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EUROPE NEWS | JULY 31, 2010, 8:20 P.M. ET

# Russia Breaks Up Protests, Arrests Leaders

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By RICHARD BOUDREAUX

MOSCOW—Russian authorities used a large police presence and the roar of car engines Saturday evening to stifle a protest by critics demanding freedom of assembly and the resignation of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Police arrested two opposition leaders and nearly 100 followers in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

About 200 activists gathered in Moscow to find the proposed site of their demonstration, Triumphalnaya Square, fenced off for a competition among souped-up stock cars. Moscow city officials had given a permit for the square to a sports car federation to block the anti-Kremlin rally.

Police officers surrounded the square and parked about 30 police buses nearby.



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Russian police clash with political opposition activists at a rally in Moscow.

Most of the protesters crowded into a block-long pedestrian arcade 20 feet wide between the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall and the barrier around the square. They began shouting "Freedom!" and "Russia without Putin!" and holding up signs reading "31," a reference to the Constitution's Article 31, which protects the right to peaceful assembly. One protester wore a soccer jersey with the number 31.

Their chants were barely audible except among themselves. They were drowned out by the stock cars, which raced in pairs

across the asphalt, spewing exhaust and kicking up dust with treacherous skidding maneuvers.

About 10 minutes into the protest, police officers waded into the crowd from either end of the arcade and began dragging away selected participants. Scuffles broke out, one resulting in broken windows at the Moscow Satire Theater next to the concert hall.

Elsewhere alongside the square, a woman asked Boris Nemtsov, a leader of the opposition Solidarity movement, to autograph a copy of his critical book about Mr. Putin. As he did so, police swooped in and shoved him in a van. A protest organizer, Sergei Udaltsov, head of the Left Front, was arrested after chaining himself to bars over a window of the concert hall.

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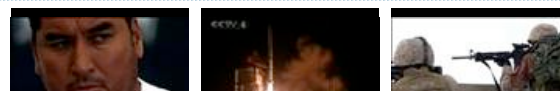
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Police said they arrested 35 protesters in Moscow and another 60 at a similar rally in St. Petersburg, which was also staged without a permit. Demonstrations on the same theme were authorized in 11 other cities, drawing small crowds.

Opposition activists began their "Strategy 31" demonstrations a year ago, holding them on the 31st day of each month that has that many days. Although Russian law allows authorities to negotiate with permit applicants only over the time and place of demonstrations, Moscow officials rarely authorize such protests. On May 31, the Triumphalnaya site requested by the opposition was given instead to a group holding a blood drive.

This month, city officials offered to allow the demonstration if the permit application excluded Eduard Limonov, a veteran opposition leader who first proposed the 31st demonstrations. Opposition leaders, divided over the offer, eventually rejected it.

Mr. Limonov and Lyudmilla Alexeyeva, a Soviet-era dissident and doyenne of Russia's human-rights community, attended Saturday's demonstration but left before police began making arrests.

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