

Putin Proposes Creating a Free Speech Space in Moscow

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The  **Moscow Times**

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Tuesday that Moscow should have a site similar to London's Hyde Park where people are always free to express their views, RIA-Novosti reported.

"In the future, we should follow the example of our neighbors in Europe and find some worthy place, like Hyde Park, and give everyone the chance to speak freely, openly on any issue, and media outlets could communicate that point of view to all citizens," Putin said at a meeting of university rectors.

Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park is famous for having hosted public meetings and orators, among them Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. It occupies a plot of land where in the 19th century demonstrators gathered in support of the rights of working-class citizens, including the right to free assembly.

Former Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov proposed a similar idea in 2009.

The opposition has in the past fought to hold demonstrations in highly visible areas of the

city, such as Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, located at the intersection of major thoroughfares Tverskaya Ulitsa and the Garden Ring Road. But Putin said Tuesday that the location of such a space was not crucial.

"In fact, it isn't important where people gather; it's important that society learn about their opinions, that the country finds out [about them], and modern media outlets can present that opportunity to all," Putin said.

The prime minister also commented Tuesday on plans for a demonstration in support of his presidential candidacy, saying organizers should cede to City Hall's request that the event be moved from organizers' requested site on Tverskaya Ulitsa and Manezh Square to a less central location, RIA-Novosti reported.

Putin's campaign had requested permission to hold a march and rally through the center of town on Feb. 23 with the participation of up to 200,000 people. City Hall asked the campaign to cut the number of demonstrators by half and suggested the grounds of the Luzhniki stadium complex in southern Moscow as an alternative rally site. On Monday, both sides held their ground on the issue, Gazeta.ru reported.

Opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov on Tuesday called the conflict a "show" in a message on Twitter.

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