

EUROPE

Protesters Hit Moscow's Streets to Fight Mass Renovation Plan

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR MAY 14, 2017

MOSCOW — Demonstrators packed a downtown Moscow avenue on Sunday, **angered by plans for the mass demolition** and replacement of huge apartment blocks and by what they called the highhanded way that City Hall, and by extension the federal government, **trampled on their basic rights.**

"We are not serfs," a hand-lettered sign pinned to the chest of one woman read, while another held aloft a placard reading **"Renovate the government!"**

A draft law, proposed by Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, would replace about 4,500 apartment buildings built mostly in the 1950s and '60s and currently home to about 1.6 million people, or more than 10 percent of the capital's population. **Much about the plan remains vague,** but the underlying idea is that owners would abandon their apartments on **the promise that the city would build them something better.**

The mayor and the government **seem rattled by the backlash,** with Mr. Sobyenin suggesting constant revisions and the federal parliament **postponing its vote on the law until July.**

After what for Moscow was a fairly large rally on Sunday — organizers said up to 30,000 people attended, whereas the police put the number at 8,000 — the mayor wrote on social media that the opinions voiced at the protest would be

taken into account. (Presumably he was not referring to repeated chants of “Sobyanin must go!” that occasionally morphed into “Putin must go!”)

The demonstration, organized mainly by women, galvanized people who described themselves as previously apathetic.

“I have never been to a demonstration before in my life,” said Leonid Sladkov, 68, a retired crossword puzzle designer who has lived since 1962 in Cheryomushki, a neighborhood where 121 out of 125 five-story apartment buildings have been designated for demolition. “They finally infiltrated my soul with their idiotic ideas.”

The mayor announced the plan during a meeting with President Vladimir V. Putin that was televised in late February. Although the city had already relocated about 160,000 families through a renovation program started in 1999 under the previous mayor, Mr. Sobyanin said, “there is still plenty of uncomfortable housing” and the new project would completely transform the city.

Mr. Putin gave the idea a public blessing, but seemed to backtrack last month by saying that “nothing should be forced upon people, and their rights should be fully respected.”

Critics are unsure what inspired the plan. Some think it was a misguided attempt to woo Muscovites, traditionally against Mr. Putin, into voting for him and Mr. Sobyanin, both of whom are up for re-election next year.

A more common explanation is that it is a gift to the powerful construction industry. Builders would gain access to vast swaths of valuable land to construct hulking towers where stretches of mostly five-story buildings now stand, replacing the 80 apartments in each building with hundreds to be sold for enormous profits.

Homeowners and tenants got virtually no say in the grandiose and wildly expensive beautification projects introduced by the mayor since he took office in 2010, which included knocking down hundreds of small kiosks that sold discount goods and widening the sidewalks. Such renovations were often seen as enriching the mayor's friends.

The anger finally boiled over because the latest plan literally struck too close to home.

“This was not something abstract like civil rights, like freedom of speech,” Julia Galyamina, a civic activist and linguistics professor who was one of the protest’s main organizers, said in an interview. “If you have an apartment and someone wants to confiscate it, that is awful. They are afraid.”

Although the Soviet Union distributed apartments at a time when private property did not exist, the Soviet-educated generation still running Russia lost sight of the fact that that mind-set shifted after the Communist system collapsed in 1991.

“They did not notice that our society has changed,” Ms. Galyamina said. “They thought they were doing people a favor to give them new apartments. The government did not consider that the people think of themselves as owners. They became owners and they want to decide for themselves: That is the main point.”

Take Cheryomushki, a neighborhood six stops on the Metro from the center of Moscow.

It was created in the late 1950s and '60s with hundreds of prefabricated apartment buildings rising in what had been cherry orchards, part of a nationwide wave of building to address a chronic housing shortage.

The graceless, boxy, five-story buildings here were christened Khrushchevki, after Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader who ordered their construction.

Designed to last just 25 years, they were revolutionary because ordinary people could get their own space away from communal apartments for the first time. In 1963, the movie “Cheryomushki” celebrated the freedom with a Soviet version of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers singing: “The whole apartment is ours, ours! The kitchen is also ours, ours.”

The district feels like a verdant oasis despite being surrounded by boulevards throbbing with traffic. Trees planted when the buildings went up now shade benches and playgrounds.

But the apartments have not aged well. And despite the protests on Sunday, one opinion poll suggests 80 percent of residents affected want new apartments.

The smallest apartments are about 300 square feet, including a tiny kitchen and one bathroom.

Alexei and Elena, both 30, were walking with their 6-month-old son, Artem, in the neighborhood. The infant is the fourth generation of the family to live in the building since his great-grandfather moved there in 1956.

“We will be happy if they tear it down. We have been waiting for that day our whole lives,” said Alexei, a car salesman, shrugging off any nostalgia. “We want something more modern.”

Given the tensions over the plan, some residents did not want to give their surnames.

His wife, weary of carting Artem up and down the stairs because there is no elevator, concurred. “We want to improve our lives,” she said. “You cannot even turn around in the bathroom.”

Supporters of the reconstruction plan catalog crooked walls, leaking ceilings, weak plumbing and faulty electricity. They are convinced that they will get something larger and better, echoing reports on state TV.

Maria Volkonskaya, a 32-year-old university lecturer in English literature, inherited her apartment in Cheryomushki from her grandparents, who had moved there in 1961. In an interview in the neighborhood last week, she said she did not want to move to a high-rise “human ant hill.”

The mayor's announcement drove her to read the new law, the Constitution and the housing code. “Everything connected with this law is suspicious,” she said. “When we start asking questions, there are no answers.”

For example, the draft law seems to guarantee only an apartment of exactly the same size, not larger nor in the same neighborhood, meaning residents could be pushed to Moscow's outskirts.

“We have to show the government that there is a limit,” she said. “They cannot behave as if we are just slaves who can be moved from one location to another and we should just be grateful for this wonderful gift that they prepared for us.”

Sophia Kishkovsky and Oleg Matsnev contributed reporting.

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