Russian dissenters fight for the right to assemble, 2009-2014

31 May 2009 to: 31 May 2014

Country: Russia
Location City/State/Province: Moscow

Goals:
To have the Russian government abide by their interpretation of the Russian Constitution. This would entail not needing to gain permission for protests from the government, but simply needing to notify the government about these protests.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › anti-government banners and signs at protests
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors › waving the National Bolshevik Party flag
- 019. Wearing of symbols › Dressed as folktale figures
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › anti-government banners and signs at protests
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors › waving the National Bolshevik Party flag
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › anti-government banners and signs at protests
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors › waving National Bolshevik Party and Strategy-31 flag
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › anti-government banners and signs at protests
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors › waving National Bolshevik Party and Strategy-31 flag
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › anti-government banners and signs at protests
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors › waving National Bolshevik Party and Strategy-31 flag
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › anti-government banners and signs at protests
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors › waving National Bolshevik Party and Strategy-31 flag
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings › the last protest was more of a meeting, since they gained permission to have the protest

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Democracy
Group characterization:

• political dissenters

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Strategy-31, National Bolshevik Party
External allies:
The Other Russia, Moscow Helsinki Group, Memorial Human Rights Center
Involvement of social elites:
Lyudmila Alexeyeva, prominent human rights activist, was involved in a protest and then later the organization. President of the European Parliament Jerzy Buzek condemned the repression against Strategy-31. Eduard Limonov was a famous dissident.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• Moscow Helsinki Group
• National Bolshevik Party
• Strategy-31

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

• Strategy-31 Abroad

Groups in 4th Segment:
Part of the Strategy-31 leadership led by Lev Ponomarev but not including Eduard Limonov (exit)

Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length: 10 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Russian government

Campaigner violence:
Set off a smoke bomb

Repressive Violence:
Protests were broken up with arrests by regular and riot police almost every time. Police beat some protesters in the May 2010 protest.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
1 point out of 6 points

Survival:
0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
They were allowed to hold their protest in the end, which was one measure of success. However, no real changes were implemented by the government.

The authors of the 1993 Russian Constitution wrote, in Article 31, “Citizens of the Russian Federation shall have the right to assemble peacefully, without weapons, hold rallies, meetings and demonstrations, marches and pickets.”

In May 2009, Eduard Limonov, founder of the National Bolshevik Party and one of the leaders of The Other Russia, a dissident party coalition, formed Strategy-31, a campaign for freedom of assembly in Russia. They derived the name from the fact that Article 31 of the Russian Constitution granted this right. The organizers of this campaign aimed to change government and police policy in favor of public assembly. They argued that protesters should not need to seek out an official permit but instead should only inform the government that the protest will be taking place.

Starting in May 2009, Strategy-31 planned to host a protest in Triumfalnaya Square, Moscow, on the 31st day of every month that had 31 days. Despite claiming that they should not need a permit, they still requested one for 31 May. The Moscow government denied them the protest permit, citing a pro-government rally that was going to take place in the same location.

On the day of the protest, a couple hundred people gathered in Triumfalnaya Square, holding banners and waving the National Bolshevik Party flag (a red flag with a grenade in the center of it). Over 100 riot police immediately disbanded the protest and arrested the organizers, who they released the next day. Strategy-31 hosted protests without permits that July, August, and November. Each garnered a few hundred protesters, and police immediately halted each protest and arrested at least a dozen protesters for violating protest and assembly law.
The night of New Year’s Eve 2010, Strategy-31 hosted a protest. About 500 people attended. Many protesters dressed like Russian folktale figures. One such protester was Lyudmila Alexeyeva, the 82-year-old chairperson of the Moscow Helsinki Group, a prominent Russian human rights group. She dressed up as Father Frost’s helper, the Snow Maiden, and helped to lead the gathered crowd in chant and song. When the police broke up the protest, they arrested over 50 protesters, including Alexeyeva.

Over the next week, the story of the arrest of the prominent human rights activist spread across the globe. Important international political figures and groups, including the President of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek, and the US National Security Council, quickly condemned the police’s actions.

In 2010, small Strategy-31 protests of 50-100 people started taking place in at least 20 other Russian cities, and the protests in Moscow began growing in size. Two days before the 31 May protests, President Vladimir Putin announced that he supported public protests, which gave Strategy-31 hope that this protest would not be shut down.

The May 2010 protest in Moscow was the largest Strategy-31 protest to date, with around 2000 protesters in attendance. Shortly after the protest began, police started asking protesters to leave and then arrested over one hundred people, who did not comply. Police also beat several protesters during their arrests.

Strategy-31 continued to hold protests across the country over the next few months, but attendance at these protests fell to fewer than 100 people per event, each of which police promptly broke up. On 31 August, Strategy-31 created “Strategy-31 Abroad” and held small protests in London, New York, Toronto, and Tel Aviv.

In 2011, Lev Ponomarev, a leader of Strategy-31, announced that the organization would stop holding protests after the 31 March protest. He said that divisions within the leadership of the group caused the dissolution. He and other leadership figures, such as Lyudmila Alexeyeva, were willing to work with the government, while Eduard Limonov was not. However, Limonov decided to continue holding protests using the Strategy-31 name, though without the previous levels of support.

These protests continued to take place in Moscow through 2012 and 2013. The size of the protests diminished, and they ranged from a few dozen to just over one hundred. Most of the protesters were people that had helped to create Strategy-31 or had been part of the campaign since its early days. Each protest lacked authorization, and police arrested some of the protesters every time. Before their arrest, protesters waved the National Bolshevik Party flags or the Strategy-31 flag and chanted against the Russian government.

Police immediately detained activists at the 31 October 2013 protest who lit a smoke bomb. Police arrested Eduard Limonov on the same day, while he was travelling to Triumfalnaya Square. The police did not give a reason for his arrest, and they later released him without charge.

The Strategy-31 protests continued to take place through May 2014. Surprisingly, the Moscow government gave Strategy-31 a protest permit for 31 May. Protesters gathered in Triumfalnaya Square and discussed repression in Russia. The police did not make any arrests. Having been given permission to hold this protest in the desired location, Strategy-31 ended their campaign.

Research Notes

Sources:


Russian Constitution, Article 31.


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Irina Bukharin, 28/11/2015

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