

The grandmaster vs. the Kremlin

Kasparov seeks to put fire into Russia's opposition

By Steven Lee Myers

MOSCOW: Garry Kasparov, the former world chess champion, took a pen and notebook and diagramed the protesters' march through St. Petersburg a week ago. Like a general reliving a battle or a player analyzing a winning combination, he drew circles and lines. He sketched Uprising Square and showed where the police had gathered in strength, blocking the street leading to the governor's office.

A tactical mistake! "This is typical for this government," he explained. "They protect themselves."

As a result only a few police officers guarded the main commercial street, Nevsky Prospekt. And so that was where Kasparov and thousands of others — as many as 5,000 according to some estimates — poured through a barricade and marched into the city's historic center, defying the government ban and the recent Russian history of

political apathy.

The whole thing lasted only two hours, ending with brief clashes with police and more than 130 arrests, including those of several opposition leaders, though not of Kasparov. Still it was one of the largest protests to date against the government of President Vladimir Putin.

And to Kasparov, it was a first crack in the authoritarian political system Putin

has created, one that Kasparov has committed himself to dismantling as presidential elections approach next March.

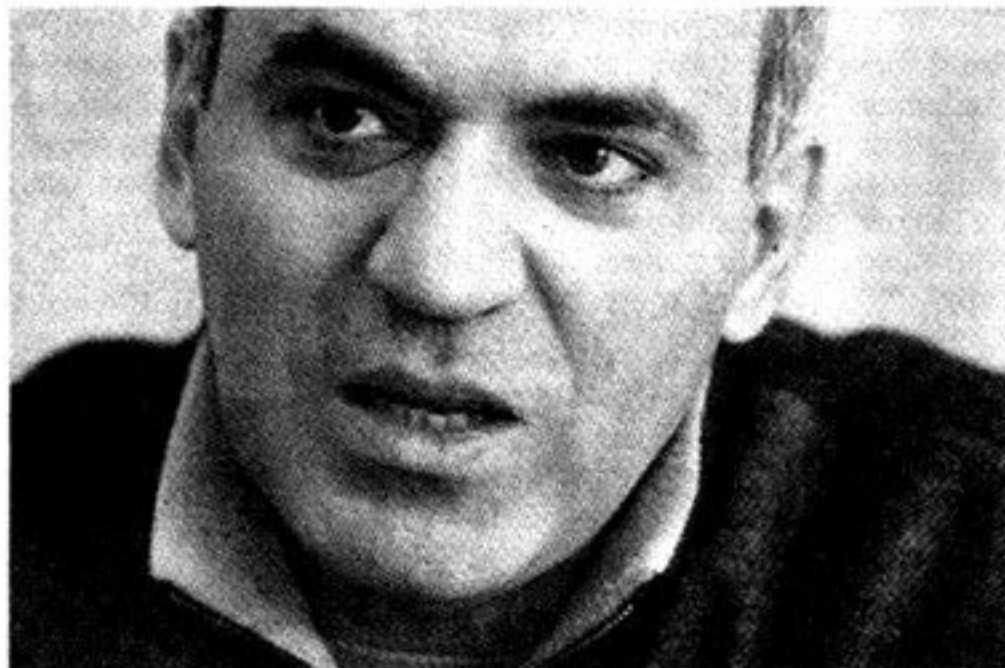
"We never saw such a protest," he said, speaking animatedly in fluent English. "Everybody recognizes it is a new page."

Kasparov, 43, is not Putin's only critic, but he may be the most prominent, the most articulate and the most fervent. He has brought to opposition politics

the same energy and aggression that characterized his chess, attacking Putin and the Kremlin — or the regime, as he repeatedly calls it — with language rarely spoken so bluntly in Russia.

"This regime is getting out of touch with the real world," he said in another interview not long ago. "It's a deadly combination of money, power and blood — and impunity."

Such attacks have drawn the scrutiny of the authorities, though so far nothing



Joseph Sywenkyj for The New York Times

The Kremlin is "getting out of touch," Garry Kasparov said.

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Kasparov is arguing for political freedoms at a time when Putin's approval rating hovers around an atmospheric 80 percent. The economy, fueled by high energy prices, is growing. A retail binge is under way, especially in Moscow and even outside of it. He argues that Putin's control of all levers of power has obscured the fundamental weaknesses in the system: the corruption, the extreme gap between rich and poor, the declining standards of health care, education, of living standards.

"At the end of the day," he said, referring to his campaign before the 2008 election, "it will depend on whether people care.

"You can't invent public protest. either exists or it doesn't exist."