

City, Opposition Settle Rally Dispute

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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A lone protester at the elections office Thursday may be just the start. **Denis Sinyakov**

Opposition leaders and City Hall have agreed on the terms for the next large-scale opposition protest, likely heading off the prospect of mass arrests even as tensions continue to rise ahead of Sunday's presidential election.

City authorities approved an opposition rally on Pushkin Square on Monday, the day after the election, which Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is expected to win by a wide margin.

The city limited the number of participants to 10,000, meaning that organizers will be required to pay a fine if more show up.

The agreement comes as opposition leaders call for increased pressure to secure democratic reforms. City authorities have pledged to disperse unsanctioned protests and encampments.

Both sides say they want to avoid violence, which would change the nature of the movement that grew up in response to Dec. 4 State Duma elections perceived as fraudulent. It has since

expanded into a call for general reform.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny has said permanent encampments are a way to force authorities to meet opposition demands: new Duma elections and, increasingly, the resignation of Vladimir Putin.

"At a certain time, we'll take to the streets, and we won't disperse," he said in a recent discussion published in Afisha. "The authorities will use force against [us]. ... It's the only way to battle tyrants," he said.

Putin supporters have accused the opposition of plotting a revolution similar to the one that brought Viktor Yushchenko to power in Ukraine in 2004.

On Thursday, Komsomolskaya Pravda published an [interview](#) with Mayor Sergei Sobyenin in which he referred to the Ukrainian protests on Kiev's central square.

"We will not have a Maidan," Sobyenin said. "We don't allow anybody to pitch tents in the city."

Sobyenin also said the size of the Russian protest rallies had been exaggerated.

Opposition leaders have not called for tent encampments at the March 5 rally, but some activists appear to be preparing for one.

Six activists from opposition group RosAgit were arrested on Pushkin Square on Wednesday while attempting to distribute tents. They were later released, Interfax reported.

RosAgit is a Navalny project, but the anti-corruption blogger's spokeswoman told Interfax that he had nothing to do with it. But "he supports this act as an example of grassroots initiative," she said.

Veteran opposition leader Boris Nemtsov told Interfax that he didn't know anything about RosAgit's distribution of tents. He said it was probably a provocation, an opinion shared by opposition leader and Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov.

"It's too cold, and people don't yet have the mindset to camp out in the streets," Ponomaryov said.

Roman Dobrokhov, leader of opposition group We, was one of the people attempting to hand out tents, and he said they were "symbolic."

He added that he and his group were intent on making sure that Putin didn't return to the presidency in May.

Earlier this week, City Hall rejected opposition proposals for protests March 8, 9 and 10.

Negotiations for a protest March 10 will continue, Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov tweeted Thursday.

Some opposition protesters have indicated that they will demonstrate with or without the city's permission.

More than 1,500 have [signed up](#) on Facebook to attend an unsanctioned rally March 5 on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad, a symbolic square close to both the Central Elections Commission and the headquarters of the FSB, the successor to the Soviet KGB.

"It's our right to protest without permission," said Vadim Korovin, who was among the detained RosAgit activists.

Korovin said the opposition's response to the presidential election would depend on how honest it is.

"Putin cares about winning in the first round more than he cares about our reaction," he said, adding that he had heard that pro-Putin voters would be bused in from the regions.

Applications from the opposition and a pro-Putin youth group to [protest](#) on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad were rejected last week.

The United Action Staff, a union of pro-Kremlin youth groups that includes Rossia Molodaya, said on its LiveJournal blog that its activists would occupy the square if the opposition tried to hold an unsanctioned protest there.

Police have promised not to allow any unsanctioned rallies, a spokeswoman said, Interfax reported Tuesday.

On Dec. 5, police swiftly arrested opposition activists, including Navalny and Ilya Yashin, after they tried to turn a sanctioned protest into an unsanctioned march.

More than 20 rallies and protests are scheduled to take place in the city center March 4 and 5, RIA-Novosti [reported](#), citing a source in City Hall.

The pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi has been given permission to demonstrate on Manezh Square on March 5, opposition leader Sergei Parkhomenko wrote on Facebook on Wednesday.

Multiple calls to the group's spokeswoman went unanswered Thursday.

"We won't sit on our hands if the opposition breaks Russian law and tries to destabilize the country," Nashi leader Maria Kislitsyna said Tuesday in a statement on the group's website.

London-based think tank Chatham House said in a report [published](#) last month that "the elections of 2011-12 mark the beginning of the end of the Putin regime."

"A next wave of protest in the Soviet-era provincial industrial cities, fueled by social and economic discontent, is inevitable," the authors of the report wrote, titled "Putin Again: Implications for Russia and the West."

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