

Moscow Residents Assaulted for Protesting Against Construction in Park

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September 08, 2015



Stories of local residents around Russia protesting against construction or demolition work by organizing rallies and camping at construction sites to hinder the builders are a common occurrence.

In the small hours of Tuesday morning, a group of uniformed men arrived by bus at a popular park in northern Moscow and attacked several local residents who were camping there in protest against the construction of football facilities in the park.

One woman sustained a head injury and was taken together with another assaulted protester to a hospital Tuesday. Several men were detained by police who were present at the scene but who activists say did nothing to prevent the attacks.

As soon as the protesters had been forced out of the construction site by men who appeared to be employees of a private security company, the heavy machinery and excavators that the local residents had been keeping at bay — including by using themselves as human shields — rolled into the park.

Numerous requests for comment filed by The Moscow Times to City Hall, Moscow city police headquarters, city park management agency Mosgorpark, Bolshaya Sportivnaya Arena Luzhniki construction company and City Hall's construction department went unanswered Tuesday.

Covert Operation

The conflict between activists protesting against the construction of football fields, a parking lot and several administrative buildings in Park Druzhby, and municipal enterprise Bolshaya Sportivnaya Arena Luzhniki, which started the construction on those projects, has been under way for more than two weeks now.

Bolshaya Sportivnaya Arena Luzhniki's main project is the reconstruction of the main Luzhniki Stadium for the 2018 World Cup, but in addition to that, the company's website says it is building football fields in several Moscow districts.

Stories of local residents around Russia protesting against construction or demolition work by organizing rallies and camping at construction sites to hinder the builders are a common occurrence. It is not unusual for protesters to be threatened or even for violent clashes to break out between protesters and men working for private security companies hired by the developers.

"The evening before [the attack], the lights in the park had been turned off, it was pitch black," Andrei Novichkov, an activist with the architectural preservation organization Arkhnadzor who was in the park that night, told The Moscow Times on Tuesday. "And at around 4 a.m. [they] started to roll construction equipment and excavators onto the site."

The construction machinery was accompanied by some 30 men wearing black uniforms with the letters "KOB" printed on the back, Novichkov recalled. They started beating activists who tried to prevent the excavators from entering the site.

Protesters called the police, who arrived at the scene one hour after the assault began. Police officers didn't interfere with the fights, which were ongoing, and when the activists asked for help, they detained several of the protesters, Novichkov said, "despite the fact that the men in black didn't have any documents with them [proving they had the right to be at the site and force activists out of it]."

Men in Masks

"When I arrived at the park, I saw more than 30 men in black uniforms ... About 10 of them were wearing black masks that completely covered their faces," said Yelena Shuvalova, a Moscow City Duma deputy who went to the scene after protesters called her in the middle of the night and asked for help.

"A police officer was there too. I asked him to explain what was going on, but he refused to do so," Shuvalova, a member of the Communist faction in the City Duma, told The Moscow Times in a phone interview Tuesday.

"So I called [the police] once again and asked them to send someone who would be able to say

what was happening,” she said.

The head of a local police department and his deputy arrived, but they weren't able to explain the situation to her either, Shuvalova said.

“I demanded that they establish who the men in black were. The deputy checked the documents of only two of them for some reason,” the politician said. “They showed him papers saying they were from Cossack organizations from different parts of Moscow,” she added.

Cossacks, who historically lived in semi-military communities and ensured law and order under tsarist rule, have in recent years resurged to prominence in quasi-militant groups that present themselves as the guardians of traditional values.

Activists and media reports said that the men were employees of a private security agency named KOBR, but its director Viktor Zaplatin denied his company had anything to do with what happened in the park this week, saying the agency doesn't have any contracts with the construction company.

“Any private security agency has to identify itself fully on its uniforms. If it were a private security agency, it should have said ‘Private Security Agency KOBR,’” Zaplatin told The Moscow Times in a phone interview Tuesday. He added that his employees do not wear uniforms like those worn by the attackers in the park.

Zaplatin admitted that KOBR is an acronym for a Cossack squad, and said he was a Cossack “ataman” (commander) himself. He claimed that his men would never take on a job like this.

“This wasn't about providing security or protection. Private security guards can't be involved in anything like this,” he said.

Novichkov from Arkhnadzor said that local residents had recognized some of the assailants as having aggressively taken part in several other similar confrontations in the neighborhood.

“They were just hired thugs,” he told The Moscow Times.

Police Promise

Shuvalova from the Moscow City Duma said she had submitted a detailed complaint to Moscow police chief Anatoly Yakunin's office immediately after her visit to the park.

“I went straight to Petrovka 38 [the headquarters of the Moscow police] and filed a complaint,” she told The Moscow Times.

Shortly afterward, she got a call from one of his deputies who told her the case would be investigated thoroughly, she said.

In the meantime, construction work in the park continues, said Novichkov, and the saga is apparently far from over.

As of 6 p.m. Tuesday, the men in black remained in the park, preventing some 50 protesters

from interfering with construction work that was in full swing, activist Maria Belyayeva told The Moscow Times.

A request for comment to the construction company from The Moscow Times went unanswered by publication time.

Earlier media reports cited construction department spokespeople as saying that two football fields and a sports ground were due to be built in Park Druzhby.

The department stipulated that there would be no major construction or cutting down of trees, and said all the work would be carried out by 2016.

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/09/08/moscow-residents-assaulted-for-protesting-against-construction-in-park-a49420>