

# Russian Opposition Leader Campaigns Against Voter Apathy

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Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny

NOVOSIBIRSK — Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader who organized massive street protests in Moscow against Vladimir Putin four years ago, had a much harder time drawing a big crowd in Siberia's largest city last month.

Maybe it was the scorching heat of the short Siberian summer that kept the size of the weekend rally to about 1,000 people.

Maybe it was the disillusionment and apathy that many Russians are feeling about their political system these days.

Or maybe it's that Navalny's anti-corruption message is being drowned out by a Kremlin media campaign increasingly focused on the separatist war in Ukraine and the standoff with the West.

As a result, Russians across the vast country seem to have become so fixated on Ukraine that their own economic and social problems are getting pushed to the back burner.

"You can see that the government has succeeded in imposing its own agenda. It's all about Ukraine, America," Navalny told The Associated Press while on the campaign trail in Novosibirsk.

"It's important to run in elections and promote the real issues and not talk about imaginary things like fascists and gays in Europe who are attacking Russia," he said.

The charismatic, 39-year-old Navalny organized the demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 that drew tens of thousands of people to the streets of Moscow before Putin was elected to a third presidential term. The blogger and corruption fighter coined the now widely used description of the Kremlin-backed political party United Russia as one of "crooks and thieves."

Navalny was convicted last year in a fraud case widely seen as a vendetta by the Kremlin for his anti-corruption activities, and he was given a suspended sentence of 3½ years that bars him from elective office until 2018. His brother was also convicted and is in prison.

He and others in the opposition are trying to persuade Russians to take part in regional elections in September, which are seen as a dress rehearsal for the national parliamentary vote next year.

Most of the people who came to meet Navalny at his Novosibirsk rally seemed to have limited expectations but were eager for a morale boost from him.

Among those who showed up were a few dozen rowdy men carrying the flags of the Russia-backed rebels in Ukraine. The men were kept on the fringes of the gathering, jeering and shouting abuse at Navalny, who at one point brought one of them onstage to show he was open to discussion.

Navalny campaigned in the city wherever he could. He talked to commuters on the subway, handed out leaflets to pro-Putin activists who shouted "traitor" while picketing his rally, and had a chat with anyone who had a question.

In a typical encounter, he was stopped by a security guard in his 50s who wanted to know if Navalny, vilified by state television as a U.S. spy, was out to overthrow the government. Navalny handed him a leaflet documenting the corruption and opulent lifestyles of top government officials and Putin's friends. The security guard sighed: "Corruption is everywhere. They steal in America, too."

No matter how hard he tried to steer the conversation to local problems of inadequate housing and bad roads, Navalny was asked again and again about his stance on Russia's annexation of Crimea and the pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Keeping voters distracted by a foreign enemy is one of Putin's favorite tactics, according to political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin.

"It's a very Soviet situation when people are not discussing the shortage of meat in shops — because it's never there anyway — but focusing instead on geopolitical problems, the

confrontation between the United States and Russia," Oreshkin said.

Thanks to Kremlin control of state television, Putin enjoys the support of 80 percent of the Russian population, and the opposition has little chance of political success.

"The thinking goes: 'Very little depends on us. Local bosses steal anyway. We don't like them and we're not going to vote,'" Oreshkin said.

Apathy and a sense of helplessness are strong across Russia, even in Novosibirsk, a city of 1.6 million with a large, educated middle class. Asked how to overcome this political lethargy, Navalny said: "Come, talk to people and explain things."

Olga Nekhorosheva, 38, does not believe in any immediate change through elections, but said people like Navalny who are not afraid to come out and talk to people could eventually help to change the mentality in Russia and usher in a better government.

Several opposition parties, including the one he leads, have formed a coalition to field candidates in Novosibirsk and in the Kostroma and Kaluga regions of central Russia.

Leonid Volkov, a former lawmaker in the Ural Mountains city of Yekaterinburg and a longtime Navalny associate who runs the coalition's campaign, sees the local elections as a chance to "reinvent" the opposition by attracting volunteers and engaging with local voters ahead of the 2016 national parliamentary election.

"Unless we come up with a comprehensive, generally recognized and trusted procedure for decision-making by 2016, we will end up arguing and our coalition will fall apart," Volkov said.

Under current Russian law, any party that holds at least one seat on any regional legislature can run in the national election without having to go through the onerous process of collecting signatures to get on the ballot. The only seat the opposition currently holds was won by Boris Nemtsov, the veteran opposition figure who was shot to death in Moscow in February.

Navalny's visit to Novosibirsk, his first campaign trip outside of Moscow in three years, went ahead largely unhindered, as did subsequent visits to Kostroma and Kaluga. But it appeared to have triggered a reaction on the ground.

Two days after Navalny's visit, Putin fired numerous officials in the regions, including the deputy police chief of Novosibirsk, all without explanation. Later in the week, local authorities announced 1 billion rubles (\$18 million) in spending this year to improve city roads, much criticized by Navalny during his rally.

As the economy sinks into recession and average incomes drop for the first time since Putin was first elected president in 2000, Navalny and his allies expect economic and social issues will come to the forefront again.

The Kremlin "went as far as starting a war so that people would not discuss economic problems," Navalny told the AP. "But real life will come back and we will see that people will begin to talk about what they should talk about: corruption, the fact that national wealth is

being unjustly distributed, and the fact that the quality of state governance is monstrously low."

Navalny, who had not left Moscow since 2012 because of trials on corruption charges and house arrest, is hoping to use his star power to promote local candidates in the three cities.

The showing for the Navalny-led coalition will depend on whether local authorities feel confident enough to allow opposition candidates to run and give them room to campaign, analyst Oreshkin said.

"If he were able to exercise his constitutional rights freely and campaign, he would win a lot of votes," Oreshkin said of Navalny. "He knows what the voters need and he knows how to work with them, and that's why they [the authorities] are afraid of him and are not allowing him to run."

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