

Hundreds of Arrests Set Grim Backdrop for Victory Day Celebrations

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OMON troops stream down the street to head off protesters in downtown Moscow Tuesday. **Natalya Krainova**

As Moscow gears up to celebrate its victory in World War II, 67 years ago Wednesday, the shadow of political conflict shrouds the capital as hundreds of arrests cloud Victory Day festivities. ☒☒

Police said over 200 arrests were made Tuesday and overnight Wednesday on the eve of the anniversary, including repeat detentions for Left-Front leader Sergei Udaltsov and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, who was arrested twice in a single evening, Interfax reported. Socialite Kseniya Sobchack and State Duma Deputy Dmitry Gudkov were also among those arrested during the protests against President Vladimir Putin's inauguration, though they were later released.

A group of hundreds of protestors spent most of the day Tuesday on Chistoprudny Bulvar,

using large rolls of plastic sheeting attached to the trees above the heads of the protesters to cover them from the rain. Several activists were handing out free sandwiches and hot tea. Many people brought plastic camping mats to sleep on.

At about 7:30 p.m. teams of OMON riot police armed with batons dashed toward protesters, many of whom did not have time to escape arrest. Dozens were detained, largely without the use of force.

The protesters fled to the Kitai-Gorod metro station on foot, where riot police and at least a dozen police vans were already waiting for them. Groups of demonstrators dispersed themselves throughout the city, and arrests continued as police pursued protesters on foot and in cars.

About 10 riot police gave chase to a group of nearly 100 protesters who scattered in the Arbat neighborhood just before midnight. One group of riot police, who hit lamp posts and fences with their batons as they ran, were joined by plainclothes police officers wielding batons as they arrested a group of six protestors in a residential courtyard on Plotnikov Pereulok. A local resident, Ilya Arbatsky, who was walking his dog at the time of the arrests, said that the protestors were all teenagers, with none over the age of 20.

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

At about 9:45 p.m., protest leaders Ilya Ponomaryov and Aleksei Navalny were seen in the midst of a crowd of cheerful supporters marching down Tverskaya Ulitsa towards Manezhnaya Ploshad. Sobchak and Navalny were detained outside the ITAR TASS agency building on Bolshaya Nikitskaya, in the rain, at about 10:30 p.m.

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

Udaltsov was arrested later in the early hours of Wednesday morning near Patriarch's Ponds. He announced through his lawyer Nikolai Polozov that he will hold a hunger strike. He will remain in custody at least until a court hearing appointed for Thursday.

As another group of about 50 protestors was detained by riot police shortly after 1:00am, the mood was light-hearted, with protestors jostling each other to get on the waiting police vehicles. The driver of one of the city buses filmed the protestors being led on to his bus on his mobile phone.

"It's very beautiful what is going on now," Aleksei Arkhipov, a teacher who was watching the events unfold, told The Moscow Times. "Because when people climb into police vans voluntarily and applaud each other it's a very civilized answer to brute force."

After being released, Sobchak and Gudkov later met with about 50 supporters near the Barrikadnaya metro station. Police broke up the meeting and arrested several

demonstrators, despite Gudkov's protests that as a State Duma deputy he could hold meetings with citizens without permission from authorities.

Those arrested included Navalny, who came to attend the meeting immediately after he was released from his detention earlier in the evening. Navalny's lawyer later said on Twitter that he was being kept in a truck outside the detention center and called for supporters to bring food and water. ☒

The arrests came as demonstrators continued a second night of round-the-clock mobile protest of Putin's inauguration Monday. Police said the 200 arrests made Tuesday included repeat arrests of individuals that rejoined protesters after being released. Police said about 300 were arrested Monday. ☒

A spokesman for the U.S. State Department expressed concern about reports of violence in Moscow during the protests and arrests. "We are troubled by reports of violence in Moscow during the protests on May 6th and by the arrests that have been carried out over the last three days," State Department deputy spokesman Mark Toner said, Bloomberg reported.

"We are disturbed by images of police mistreatment of peaceful protesters, both during the protests and after detentions ... We want Russia to fulfill its own potential, and that means giving people the chance to freely express themselves," he said. ☒☒

Opposition activists called for demonstrators to converge at Pushkin Square at 11 a.m. Wednesday, where a sanctioned rally was being held by the Communist Party. Opposition organizers clarified on Facebook that they did not want to join the communist rally, but use it as a way to gather legally for a march down Tverskaya Ulitsa toward the Kremlin. Demonstrators arriving at the scene began reporting a heavy police presence via Twitter.

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