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Ahead of New Protests, Russia Starts Blocking Web Pages

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A man shouts anti-government slogans in downtown Moscow on March 26, 2017. **AP Photo / Andrew Lubimov**

With Russia's opposition leader in jail for disobeying police at last Sunday's anti-corruption protest in Moscow, the country is set for more nationwide demonstrations this weekend. And Russia's General Prosecutor ain't having it.

Federal attorneys have already instructed Roskomnadzor, Russia's unbeautifully named state censor, to start blocking pages on Vkontakte, LiveJournal, and YouTube that promote unsanctioned rallies scheduled for Sunday, April 2.

Unlike last Sunday, these next protests aren't being organized by the Anti-Corruption Foundation, making April 2 a test of the movement's viability without the mobilizing efforts of Alexei Navalny, the handsome and not-the-least-bit controversial blogger who's come to lead Russia's anti-Kremlin opposition.

According to the General Prosecutor, city authorities have not received any permit requests for this Sunday's mass protests, which officials argue is sufficient grounds to block websites promoting the rallies.

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"The organizer of a public event is not entitled to carry out a public demonstration without notifying the appropriate authorities," a spokesperson for the General Prosecutor told the news agency Interfax.

In a press release on Friday, Moscow police warned locals that "all necessary measures" would be taken to ensure public safety, in the event that demonstrators stage an unsanctioned protest on Sunday. Moscow police also reported that "the supposed organizers of this event" have denied their involvement.

Last weekend, "all necessary policing measures" included roughly a thousand arrests, as well as a raid on the Anti-Corruption Foundation's Moscow office (where law enforcement claimed to be responding to a bomb threat). When staff refused to evacuate the building, not wanting to interrupt the foundation's live-streaming of protests across Russia, the entire office was arrested for disobeying police orders.

Navalny, the foundation's star leader, was sentenced to two weeks in jail, where he resides today.

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