow,

they will return in coffins."

But Zuev's fighting stance was a lone voice in recent days. Most protesters who spoke to The Moscow Times believe the authorities will come down hard on the movement as soon as it fizzles down to a manageable number. Many were also resigned to the fact that that will happen sooner or later.

"For now they want to scare all of the protesters by randomly targeting certain people who were more visible," said Artyom Mozgov, a 20-year-old activist who was one of the two protesters fined this week. "Most likely they will wait until the number of people on the streets becomes lower and lower, and when the number of protesters is around 1,000, they will clear them out with force."

As the crackdown intensifies, protesters have added cries of "Freedom to political prisoners," "When we are united we are unbeatable" and "You can't scare us" to their catalog of chants, many of which are directed at the Kremlin. Those include "Putin resign" and "Twenty years, no trust," a reference to the time the Russian president has been in power.

On Friday evening at Lenin Square in the city center, where protesters gather in front of the governor's administration building each day before beginning their march, several people posted flyers with information on donating money to Furgal's legal defense team and to help those like Mozgov pay off their fines.

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Then their daily ritual began, with Dmitry Timoschenko, a 33-year-old salesman, leading chants over a megaphone as about 100 protesters gathered. One of the two protesters fined this week, Valentin Kvashnikov, had normally held the megaphone, but he has since stopped coming to the square. Timoschenko and others had taken his place.

"Some of us are braver; some are less brave. Some pick up the megaphone; others aren't up for that," Timoschenko said, noting that he expected police to target him at some point. "People have already given me their contact information for if or when I get fined."

Several hours later, as the protest came to an end, Timoschenko and another man who had held the megaphone were detained.

By the time the skies opened on Saturday, new protesters had taken their place.

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