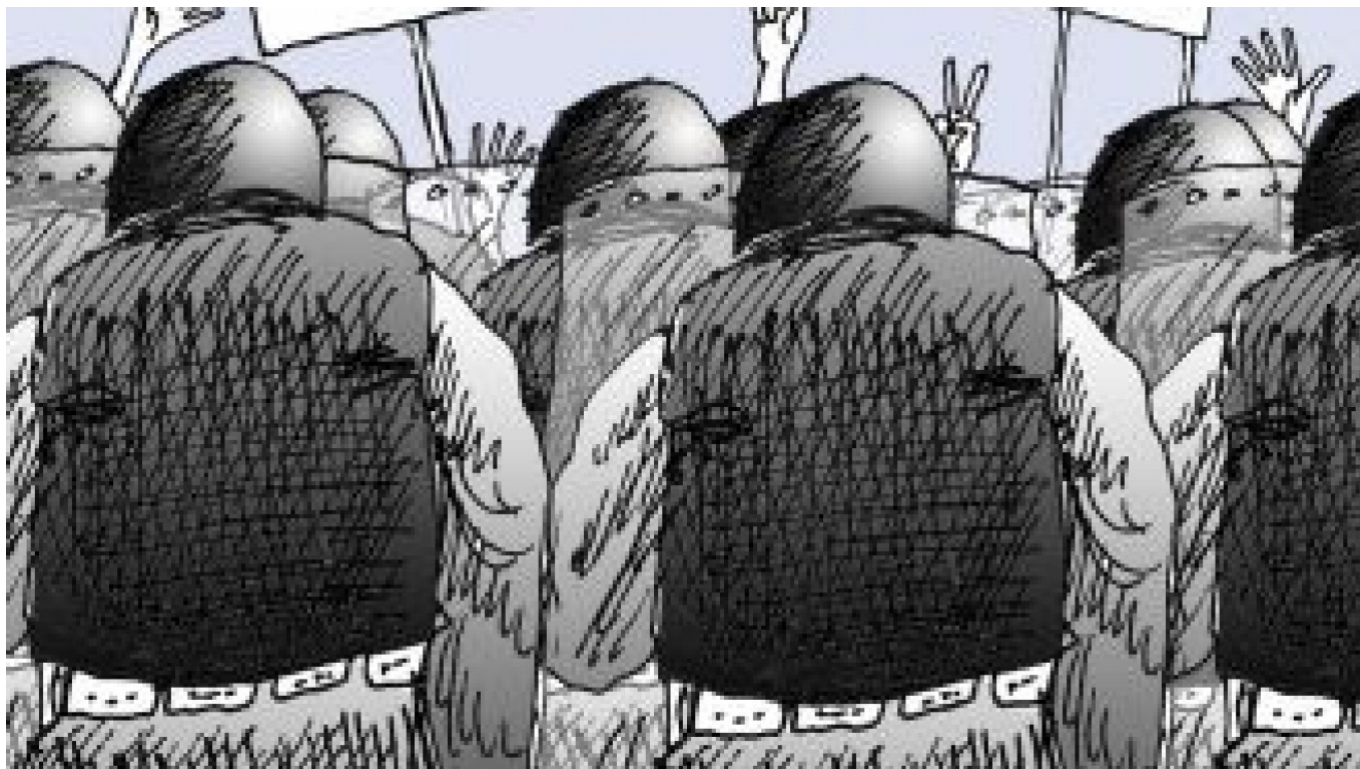


Why '31' Matters

By [Victor Davidoff](#)

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Most people probably spend the evening before their birthday either cooking or going over the menu at the restaurant where they plan to celebrate. I spent the entire evening of July 31 — the day before my birthday — sweating in a police van and then discussing charges at the Basmanny police precinct. I wasn't hauled in because I started celebrating early. I was detained on Moscow's Triumfalnaya Ploshchad along with 81 other people, including former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, for wearing a badge with the number 31 on it. This number symbolizes Article 31 of the Russian Constitution, guaranteeing Russian citizens the right to assembly. As the police protocol noted, I also shouted, "Down with the police state!" and "Freedom! Freedom!"

One might ask why someone about to turn 54 chose such a strange way to spend the Saturday evening before his birthday. One reason is that exactly 30 years ago I spent my 24th birthday in the Butyrskaya prison after being accused of "slandering the Soviet system." My "slander" consisted of being part of the human rights movement in the Soviet Union. My punishment was three years imprisonment in a special psychiatric hospital.

After my release, I immigrated to the United States, where I covered human rights issues

in the Soviet Union for the Voice of America and Radio Liberty. When the coup in August 1991 failed, I was happy to return to Russia, where it seemed that our dream of freedom had come true. Neither I nor my fellow dissidents could have imagined in our worst nightmares that we would once again have to go out on the square and risk arrest to defend our basic civil rights.

True, compared with my detention in the Soviet period, I have to say it wasn't too bad this time. The cells in the Basmanny precinct were clean and well-lit — much different from Soviet-era cells, which were working copies of the dungeons of the Inquisition. And although the cops were far from friendly, they weren't any ruder than the New York police who arrested me with a group of protesters by the Soviet UN mission during the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in 1986. (We were accused of coming too close to the building, but the charges were later dropped.)

On Saturday night, I was in good company. Most of the other 15 detainees in the bus were students in their early 20s, but some were much older, like Dmitry Vaisburd, a soft-spoken man with a gray beard and nearly crippling arthritis who took part in the rally on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad for the 10th time. There also was Sergei "Serge" Konstantinov, one of the leaders of the Solidarity opposition movement, a young lawyer with the torso of a bodybuilder and a resonant orator's voice that reminded me of U.S. President Barack Obama.

More than 1,000 of us went to Triumfalnaya Ploshchad to demand that our constitutional right to freedom of expression and assembly be respected. Instead of respect, we found ourselves surrounded by hundreds of police, OMON riot police and Interior Troops. We were detained after being roughed up. The violent events on a central Moscow square — a main topic on the Russian Internet this week — have been ignored almost completely by the Russian mass media. Not one television station covered the event with the exception of privately owned Ren-TV. Russian news agencies provided short accounts of the event, citing police statements that lowered both the number of participants to 200 and the number arrested to less than 40.

Meanwhile, the Russian political establishment lost no time accusing the organizers of "extremism" for turning down Moscow city authorities' proposal to hold the demonstration in another place.

There is a reason why the organizers haven't agreed to change venues. Triumfalnaya Ploshchad wasn't chosen randomly. It is one of the cradles of modern Russian freedom. In the 1960s, it was here, by the statue of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, where young people first congregated for unsanctioned poetry readings. Later, it was here that samizdat literature was passed from hand to hand, and where the leaders of the dissident movement met — people like Vladimir Bukovsky, Eduard Kuznetsov and Vladimir Osipov. For democratically minded Russians, Triumfalnaya Ploshchad — Triumphal Square — is a symbol of freedom like the Liberty Bell or the Declaration of Independence in the United States. It is not a bargaining chip.

Moscow city authorities — obviously getting signals from above, though not exactly from heaven — have 10 times refused to "sanction" the "31" demonstration on Triumfalnaya. Their reason is always the same: Another group previously requested the space. However, when it gets to court — as in the hearing on the Dec. 31

rally &mdash the Moscow city government can't provide documents supporting its case. These refusals make a mockery of citizens' constitutional rights. If we demonstrators accepted the authorities' terms, it would mean accepting that the authorities, not citizens, have the right to determine when and where a demonstration might be held. This is certainly what the Soviet authorities believed: It was their sacred right to dictate to their citizens. Unfortunately for them, citizens had a different opinion and found a way for their point of view to prevail.

For those of us who lived in the Soviet period and remember perestroika and glasnost, it remains a mystery why the current leaders are following the path of their Soviet predecessors. Do they think that today's citizens, unlike their Soviet dissident predecessors, will give up? If that is the case, to show them that they are wrong and to remind them that rights belong to citizens and cannot be taken from them by the authorities, I'll go to Triumphalnaya Ploshchad again on Aug. 31. And if I have to, I'll come every 31st day of the month &mdash at least until I'm 84. That was the age of the oldest demonstrator on July 31.

Victor Davidoff is a writer who is working on a book about Soviet psychiatric abuse.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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