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1,000 Rally Around the Tricolor on Flag Day

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By Vadim Nikitin

About 1,000 liberal-minded activists marched with a giant Russian flag near the White House on Tuesday, some to express mixed views about the country's course, others to stump for former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov as the next president.

The march, organized by the Union of Right Forces, culminated commemorations for the 15th anniversary of the failed 1991 coup, when Communist hard-liners calling themselves the State Committee for a State of Emergency, or GKChP, tried to oust Mikhail Gorbachev.

Despite Internet threats that the march would be shelled with a vintage grenade launcher, the sole disruption involved a young man who shouted "Glory to the GKChP!" as he stomped on the large flag. Marchers overpowered him and turned him over to the police. The unidentified man faced a charge of disorderly conduct, a minor offense that carries a penalty of up to 15 days in prison, Interfax reported.

Veterans of the early 1990s pro-democracy movement carried the giant flag from the White House to a monument honoring three young people who died during the Aug. 19-21 coup attempt. Then-President Boris Yeltsin declared Aug. 22 as Flag Day to commemorate the failed coup.

"We don't look too bad together," Boris Nemtsov said as he embraced Irina Khakamada, who left his Union of Right Forces, or SPS, in 2004, and planted a kiss below her ear. The two looked relaxed as they marched with current SPS leader Nikita Belykh and a banner proclaiming "Let us preserve freedom for future generations." The Russian text of the slogan formed the acronym SPS.

After a flag was raised and the tsarist anthem played, Belykh warned that today "we are offered stability and order instead of democracy and freedom.

"In 1991 we made our choice," he said in a speech. "We are once again at a crossroads, democracy or totalitarianism, Europe or North Korea."

Admiral Alexander Usov, the father of one of the men who died trying to stop an armored vehicle on the night of Aug. 20, said he did not think his son would have turned up if the coup had happened today. "They came here because there was nothing to eat!" he exclaimed. "Although maybe not always in the best of ways, that problem at least has been solved."

The mostly middle-aged and elderly crowd cheered speeches remembering the defense of the White House and democracy in 1991, but they were more circumspect about the intentions of some speakers. "It sounds like he's already putting forward his candidature," grumbled a man as SPS member Eduard Vorobyov spoke about the need to revive the center-right democrats as a true opposition force.

The weakest reaction came after a speech by Yulia Malashova, who heads a youth group in support of Mikhail Kasyanov. The crowd coldly ignored her megaphone chant of "Go Kasyanov!"

Nemtsov and Khakamada reiterated their support for Kasyanov, who plans to run for president in 2008. Khakamada, who ran for president in 2004, said she would only run again if Kasyanov dropped out.

In contrast to some angry outbursts at other rallies over the weekend, the mood at the Flag Day gathering was generally upbeat and festive.

"I came here in 1991 to defend free, democratic Russia, and I come here every year to honor the flag," said a demonstrator, Valentina Tyshkevich. "Russia became a new country, although maybe not the one that we fought for.

"I personally benefited little from the changes after 1991. In fact, most of us who defended the White House got nothing out of it. Many of us even lost our jobs later," she said. "But I am happy because at least my children can now look forward to a better life."

Yakov Shagidevich, a retired computer scientist and SPS member, arrived at the rally with his granddaughter, Viktoria, who was born on Aug. 21, and grandson, Misha, 5.

"She was a symbol of our victory over communism, and that is why she was named Viktoria", he said.

Shagidevich said he believed that life had improved significantly since 1991. "The real poverty was under communism. They say that production has fallen. If the production of weapons and submarines has fallen, that can only be a good thing," he said.

Elsewhere, the Our Country movement on Tuesday delivered an 85-meter-long flag to Sakhalin Island after carrying it through dozens of Far Eastern towns during a 12-day car rally, Interfax reported.

In Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, activists of Young Guard, the United Russia youth organization, handed out tricolor ribbons and leaflets about the history of the flag to passersby.