

Protests Draw National Attention to Astrakhan

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Oleg Shein

Correction appended

Russia's protest movement descended on Astrakhan on Tuesday, with opposition leaders joining in support of an opposition mayoral candidate who has been on a hunger strike for weeks after losing an election he claims was tainted by fraud.

Dozens of supporters led by opposition figure Alexei Navalny and A Just Russia State Duma Deputies Dmitry Gudkov and Ilya Ponomaryov joined 1,500 local protesters in the southern city in standing with candidate Oleg Shein who, along with 20 others, stopped eating on March 16.

Shein, who ran for mayor as a candidate for the A Just Russia party, began the strike in protest of the results from the March 4 election that gave him just 30 percent of the vote compared

with 60 percent for his opponent, Mikhail Stolyarov of United Russia.

The 26-day protest has become a rallying cry for the wider opposition movement and came to a head when Navalny announced Monday that he would travel to Astrakhan to lend Shein support and bring wider attention to his cause.

Shein, 40, told Interfax that he would continue his hunger strike. While he insisted that he was holding strong, Ponomaryov said his colleague looked “far worse” than four days earlier when Shein visited Moscow for a party meeting.

Protesters attempted to erect tents in the city, but they were blocked by police who had been put on high alert, local media reported. The group was also confronted by members of the pro-Kremlin youth Nashi, Navalny wrote on his Twitter page.

In Moscow, Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov was detained during an unsanctioned protest with about 30 others outside Astrakhan region’s representative office, but was later freed.

In a sign that the media thaw, which emerged in the run-up to the election, is continuing for now, state-run and state-controlled news channels dedicated significant coverage to Tuesday’s events in Astrakhan.

As tempers flared, Alexander Zhilkin, the governor of the Astrakhan region, reportedly told Navalny and his supporters to “get away from the city,” according to Interfax.

But Ponomaryov denied that Zhilkin made such a harsh comment while meeting the delegation from Moscow.

“His position was constructive. He wants to resolve the situation and doesn’t want to be blamed for it,” Ponomaryov said.

Ponomaryov said that according to Zhilkin, the situation should be resolved through negotiations between Shein and Stolyarov. He added that the governor was only expressing his personal opinion, since he has no influence over the mayor officially.

Astrakhan region’s prosecutor’s office said in a statement Tuesday that it had found some violations in how the election campaign was conducted, but that they were minor and did not put the “authenticity of the vote count” into question.

Under the current law, a new election could only be called if a court declared the vote invalid.

Ponomaryov said the Central Elections Commission has released footage from Astrakhan polling stations to Shein who has said he plans to use the video as evidence in court to question voting at more than 100 polling stations.

The Communications and Press Ministry installed cameras at more than 90,000 polling stations around the country in response to mass street protests against alleged fraud in December’s State Duma elections.

The Central Elections Commission is expected to issue a report on Astrakhan’s elections during a meeting on Wednesday, a commission source said.

A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov said Tuesday that he would ask President-elect Vladimir Putin to address Astrakhan's hunger strike. Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told Itar-Tass that the president-elect is aware of the situation.

Mironov, a former Federation Council speaker who ran against Putin for president, tried to raise the issue with Putin earlier while congratulating him on his victory.

Mironov's intended appeal to Putin was met with skepticism from the head of Astrakhan's local Yabloko party branch, Vladimir Monin, who said Mironov appeared to be meddling politically in a legal matter.

"Doesn't he know the legal procedures? There is no way then to appeal to court [if he continues]," Monin said.

Monin suggested that the party doesn't have enough evidence that the election was rigged to appeal to the court.

"That's why they are trying to get support from Navalny, Udaltsov and maybe the Pope later on," he said.

But Ponomaryov said his intention — as well as that of his colleagues — was not to declare Shein a winner, but to shed light on violations committed during the counting of the votes.

Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Oleg Shein was 30 years old. In fact, he is 40.

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