

Rally Defies Threat of Fines, Rain

By [Rachel Nielsen](#)

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Tens of thousands of protesters walking along the Boulevard Ring in a March of Millions demonstration Tuesday. **Igor Tabakov**

Tens of thousands of people braved a thunderstorm and the threat of staggering fines Tuesday to march through the city in the first sanctioned protest against President Vladimir Putin since his inauguration May 7.

The march along the Boulevard Ring and the rally on Prospekt Akademika Sakharova remained peaceful despite speculation that a crackdown would follow police raids against the organizers the day before and the passage of a law last week massively increasing fines for illegal protests.

Putin touched upon the increased tension in his address to the nation marking the Russia Day national holiday and appeared to attempt to defuse the sense of an impending standoff.

"It is important to listen and to respect each other, to seek mutual understanding and find compromise, to unite society around a positive and constructive agenda," he said according

to an official Kremlin [transcript](#) of the speech.

Despite some pundits' warnings that the opposition is radicalizing, Tuesday's protest resembled the peaceful rallies seen over the winter and police presence was markedly more modest than at the May 6 march, which ended in a clash between protesters and police.

"This government is not a legal one," said 41-year-old musician Slava Golikov, explaining why he had joined the protest again after being detained on May 6 for obstructing police by linking arms with others.

Protest co-organizer Sergei Udaltsov [claimed](#) that more than 120,000 participants had attended, while police [officially](#) put the figure at 15,000.

As during previous protests, participants formed a motley crew ranging from red-flag waving left-wingers and communists, liberal middle-class activists with orange banners and nationalists displaying Tsarist-era colors, swastikas and even Nazi-style uniforms.

A middle-aged woman handed a nationalist flyer to Tamil Gizatullin, an ethnic Tatar who had arrived by train from Kazan.

Gizatullin, 65, said he wasn't concerned about the nationalist presence. He said that he spent half his monthly pension on the train ticket, but that he felt compelled to attend after Monday's raids.

"That was the last straw," he said.

Protesters followed police orders directing them along a route from Pushkin Square along the Boulevard Ring to Prospekt Akademika Sakharova.

Not a single detention was reported.

Chants of "Putin is a thief" and "We are in power here" were coordinated by protest leaders while the march paused several times to let participants arriving late get through metal detectors.

Marchers cheered as they turned onto Prospekt Akademika Sakharova, which had been the site of the largest opposition protest on December 24.

Speakers addressed the crowd from an enormous stage, but despite a gargantuan screen that showed them in close-ups, speeches were barely audible in the wide space.

Udaltsov, who had attended the protest in spite of a summons to appear before investigators for questioning, was the first to speak. He proposed a revival of last month's round-the-clock opposition camps, and demanded the release of activists arrested by police for the May 6 violence.

He also suggested holding the next protest on October 7, and calling for a nationwide "political strike" beforehand.

Other speakers included solidarity co-leader Boris Nemtsov, and A Just Russia State Duma

Deputies Ilya Ponomarev and Gennady and Dmitry Gudkov. They called for the opposition movement to improve its organization.

While most of those who took to the stage got a warm welcome, former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, who was widely accused of being corrupt, was met by boos.

Meanwhile, police officers approached Nemtsov and Udaltsov behind the stage to hand them summons for questioning by the Investigative Committee after the rally.

Environmental activist Yevgenia Chirikova told the crowd that Alexei Navalny, the charismatic blogger-turned opposition leader, would not speak, as he was being questioned by investigators in the aftermath of Monday's raids.

He did, however, appear in a video clip from an earlier rally set to rock music. Chirikova then read off her own speech with her index finger pointed at invisible enemies as she waved her arm up and down.

After 4 p.m., the crowd began to thin and as singer Gleb Samoilo performed a few rock songs, another heavy downpour burst out of the skies, sending protesters towards the Chistiye Prudy metro station past lines of rain-soaked interior ministry troops in riot gear.

Some participants expressed frustration that change was not at hand.

"I think they have botched the protest," said a disappointed Vyacheslav Berezin, a taxi driver. Asked what opposition leaders should do next, he said he did not know.

"If we don't have elections, we'll have stagnation," said Sergei Badayev, who held up a sign saying "Don't steal, don't lie." He said it was most important to focus on installing democratic procedures, which he said would throw out bad rulers by design.

In protests that have been marked by wildly creative signs and costumes, Tuesday's rally had its own novelties. One new approach was to get police to change sides by handing them professional leaflets with legal statutes printed on them.

Another initiative saw dozens of volunteers distribute a 15-point questionnaire dubbed a "referendum," asking protesters what they thought and want to see done.

Many respondents checked boxes saying they don't trust the results of December's State Duma elections and that they support dissolving the City Duma.

Staff writer Alexandra Odyanova contributed to this report.

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