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Why Did Moscow Police Just Arrest Scores of Teenagers?

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SOTAvision

Moscow police arrested scores of "nonconformist" teenagers on Saturday night in a massive raid on the popular nightlife district of Kitai-Gorod.

Telegram news outlets put the number of detainees at between 100 and 300, with most estimates ranging from 150 to 200.

Here's what we know:

What happened?

Eyewitnesses said as many as 15 police vans arrived in Kitai-Gorod at around 8:00 p.m. local time, shortly after which officers started "indiscriminately" arresting people.

One detainee told the RBC news website that police stopped their group of friends on the way

to a clothing store, asked their ages and ordered them to get into one of the vans.

"We weren't drinking, smoking, or anything," the detainee said. "We sat in the van for about an hour and a half. They took us to the Tagansky police station."

The detainee said police then handed them military draft notices.

A crowd of parents gathered outside the police station. Chants of "freeloaders" and "we're keeping you here" could be heard in video footage posted online.

The Interior Ministry described the raid as a "preventive" measure to "maintain public order."

The Ostorozhno Novosti news outlet reported that the police prevented the parents from entering the station, where police were holding at least one child as young as 12.

One detainee told the outlet that police denied the detainees water, and that he witnessed the police officers beat another detainee for smoking an electronic cigarette.

The Telegram news channel Baza, which is believed to have links to the Russian security services, reported that at least 17 people were issued military summonses, while one detainee told Ostorozhno Novosti that everyone around him at the station received one.

"No exceptions. I have a deferment, but I still received a draft notice," he said.

Idite Lesom (Get Lost), a group that helps Russian men avoid military service, said Sunday that it had received requests for help from two people detained in the raid, both of whom were ordered to appear at the enlistment office on Ulitsa Yablochkova on Monday morning.

At least one person has been sentenced to administrative detention. Magomed Gasanov, 21, spent two nights in police custody after allegedly refusing to show his passport and was sentenced Monday to 13 days in detention for disobeying police, Ostorozhno Novosti reported.

The outlet said Moscow's Basmanny and Tagansky district courts received 12 cases on Monday involving petty hooliganism and disobeying police, but it could not confirm whether all of them were related to the Kitai-Gorod raids.

Who are the 'nefors'?

Kitai-Gorod, a neighborhood just east of the Kremlin, has become a popular hangout for teenagers from various youth subcultures, especially "nonconformists," or "*nefors*" for short. "*Nefors*," a Russian slang term, is used to describe young people who dress unconventionally.

Saturday's raid was not the first time they've faced police action.

Police in July detained dozens of teenagers in the neighborhood. One detainee told Ostorozhno Novosti that officers had asked them what they were doing in Kitai-Gorod, and whether or not they had consumed alcohol or drugs.

"They humiliated us, yelling that we were scumbags. They suggested shaving my head. Then

one of the police officers took out a stun gun and started shocking everyone. He shocked my buddy three times with the stun gun," the detainee told the outlet.

Teenagers interviewed by Bereg, an independent journalism collective, said police have regularly patrolled the area and harassed "*nefors*" since a March 20 attack on students leaving the Moscow Choral Synagogue.

It remains unclear whether any of the teenagers who regularly gather in the area were involved in that attack.

"People have become afraid to come to Kitai-Gorod because there's one kind of crowd here before 9:00 [in the evening], and a completely different one after that," one local business owner told Bereg, describing how teenagers in the area frequently drank, used drugs and caused disturbances.

Teenagers interviewed by the outlet said city officials have gradually been closing off their usual gathering spots in the area, leaving them with fewer and fewer places to go.

The aftermath

Yekaterina Mizulina, head of the pro-Kremlin Safe Internet League, questioned why parents had been barred from seeing their children at the police station.

"Even if the teenagers have done something wrong, the police have no right to detain them for more than three hours — especially if they're sober and their parents (that is, their legal guardians) have come to the station to pick them up," she wrote.

Lawmaker Nina Ostanina, who chairs the State Duma's family affairs committee, asked the Interior Ministry for information about the raid, the Vedomosti business daily reported Tuesday, citing her letter.

According to the letter, Ostanina alleged that the police may have violated the rights of some minor detainees by arbitrarily detaining them, holding them for more than three hours and failing to notify their guardians promptly or let them into the police stations where their children were being held.

Eva Merkacheva, a member of Russia's presidential human rights council, told Vedomosti that young people should be given the right environment in which to spend their time.

"[We need to] actively involve them in some kind of cultural, interesting life that would appeal to them, taking their current interests into account," she said.

Shura Bogacheva, a journalist who studies youth subcultures, told the newspaper she believed only a small minority of the teenagers who gather in Kitai-Gorod drink or use drugs there.

She called on authorities to give teenagers more places to gather, as they are "increasingly being pushed out of parks and courtyards."

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