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Russian Congress Seeking Inspiration From Medieval History Is Quashed by Authorities

The crackdown is being seen as a sign that the Kremlin is playing closer attention to local power structures ahead of fall elections.

By Uliana Pavlova

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Yulia Galyamina. **Telegram / galyamina**

VELIKY NOVGOROD — Yulia Galyamina knew she might be arrested on Saturday for organizing a meeting of independent municipal deputies in Veliky Novgorod, Russia's ancient seat of self-government. She just didn't expect it to happen so fast.

Within 30 minutes of the start of the two-day Zemsky Syezd, or Congress, a name chosen in a nod to a conference that helped kick start the 1905 Russian Revolution, police showed up and escorted 48-year-old Galyamina and three of her colleagues out of the building.

“Municipal deputies are supported by the entire country and I am confident that we will win,” Galyamina shouted as she was led away by officers, her red dress standing out against the navy blue uniforms. As the police car door slammed, her supporters shouted “Yulia, Yulia, Yulia!”

Municipal deputies are unpaid elected officials engaged in local politics with limited financial and administrative resources. While they usually escape the Kremlin's radar, Saturday’s events are being seen as a sign that the government is starting to pay attention to them as part of a wider crackdown, and ahead of elections to the State Duma lower house of parliament this fall.

“The Zemsky Congress is a gathering of people who are trying to come to power not from above, but from below, from the municipal level,” said Andrei Kolesnikov, chair of the Russian Domestic Politics and Political Institutions Program at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

“The government did not immediately recognize the danger of such a structure, but when they did, they began to seriously suppress it,” he added.

Galyamina, who is a former Moscow Duma deputy for the opposition Yabloko party, told The Moscow Times the day before the Zemsky Congress was due to start that its main aim was to come up with a plan for municipal deputies to decentralize Russia’s power structure, network with each other and expand the power structure within local government.

“People are being asked what color they want the bench to be painted, when what they want is to have a say in how the local budget is distributed,” she said.

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Three days before the Zemsky Congress, Veliky Novgorod Governor Andrei Nikitin issued a decree prohibiting gatherings of more than 30 people, citing Covid restrictions.

Galyamina and her team kept the number of people in the meeting room below that number and only allowed two journalists in at a time, but police still arrived to arrest her, along with municipal deputies Vitaly Bovar and Alexander Bondarchuk and volunteer Viktor Shalyakin.

“In Russia today, the practice of persecuting people, whose only fault is their desire to take part in governing their state, or to deal with issues of local self-government, or to express their own opinion, is growing in scale,” said municipal deputies in a joint statement obtained by The Moscow Times.

In a similar incident in March, about 200 people were detained at a conference for municipal deputies in Moscow, including Galyamina, Yevgeny Roizman, Ilya Yashin and Vladimir Kara-Murza — other well-known opposition figures with ties to jailed Kremlin critic Alexey Navalny.

Galyamina herself was charged last December with multiple violations of Russian protest law, and detained last summer for rallying against a package of constitutional amendments including provision for President Vladimir Putin to stay in power until 2036.

Political scientist Yekterina Schulmann said she believes municipal deputies are coming under government watch because they have important qualities that other more powerful politicians lack.

“These are the elected representatives of the people, enjoying undeniable legitimacy,” she said.

Online congress

The day after the Zemsky Congress arrests, municipal deputies and journalists gathered outside Veliky Novgorod’s courthouse, a brutalist building with peeling paint and a giant Russian flag, as Galyamina and others were being held in custody. The court sentenced Galyamina to seven days in prison the next day, and her lawyer has said they will appeal.

The congress quickly moved online for a Sunday evening session.

“In my opinion, the congress took place,” said Moscow Duma deputy Mikhail Timonov.

“The authorities dispersed the congress in real life, so what? It didn’t stop people from communicating online,” he added.

Despite its digital outcome, the organizers of the Zemsky Congress were keen to draw parallels with its historic roots in medieval Veliky Novgorod, where the people could overrule greedy princes levying high taxes.

“Russia has its own historical roots of democracy, so it is completely unnecessary to look to the West,” said Galyamina.

“Instead, we need to rethink our own history not as one of autocracy and endless riots, but as one of democracy.”

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