

A Day-by-Day Look at This Week's Protests

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Protesters facing off with OMON riot police through barricades and the cloud of an opposition-tossed smoke bomb at Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Sunday. **Igor Tabakov**

As anti-Kremlin protests ended a fourth straight day Wednesday, demonstrators seemed to have proven that public anger is high enough to draw crowds onto the street regardless of the weather, the time of day or night, and police detentions.

After a two-month lull, the latest wave of protests began on Sunday, the eve of President Vladimir Putin's inauguration, with a massive and unprecedentedly violent rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

The protesters then declared a round-the-clock vigil in central Moscow and have pursued smaller, peripatetic demonstrations that move from square to square to avoid protester detentions by the seemingly ever-present OMON riot police.

The protests pose a challenge to the authorities, who had hoped that scheduling a four-day public holiday around Putin's inauguration would encourage the middle class, who make up the bulk of the demonstrators, to go to their dachas or on mini vacations abroad rather than hit the streets.

This week's rallies also have come as a surprise to many observers, who noted that interest among protesters had been declining in the months since tens of thousands of people first rallied on Bolotnaya Ploshchad in December to decry disputed State Duma elections.

Here is a day-to-day look at how the protests have played out this week.

Sunday: Violence

Despite many pessimistic predictions, the demonstration dubbed as the "March of a Million" unexpectedly drew from 30,000 to 100,000 people on Sunday, according to organizers and Moscow Times reporters attending the event.

Heralded as a sanctioned peaceful march against Putin's third presidential term, the event ended up with police detaining at least 450 people, including the fractured opposition's main leaders, even before many could step on the stage.

Violence broke out when a group of OMON riot police officers whipped out their batons and struck several protesters in an attempt to push back thousands of people advancing toward them from a bridge leading to Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

The riot police started picking off people from the crowd, often using force and dragging them behind a wall of policemen. A few demonstrators started throwing chunks of asphalt, poles from their posters, glass and plastic bottles, smoke bombs and even umbrellas at the police. Police officers initially responded by throwing the objects back at the protesters.

Dozens of people on both sides received medical aid. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov later said on Dozhd television that the police had acted properly and should have been even rougher with demonstrators.

"This is the first trophy for the museum of the revolution," said Mikhail Zotov, 31, a computer programmer. He held up on a pole an OMON helmet that he had retrieved from the Moscow River along Bolotnaya Ploshchad. Nearby protesters cheered as Zotov paraded the helmet around.

Across town at the Poklonnaya Gora war memorial, a pro-Kremlin rally that police said was attended by 30,000 people took place without incident. (Some news reports estimated that only about 3,000 people attended.) The crowd waved the flags of the state postal service and ruling United Russia party, and musical groups performed on a stage.

Monday: Nonstop Vigil

As Putin was sworn in as president for the next six years on Monday, the city center erupted with more opposition gatherings and marches down leafy boulevards.

Police made about 300 detentions, sometimes arresting the same person several times

at different places, as thousands of demonstrators were chased from street to street by the riot police.

The long day of wandering Moscow's streets for a place to protest turned into an even longer night as hundreds of demonstrators led by anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny and leftist activist Sergei Udaltsov attempted to kick-start a nonstop protest.

Having been pushed from place to place all Monday, the demonstrators were called to the Kitai-Gorod district in the late evening and were joined there by Navalny and Udaltsov, who were released from jail that afternoon for their Sunday activities.

Surprisingly, police allowed the group to settle on a square around a 19th-century chapel dedicated to heroes of Plevna, a town in Bulgaria that was the site of a key battle in the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-78. Although the protesters camped on the square near the Kitai-Gorod metro station, they used the rallying cry of "Occupy Old Square," referring to the adjacent Staraya Ploshchad, where the presidential administration is located.

Police tactics varied from a welcoming attitude to cunning, if obvious, bureaucratic intervention.

At first, police Colonel Oleg Sigunov wandered cheerfully among protesters, standing and listening to them sing songs in English and tapping his foot. The feeling in the square was of a small music festival.

"I give the orders here, and I don't see any violations," Sigunov said, adding that he was in charge until sunrise. "It's a good atmosphere."

But just as some demonstrators settled down to sleep around 2:30 a.m., they were forced to move as water trucks arrived to clean the square, followed by the police.

Navalny led demonstrators up Ulitsa Maroseika and Ulitsa Pokrovka to the sound of beeping car horns and the bizarre sight of Dozhd television host Pavel Lobkov riding in a red convertible with the Soviet national anthem blasting from speakers.

Then about 500 people, carrying water, camping mats and supplies donated via an Internet appeal, migrated to the next venue, this time an area near a statue of a Kazakh poet on Chistoprudny Bulvar.

There the "Groundhog Day"-like scene continued: Navalny spoke to the crowd, the riot police caught up and blocked off the boulevard, and the crowd moved on, somewhat depleted and dissipated.

It was a long night, but the atmosphere remained light and committed.

"The cops will drive the protesters away. But they'll gather again," said Pavel Kostamarov, 36, a film director. "It's like water: You have to find the pores, the little streams, the chinks in the armor. Then you soak through and form a big mass in the ocean. When we have an ocean, all the rats will drown."

About 300 people made it back to the square, where police detained, once again, Navalny

and Udaltsov. But the protesters were allowed to camp out, and by early morning, with the sun beating down, two young women were playing badminton and a game of charades was in full swing in front of the chapel. Somebody had scrawled, "Putin is a thief!" and "Freedom forever" onto the statue's base.

A few minutes later, the police swarmed in, snapping up 10 or so protesters and sending the rest on their peripatetic journey once more.

Tuesday: Braving the Rain

A group of hundreds of protesters spent most of the day Tuesday on Chistoprudny Bulvar, using large rolls of plastic hanging from trees to protect them from rain showers. Several activists handed out free sandwiches and hot tea. Many people brought camping mats to sleep on for a second night of round-the-clock protests.

Some demonstrators joined the group right after court hearings and two days of detention for their involvement in Sunday's protest.

Police said more than 200 arrests were made Tuesday, including Left Front leader Udaltsov and Navalny, who was detained twice Tuesday evening. Also briefly detained were socialite Ksenia Sobchak and State Duma Deputy Dmitry Gudkov, of A Just Russia, who joined the protesters as they walked from place to place, trying to keep one step ahead of the police.

Sobchak called her detention illegal. "It was an absolutely illegal detention. We didn't chant, we didn't stand with signs. I walked around town with a group of people who didn't want to separate," she wrote on Twitter.

The protesters then made their way to the Kitai-Gorod metro station, where riot police and at least a dozen police vans were waiting for them. After that, the people moved to the Pushkinskaya metro station and down to the headquarters of the Itar-Tass state news agency at Nikitskiye Gates. A group of riot police officers clustered around the front entrance, protecting the building.

Later on, small groups of demonstrators dispersed themselves throughout the city, and the detentions continued as police pursued them on foot and in cars.

Many activists were released shortly after being taken into custody, only to rejoin protesters and be arrested again.

As a group of about 50 protesters was detained by riot police shortly after 1:00 a.m. Wednesday, the mood was light-hearted, with protesters jostling each other to get in the waiting police vehicles.

"What is going on now is wonderful," Alexei Arkhipov, a teacher watching the detentions, told The Moscow Times. "It's a very civilized answer to brute force when people climb into police vans voluntarily and applaud one another."

Udaltsov was detained again in the early hours of Wednesday near Patriarch Ponds and he and Navalny were later sentenced to 15 days in jail. Udaltsov announced through his lawyer Nikolai Polozov that he would go on a hunger strike.

In a possible mixed signal from the police, Nikolai Belyayev, an activist with the League of Voters, wrote on Twitter early Wednesday that riot police had "refused to detain people on Arbat." The information wasn't confirmed by the authorities.

Separately, the U.S. State Department expressed concern about reports of violence in Moscow during the protests and arrests.

Wednesday: A Free Ride

Hundreds of opposition activists joined several thousand Communists in a Victory Day march down Tverskaya Ulitsa that was also a show of resilience for the nonstop protest.

The protesters, many wearing the opposition movement's emblematic white ribbon, denounced Putin as a thief and called for his resignation. They stood out from the majority of marchers by their relative youth and aggressive slogans, prompting curious looks from marchers with the mainstream Communists. Police estimated the entire crowd at 3,500, according to a statement on the official website.

Their appearance on Wednesday could signal growing solidarity between the protest movement and the Communist Party, the country's most powerful political force after the pro-Kremlin United Russia.

Left-wing forces are prominent in the opposition movement. One of its most visible leaders, Udaltsov, is an avowed Stalinist whom many believe could eventually lead the Communists.

But while Communists interviewed by The Moscow Times said they shared the opposition's distaste for Putin, who was inaugurated on Monday, they expressed suspicion about some of its most prominent faces.

"Kasyanov, Nemtsov, Ryzhkov — they're no different from Putin," said Yury Gorbach, 47, a worker at Metrovagonmash, which manufactures metro train cars. "They just want power."

Wednesday's march ended with a rally on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad in front of the headquarters of the Federal Security Service amid reports. Later hundreds of opposition activists began gathering in Alexander's Garden, by the Kremlin walls, and at Chistiye Prudy, followed by the police.

Staff writers Roland Oliphant, Rachel Nielsen, Natalya Krainova and Alexandra Odynova contributed to this report.

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