

3,000 Praise Forest, Assail Putin at Rally

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August 22, 2010



Rocker Yury Shevchuk performing at a rally of 3,000 on Pushkin Square. The leader of Khimki forest protests, Yevgenia Chirikova, is standing behind him. **Igor Tabakov**

More than 3,000 people crowded onto Pushkin Square on Sunday evening to denounce the authorities' plan to cut down a centuries-old oak forest north of Moscow, and rock musician Yury Shevchuk belted out two songs despite a concert ban.

While the three-hour rally ended peacefully, police earlier Sunday detained three prominent opposition activists who had planned to attend and blocked vans carrying the musical equipment of other musicians from the square.

Many demonstrators said they came to voice their opposition of both the deforestation in Khimki and of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

"The Khimki forest is the occasion, but if oil prices drop, there will be more people to protest here," said Vladimir Kondrashyov, a 41-year-old driver wearing a T-shirt reading, "Putin, step down."

City Hall allowed the rally, but not a concert that organizers had wanted to stage, in a rare authorization of an opposition event in recent years. The anti-Putin sentiment and the relatively large turnout could prove worrisome to the authorities, coming a day after 3,000 people called for Putin's resignation at a rally in [Kaliningrad](#).

Despite the concert ban, Shevchuk, frontman for rock band DDT, sang his hits "Osen" (Fall) and "Rodina" (Motherland) on an acoustic guitar standing on an improvised stage on a truck, surrounded by scores of journalists, police and demonstrators, including Yevgenia Chirikova, leader of the Khimki forest protest movement. Shevchuk made headlines in May when he criticized Putin in a televised exchange at a charity dinner in St. Petersburg.

Many more bands and singers, including Alexander F. Sklyar, Barto, Televizor and OtZvuki Mu, were expected to perform but could not enter the square. Cars with concert equipment were barred by the police from entering the site.

The rally — dubbed "We All Live in the Khimki Forest!" — was hosted by legendary rock critic Artemy Troitsky.

More than 3,000 people crowded into the cordoned-off square after passing through metal detectors, which saw long lines. Some carried the flags of opposition groups and chanted, "Putin resign!"

Police officers cordoned off the area. One officer told The Moscow Times that about 1,500 officers had been deployed.

Sunday's protest marked the largest in a weeks-long series of rallies to oppose federal authorities' decision to raze part of the forest to make way for an \$8 billion highway to St. Petersburg. The protesters say it is possible to construct the road around the forest without cutting down the trees.

The pro-Kremlin Nashi youth group brought three buses to Pushkin Square to offer demonstrators the chance to go to the Khimki forest to collect trash.

"We don't offer an alternative point of view. We just suggest cleaning up the trash," senior Nashi official Oleg Sokolov told The Moscow Times near one of the buses.

He said about 80 Nashi activists were waiting in the buses, and some 20 people had come from the rally but looked "more like photographers and bloggers" than activists.

Sokolov was an organizer of a controversial exhibit at the Seliger youth camp in July that featured portraits of former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, human rights leader Lyudmila Alexeyeva and opposition leader Boris Nemtsov mounted on stakes and wearing hats with swastikas.

Gleb Krainikh, a Nashi commissar standing near the buses, conceded that he personally liked Shevchuk's music.

Although the rally was not banned, human rights leader Lev Ponomaryov was detained in the metro station near Pushkin Square an hour before the rally started. The reason for his detention was unclear, but he told Ekho Moskvy radio that it was in connection with his

participation in a rally to mark the national Flag Day holiday, which was celebrated Sunday, earlier in the afternoon.

Police detained Nemtsov and fellow Solidarity opposition group member Mikhail Shneider at the Flag Day rally when they attempted to march along Novy Arbat with 100 people carrying a giant Russian flag.

The Flag Day rally was sanctioned to be held near the intersection of Novy Arbat and the Garden Ring, but the activists were detained when they decided to move along the street.

Nemtsov and Shneider also had planned to attend the Pushkin Square rally.

Nemtsov, Shneider and Ponomaryov were taken to a court late Sunday, Ekho Moskvyy reported.

"We are attending the court hearing," Nemtsov said by cell phone, adding that he could not comment further because the hearing had started.

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