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Russians Take to the Streets in Mass Anti-Kremlin Protests to Support Navalny

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Ksenia Churmanova / For MT

More than 270 people were detained during nationwide protests on Saturday to call for the resignation of President Vladimir Putin and the release of his opponent, opposition activist Alexei Navalny.

Presidential hopeful Navalny was sentenced to 20 days behind bars for organizing unsanctioned rallies ahead of a protest rally in Nizhny Novgorod last week. His campaign organized protests in around 80 cities on Saturday, to coincide with Putin's 65th birthday.

Protesters called on Putin to allow Navalny to run in elections next March despite a criminal conviction which Navalny says is politically motivated.

In Moscow, around 700 protesters braved the rain to attend the protest, Moscow police told

the Interfax news agency. Other reports suggested up to one thousand people attended the rally on Pushkin Square. The protesters chanted "Happy birthday, Putin!", "Free Navalny!" "Russia without Putin!" and "Navalny is our president!"

Related article: Alexei Navalny's Mass Protests, Live

Many protesters had brought cake or other birthday-themed props with them.

" This is a gift for Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] that I've been meaning to give to him for five years but somehow never get to," a middle-aged man who identified himself as Yevgeny told The Moscow Times, holding a fake present labeled "Retirement."

"I don't like where this country is heading. I've seen how people in the interior of Russia live and they deserve more from a country that has such natural resources," he added.

The turnout in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities was generally lower than during previous protests in March and June.

"I'm disappointed that not many people showed up today," Artyom, a 21-year-old student told The Moscow Times while protesting on Pushkin Square. "The outcome of the 2018 elections is predictable, it's pointless to ask for Navalny's release."

"But I'm thankful to him for raising interest among the youth in the police," he added.

Embed:

> People slowly gathering at protest site in Putin's hometown of St. Petersburg https://t.co/qWgfs9kHRH pic.twitter.com/mSMfRSjKdA
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> — The Moscow Times (@MoscowTimes) October 7, 2017

Compared to previous rallies, the police response in most cities appeared milder, with fewer hardhanded detentions in most cities. St. Petersburg was a notable exception, with 62 people detained by riot police, often with force.

In total, at least 271 people across 26 cities were detained, according to the OVD-Info police monitoring site.

The protest in St. Petersburg, Putin's hometown, elicited a harsher response from law enforcement, with protesters being dragged into police vans with force.

Ahead of Saturday's protests, authorities also detained key Navalny campaign staff on charges of organizing unsanctioned rallies and some were given sentences.

In Moscow and St. Petersburg, there were many young faces among the protesters, some of

whom were clearly underage.

"I'm not a supporter of either Navalny or Putin," Alexander, a 15-year-old at the Field of Mars protest site in St. Petersburg told The Moscow Times. "I'm simply here to watch. I know it's dangerous to be here but it doesn't matter, I'll be careful."

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