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Moscow Authorities Stage Raids, Warnings as City Braces for Weekend Protest Showdown

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Sergei Bobylev / TASS

Moscow authorities have conducted raids on opposition activists and issued warnings to Muscovites in the run-up to this weekend's planned protest to demand that opposition candidates be allowed to run in the city's local elections.

Activists have rallied for three weekends in a row after authorities barred independent candidates from running because they failed to collect enough real signatures in their support, an assertion rejected by the candidates. Police detained more than 1,300 people in central Moscow last Saturday in one of the biggest crackdowns in recent years against an increasingly defiant opposition decrying the Kremlin's tight grip on power.

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Russian investigators on Tuesday opened criminal proceedings related to Saturday's protest, saying they are treating the demonstration as mass civil unrest.

The next morning, authorities raided the homes of at least two opposition activists in connection with the criminal case, according to the police-monitoring OVD-Info website. The charges for organizing mass riots carry a maximum prison sentence of 15 years.

Opposition activists have called for another protest to take place this Saturday in central Moscow, with a Facebook page for the event listing 15,800 as going or interested in attending.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, a Putin ally, warned activists that he would not allow their protest movement to plunge the Russian capital into anarchy. In his first public comments on Saturday's demonstration, Sobyanin praised the police for what he called their appropriate response, saying they had fulfilled their duty.

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"We don't live in Zimbabwe," the mayor told the TV Center television channel Tuesday, accusing the opposition of "a desire to usurp power illegitimately."

Describing the protest as "mass disorder well planned in advance," Sobyanin said protesters on Saturday "tried to block roads, block streets and assault police officers. They simply forced the police to use force."

Dozens of demonstrators and several police officers were injured after police used batons to disperse crowds and, in some cases, beat protesters taking part in what the authorities said was an illegal demonstration.

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The leader of Russia's Libertarian Party was detained Tuesday afternoon outside Moscow City Hall after failed talks to settle on a location for Saturday's upcoming demonstration, leading organizers to push forward without the authorities' approval. Mikhail Svetov, the Libertarian Party negotiator, was arrested for 30 days starting Wednesday.

Lyubov Sobol, the only rejected opposition candidate not jailed for organizing the latest demonstrations, has called on supporters to gather anywhere on central Moscow's 9-kilometer Boulevard Ring for a "peaceful march" this Saturday.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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