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Embattled Navalny Kicks Off Mayoral Run

By Natalya Krainova

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Navalny, with his name in Russian in the background, speaking on stage at his campaign kickoff on Monday. **Sergei Karpukhin**

Anti-Kremlin leader Alexei Navalny rolled out his Moscow mayoral campaign at a downtown hotel on Monday in the company of hundreds of supporters, volunteers and reporters, touting solutions to problems like traffic and high utility costs and unveiling a slogan that points to his national political ambitions.

Dressed in gray trousers and a blue shirt, Navalny emerged in a hall of the hotel five minutes before the start of the event with his blonde-haired wife, Yulia, to applause from attendees.

In a half-hour speech, Navalny focused on the issue he has made his name with, fighting corruption, saying that if he became mayor he would make city spending transparent and put it under the control of Muscovites.

"We know how to change the world for the better, and we will definitely change the world for the better," he said, stumbling on his words out of emotion, to more applause from the audience.

Navalny, 37, faces an uphill battle to win the mayor's job. Although popular among many young people sympathetic to the anti-Kremlin protest movement he has helped lead, Navalny may struggle even to get registered to run in the Sept. 8 race.

He must collect the signatures of at least 6 percent of municipal deputies or municipal heads in 110 of the city's 146 municipal districts, and even if he manages to do that, he could be barred from running if he is convicted of the embezzlement charges he is currently battling.

In an ongoing trial in the provincial city of Kirov, Navalny stands accused of stealing a large amount of timber from a state-owned company. He was set to travel to Kirov on Monday night for another hearing in the case.

Before Navalny spoke at Monday's campaign kickoff at the four-star Renaissance Hotel, a presenter gathered 17 activists on stage who worked on the campaign platform and several municipal deputies who support him. In his speech, Navalny named them one by one, explaining why each of them joined his campaign.

Speaking about reforming the city budget, Navalny said spending powers should be transferred from City Hall to more local municipal authorities to streamline and speed up solutions to citizen problems.

In a 15-page booklet distributed at the event, Navalny also offered solutions to the problems of traffic jams and illegal immigration; methods to improve the quality and reduce the cost of utilities, healthcare and education; measures to eliminate red tape for business people; and police reform.

"But we understand that no reform will work without basic political conditions — people should elect their authorities," he said.

While campaigning for the city's top job, Navalny is clearly also touting his leadership abilities for a possible future presidential run, which he has spoken before about wanting to make. Volunteers handed out small paper flags and stickers bearing Navalny's name on them with the slogan "Change Russia, start with Moscow!"

The far-and-away favorite in the mayoral race, acting Mayor Sergei Sobyanin. already has significant national connections, having served as Kremlin chief of staff before taking the mayor's job more than two years ago.

A total of 34 candidates had submitted their documents to the Moscow City Elections Commission as of Monday, including Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of liberal opposition party Yabloko, and State Duma deputies Ivan Melnikov of the Communist Party, Nikolai Levichev of A Just Russia and Mikhail Degtyaryov of the Liberal Democratic Party.

Two young volunteers told The Moscow Times after Navalny's speech that they had not studied the programs of other candidates or looked into their biographies, but they still preferred Navalny because they were disappointed with mainstream politics in general.

Ksenia Petrova, 18, said Navalny was honest and enthusiastic and offered "real methods for fighting corruption."

Vasily Drovetsky, 22, a realtor, said he supported Navalny's political views, which he defined as "liberal-nationalist or liberal-democratic" and said Navalny was "good at managing his [anti-corruption] projects." Drovetsky said he believed the other candidates were "spoilers" or "fake opposition."

Another volunteer, Arman Tuganbayev, 15, said he had been following Navalny's activities since a rally against election fraud following disputed State Duma elections in December 2011 and would volunteer for Navalny's headquarters unofficially because he was a minor.

"I heard about the falsifications at the elections, attended [opposition] rallies a couple of times, saw the good and nice people who are going there and started helping [the opposition] unofficially," Tuganbayev said.

The teenager said he understood the importance of volunteers for Navalny, who gets virtually no television coverage.

"The biggest problem for Alexei is that citizens learn most information from television, but he has no access there. Therefore, he has to bring his ideas to people on the streets," Tuganbayev said.

Before the event, as the songs of popular 1980s Soviet rocker Viktor Tsoi played gently in the background, attendees waited in a hall decorated with huge billboards depicting Navalny and his mayoral program.

Part of the billboards showed Navalny looking into the distance with skyscrapers in the background and bore his campaign slogan: "Change Russia, start with Moscow!"

The other billboards read "This is what we will make Moscow look like" and listed the six main priorities of Navalny's campaign: "Honest budget," "The official about whom you know everything," "In your courtyard, there is more authority than in City Hall," "Authority as a service," "Competition and development of business," and "Changes in Moscow are key to changes in Russia."

Before the event, guests were treated to cold juice and plums, and afterward they were offered tea or coffee to go with red fish sandwiches and small chocolate-filled pies.

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