

Putin Rally Raises Bar for Opponents

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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People listening to the rock band Lyube perform after a seven-minute speech by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in Luzhniki stadium on Thursday. **Sergei Karpukhin**

In a show of strength and administrative muscle that for its sheer size upped the ante for street protests, Prime Minister and presidential hopeful Vladimir Putin declared himself a true patriot to tens of thousands of people at Luzhniki stadium on Thursday and promised to fight for Russia.

The rally, which came less than two weeks before the March 4 election Putin is expected to win, was the prime minister's most concerted effort to head off the resurgent opposition movement, whose own massive rallies have become the largest political challenge of Putin's decade-long rule.

The rhetoric of the event was unusually conspiratorial, with Putin and other speakers describing an ongoing "battle for Russia" against unidentified enemies that they said were trying to destroy the country.

Putin's appearance was a surprise for many because he rarely addresses large crowds of supporters, and it was not announced. He took the stage after glowing remarks from several prominent supporters, including Mayor Sergei Sobyenin.

In a brief speech, Putin told the crowd that tens of millions of Russians shared their views about Russia and his return to the Kremlin, where he served two terms from 2000 to 2008. Twice he asked if the crowd loved Russia, provoking a resounding "Yes!"

"We won't allow anybody to meddle in our domestic affairs. We won't allow anybody to deny our will," he said.

In conclusion, he recalled the Battle of Borodino, which marked the beginning of the end of Napoleon's 1812 campaign. "We will die defending Moscow, like our brothers died," he said, reciting a poem by Mikhail Lermontov.

He added, "The battle for Russia continues, and we will win!"

Some attendees were star-struck by the appearance of the prime minister. "It doesn't get better than that," one woman said of Putin's seven-minute speech as she left the stadium.

"My dream man," said another woman, who joined the throng that headed for the exit immediately after Putin spoke, skipping a concert by the rock band Lyube.

Others were less impressed. "He is just trying to divide people by playing them against each other," a middle-aged man remarked to a friend.

Police put the number of attendees at 130,000, and the event's organizer — the All-Russia People's Front, an umbrella organization of pro-Putin groups — could face a 2,000 ruble (\$67) fine for surpassing the agreed-upon 100,000 limit.

The march and subsequent rally coincided with both the Defenders of the Fatherland Day, a national holiday, and the Maslenitsa festival. Inside the stadium, the atmosphere was festive, with traditional songs and dances and stalls selling barbeque, blini and mead.

While the recent opposition protests have attracted mostly urban middle-class voters, the majority of demonstrators at Luzhniki were rural and working-class voters, as well as military and state workers.

Some said they came of their own free will, but others said they were paid or forced to come by their employers or schools. The uniformity of the rhetoric on signs and in interviews, combined with a general resistance to speak to reporters, contributed to the perception that the contingent of forced attendees was large.

A woman who introduced herself as Galina, a school worker, was about to explain her attitude toward Putin when a woman standing with her told her to be quiet.

An elderly woman wearing an "I'm for Putin" bib also refused to comment, as did a man holding a trade union flag and many others wearing matching pro-Putin clothing and waving identical flags.

"They said that if we didn't come, we would have problems," said an 18-year-old student from a local technical institute, referring to his school's administration. He said he would probably vote for nationalist firebrand Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

Another student, Maxim, 18, said he and his friends were being paid to attend the event, but he didn't know by whom.

Allegations of busing and bribing nagged the last major pro-Putin rally on Feb. 4. This time, some attendees stressed that they had come of their own free will. "I'm for Putin. I came on my own two feet," one sign read.

By and large, those who said they supported Putin explained that there was no alternative and that they sought stability and opposed a revolution.

"Liberals say there are no independent courts, but during the 1990s the courts were criminal gatherings," said Viktor Samorodov, 42, a businessman from Samara.

"They say there is no free media, but in the 1990s the media was controlled by two oligarchs," he said, referring to Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovskiy.

The opposition has not called for a revolution, but Putin supporters seem to be whipping up fears about one by distorting the opposition's message.

Sobyanin, who served as Putin's chief of staff before being appointed mayor, joined the fray Thursday. "Sometimes ambitious politicians call us to revolution, but we won't let them sow discord in our country," he told the crowd.

Political scientist Sergei Kurginyan made similar remarks at a separate rally of 1,000 people outside the All-Russia Exhibition Center on Thursday. His Anti-Orange movement organized the rally and promised to create a new version of the Soviet Union.

The Liberal Democratic Party also staged a rally for its leader, Zhirinovskiy, on Pushkin Square, while the Communist Party and opposition group Left Front co-lead a demonstration on Teatralnaya Ploshchad.

Ten Left Front and 11 Solidarity activists were detained on Frunzenskaya Naberezhnaya in connection with a pro-Putin march, that preceded the Luzhniki rally. Nine of the Solidarity activists have been released, Interfax reported.

At Luzhniki, many attendees acknowledged that they were state workers. A man in sports clothes barked orders to a group of Uzbek workers, one of whom told The Moscow Times that he worked for the city.

Buses that clearly belonged to the city and were marked with slogans such as "We're for Putin" brought supporters from Zelenograd, a far-flung corner of Moscow.

The military and Emergency Situations Ministry provided food kitchens for the event, and Moscow's school food service supplied trucks, The Washington Post reported. Putin supporters are often accused of improperly using administrative resources on behalf of their candidate.

Vitaly, 40, a state worker, held one of the very few homemade signs visible at the event. "Blogger Navalny, Carnival Protests," it read, with a photograph of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny dressed up as a clown. "Navalny is just a showman," Vitaly said.

Opposition sign-making has increasingly become a competition of craftsmanship and wit. On Monday, a museum exhibition of homemade opposition signs opened at the Artplay gallery.

No such exhibition is likely to come out of the Luzhniki rally, as demonstrators by and large carried mass-produced signs with straightforward slogans such as, "If not Putin, then who?" and "Our vote for Putin" and "For Putin. That's It."

"For Putin. There are no alternatives," rock star Grigory Leps told the crowd, echoing a sentiment widespread among attendees, including Ruslan, a 32-year-old lawyer, who was elaborating on this point to a reporter when his friend chimed in, "We want to live in a country that's developed, like yours!"

Several African students attended under the supervision of a Russian woman who called the event a "real circus" but declined to elaborate. One of the Africans, a Kenyan student named Antony, said, "Putin is a good man, and he is fair with foreigners."

The show of political muscle as well as the theatrics of it all wasn't lost on Lyudmila Dokolina. A woman in her mid-60s, Dokolina said she represented a city-run disabilities group and had come to the event even though she supported "no one."

"Just like in Soviet times, something is turned into a show and people are forced to attend," she said. "I believe that 50 percent came for this reason, and I don't like it."

About 70 citizens of Uzbekistan were detained Thursday after apparently having been used unawares in a scheme to ridicule organizers of the pro-Putin rally.

The migrants were promised 600 rubles for attending the event at Luzhniki stadium, and some were given signs with the message "We Were Brought In by Instructions From Above," police said, Interfax reported.

Police said they had been tipped off about the ruse and detained the group before it joined the march of Putin supporters toward the stadium.

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