

Rally Suggests Protest Mood Is Growing

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The holiday mood, winter chill and end-of-the-year fatigue failed to dampen the country's newfound political activism, with a protest on Moscow's Prospekt Akademika Sakharova on Saturday garnering more people than its Dec. 10 predecessor on Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

Attendance estimates ranged from 30,000 to 120,000. Several Moscow Times reporters at the event put the figure at about 80,000, which is well above the 30,000 to 60,000 at the previous event.

The roster of speakers was more diverse and impressive than on Dec. 10, with whistleblower Alexei Navalny, socialite Ksenia Sobchak and even former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin taking turns at the microphone, to various reactions from the crowd.

The purpose of the rally was to protest the widely disputed outcome of Dec. 4 State Duma elections and the Kremlin's overall stifling of the country's politics. But for some newcomers, it had also become personal.

'We Do Exist'

“I came because I was mobilized by Vladimir Putin, who called us the Bandar-Log,” said Eduard, 32, a lawyer from the Moscow region. The prime minister compared protesters to the tribe of monkey-people in Rudyard Kipling's “The Jungle Book” during his televised call-in show on Dec. 15.

Eduard's feelings were echoed by Igor Suzdaltsev, who attended the rally with his friends and roped a Moscow Times reporter into taking their picture. “We are the middle class. We were told that we don't exist, but we do, and you can even touch us,” he said.

Putin's ruling United Russia party won a narrow parliamentary majority in the elections, but did so amid reports of vote rigging. A week of seething public discontent, driven by the middle class, culminated in the Bolotnaya Ploshchad rally, which was Moscow's largest protest since 1993.

Protesters have demanded that the Kremlin hold a repeat election and sack the head of the Central Elections Commission, Vladimir Churov, a longtime Putin friend and ally, who repeatedly dismissed reports of serious violations.

The government rejected both demands and instead proposed restoring direct gubernatorial elections and softening notoriously restrictive rules for registering political parties and presidential candidates – but only after presidential elections in March, in which no radical anti-Kremlin will be allowed to participate and which Putin is widely expected to win.

Putin has voiced an ambiguous stance on the protests, acknowledging their legitimacy but ridiculing their participants. In addition to comparing protesters to the Bandar-Log, he said during his call-in show that the white ribbons worn by many activists as a symbol of the protest reminded him of condoms.

The slight did not go unnoticed. Some protesters on Saturday brought condoms inflated like balloons, and one carried a homemade condom-shaped poster made to look like a space rocket bearing Putin's picture and the phrase “Let's go,” which Yury Gagarin uttered moments before he became the first man in space.

Dozens of prominent public figures, including opposition politicians, bloggers, journalists and musicians addressed the protesters from a large stage, many of them raising their voices to rile up the crowd.

Opposition Roll Call

Anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny and liberal opposition leader Ilya Yashin switched their voices from husky to calm and mild a few times while addressing the public.

Others who took the stage included liberal opposition politicians Vladimir Ryzhkov, Boris Nemtsov, Garry Kasparov and Ilya Yashin; rock musician Yury Shevchuk; journalists Leonid Parfyonov and Viktor Shenderovich; leader of the movement to protect the Khimki forest Yevgenia Chirikova; Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov, who had recorded a video message from the hospital; and even nationalist leaders Vladimir Tor and Vladimir Yermolayev.

Navalny was met with the loudest welcome from the crowd, while the nationalists were met with boos and whistles, as were socialite Sobchak and former minister Kudrin, both of whom have ties to Putin.

Presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov, also suspected of collaborating with the Kremlin, came to the protest but did not give a speech. A group of anarchists pelted him with snowballs; Prokhorov, who came without bodyguards, did not fight back.

A resolution passed at the rally reiterated previous demands for a repeat election and Churov's ouster and added proposals to "not give a single vote to Putin" during the presidential vote in March and to create a voter union that would investigate violations during the Duma elections.

Many speakers, including Navalny, Yashin and Shenderovich, said the large turnout meant protesters could speak with the Kremlin from a position of power, but they cautioned against violence for now.

Navalny told the crowd that he saw "enough people here to seize the Kremlin and the White House right now."

"But we will not do it because we are a peaceful force, although if the crooks keep deceiving us, we will take what is ours," he said.

"We don't want blood, come to your senses," Yashin said to authorities from the stage.

The event, however, ended without any serious conflicts or clashes with police, who earned praise from rights activists for their restraint and professionalism.

Counting the Crowd

Police said about 29,000 attended, higher than their count of 25,000 for the Dec. 10 rally. Organizers put the number at 120,000, higher than their estimate of 85,000 for the earlier rally. Independent monitors from the Citizen Observer electoral watchdog were keeping count at the entrance to the rally's venue, but they hadn't given their results as of Saturday night.

It also remained unclear whether any figures took into account the constant ebb and flow of protesters, many of whom only spent an hour or two in the cold at the rally but then were replaced by latecomers as they left.

The protest's sea of people, who patiently squeezed through the 49 metal detectors that formed the sole entrance to the downtown Prospekt Akademika Sakharova on Saturday, included political activists of all affiliations, from liberal to nationalists to anarchists, as well as ordinary people of various social status, from students to white collar-managers.

Most of them seemed to be enjoying themselves, despite the thermometer hovering at minus 3 degrees Celsius. Attempts by opposition leaders to rouse the public into a bellicose mood were largely unsuccessful, with an ironic vibe prevailing, just as on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Dec. 10.

But through smiling faces and humorous posters were everywhere, the people carrying them

spoke about serious discontent with the country's politics.

Yury Ivanov, 25, a businessman, said he came to protest the authorities' way of treating people in the last decade.

"If I didn't come today, I would feel ashamed every time I say I'm dissatisfied with those in power," he said.

Most protesters were also optimistic about their chances of turning the tide. Ivanov said he believed the protests already had had a huge effect, as indicated by the Kremlin's recent proposals for easing rules for parties and presidential candidates.

"They are on back foot now ... and will have to react to people's indignation," Ivanov said.

"It's possible to change the situation," agreed Alexander Podosinov, 52, an artist and photographer. A disabled man, he hobbled on forearm crutches, patiently making his way through crowds to be at the rally.

Khodorkovsky's Mother

"We will keep going until our complaints are addressed," said Yulia, 35, who works in television. She declined to give her last name or name the channel she works at to avoid problems with her employer, most of whom show a vehement loyalty to Kremlin — even if some employees appear to think otherwise.

Standing in front of the stage at the protest, some members of the older generation were smiling.

Valentina Legonkova, 67, employed in publishing business, said she was "glad that the people have bucked up."

"I hope there will be more of us" at future protests, she said.

Legonkova, who attended protest rallies in the late 1980s that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, said she wanted "freedom" and "democracy" for Russia.

Nikolai Sayunov, 57, an unemployed resident of the Pskov region who had come to Moscow to visit friends, said he took part in public protests in the 1990s and attended Saturday because he believed that power should be in the hands of the people.

"They wiped their feet on me," Sayunov said of the authorities. "I don't want to live in such a country."

Once-prominent leftist activist Viktor Anpilov was spotted by The Moscow Times distributing copies of Molniya, the newspaper of his unregistered Working Russia party, in the crowd while shouting crossly, "Off with corruption!" and "No more living like that!"

He spared only seconds for an interview, saying he was giving out the newspaper because he "wanted to inform the public in line with the Constitution, which gives me this right." He did not say what he was informing the public about.

Marina Khodorkovskaya, mother of jailed oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, also attended the event. Approached by a reporter as she walked away from the rally around 5 p.m., she said she had come to Prospekt Akademika Sakharova because she wanted her grandchildren "to live in a free country so they don't have to live abroad as many now do."

Staff writers Rachel Nielsen and Alex Winning contributed to this report.

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