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Navalny Defies Putin After Leaving Jail

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Alexei Navalny, seen with his wife, Yulia, speaking to reporters after his release from police custody Wednesday. **Mikhail Metzel**

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny used his release from jail on Wednesday to call on Russians to unite against Vladimir Putin, whom he said would try to snatch victory in a March 4 presidential election that was sure to be unfair.

Navalny, who has harnessed a mood change among Russia's urban youth against Putin's 12-year rule, was greeted by chants of "Navalny, Navalny" and applause from supporters who braved a blizzard to await his release from a Moscow police station.

Initially weary and dazzled by scores of television camera lights, Navalny swiftly embarked on a dissection of the disputed Dec. 4 parliamentary election, brandishing his slur of Putin's ruling party as a collection of "crooks and thieves."

"The party of crooks and thieves is putting forward its chief crook and its chief thief for the presidency," Navalny, dressed in jeans and holding a plastic supermarket bag full of clothes, told reporters after his release.

"We must vote against him, struggle against him," Navalny said. "If he does become president, he will not become a legal president. It will be an inherited throne."

Navalny, a 35-year-old anti-corruption blogger, was detained on Dec. 5 for obstructing justice at an opposition protest in central Moscow against alleged vote-rigging in the parliamentary election. He was sentenced to 15 days in jail.

His "crooks and thieves" slogan has struck a chord with millions of Russians from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea, turning him into the most prominent leader of the fragmented opposition groups that refuse to cooperate with the Kremlin.

Prime Minister Putin, who served as president in 2000-08, is almost certain to win the election, and his ruling party dismisses Navalny's slogan.

Putin supporters, who credit the 59-year-old former KGB agent with bringing order to Russia after the chaos accompanying the 1991 Soviet collapse, say the opposition movement represents a tiny section of Russia's 143 million population.

Diplomats say Navalny's mix of scorn for the ruling elite and rhetoric on illegal immigration make him a potential threat to Putin if he can mobilize large numbers of Russians.

But businesspeople caution that Putin remains Russia's most popular politician and is still viewed as the ultimate arbiter by the clans that own swathes of the world's biggest energy producer.

Navalny said he had enjoyed his time in prison as cellmates had read lectures on everything from politics to physics, though he quipped that he could not give the jail more than two stars.

He called on people to join mass protests planned for Saturday across Russia. The protesters will call for free and fair elections. The Russian authorities have sanctioned a protest of up to 50,000 people in Moscow.

"For Putin to leave, we must put forward our completely legal demands. So that Putin leaves, we don't need to smash up and burn shops or anything like that. People should come out and show their will, show that they are the power," Navalny said.

"What will happen on March 4 will not be presidential elections in the normal sense of the word so it is pretty senseless to take part," he said, though he added that if free elections were held he would "be ready" to run.

Navalny said he was not afraid of reprisals and that he had been fairly treated in prison by guards who he said were often more opposed to the Kremlin than the most die-hard opposition activists.

"I am not afraid. We are the majority, we are the power in this country, and we see their fear, we feel their fear," he said.

Surrounded by a pack of reporters, Navalny asked repeatedly to be allowed to embrace his wife, Yulia, whom he eventually hugged and kissed. "I feel a lot better now," she said.

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