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In Wake of Putin's 'Coup,' Russia's Top Opposition Leader Refrains From Action

Other opposition figures are planning a Feb. 29 march against the president's proposed reforms that could keep him in power past 2024.

By Evan Gershkovich

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Nearly 1,500 activists marched in Moscow on Sunday against Vladimir Putin's proposed constitutional changes. **Anton Novoderezhkin / TASS**

There was deathly silence from Russia's most prominent opposition politician for days after President Vladimir Putin sent shockwaves through the establishment last Wednesday by proposing a clutch of constitutional amendments that could allow him to stay in power beyond the end of his term in 2024.

Just hours later the silence became even more deafening when Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev announced that he and his entire government would be resigning, citing the need

to allow the president room to push through the changes, and little-known tax chief Mikhail Mishustin was named as his successor.

Only after a lesser known opposition politician on Friday morning announced a protest march on Sunday against the proposed reforms, calling them a "coup," did Alexei Navalny, the man who for years has been Putin's loudest critic, finally speak up.

"The Russian Constitution is abominable," Navalny wrote on Twitter that afternoon. "The mechanism of the usurpation of power is built into it. Under this Constitution, everything has been taken away from us — from elections to pensions — and they want to continue taking away from us. There is no need to protect it."

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Observers have homed in on the fact that Putin's proposed changes to the 1993 document would strengthen parliament and other government bodies, while the powers of the presidency would be reduced.

In effect, analysts say, Putin appears to be keeping various doors open for whatever position he might take on after leaving the Kremlin, while simultaneously reigning in his successor.

Critics recalled recent moves by neighboring Kazakhstan's longtime leader Nursultan Nazarbayev, who instituted constitutional reforms to weaken the president's powers and turned a smaller government body into the country's most important one. He then made himself its lifetime leader.

That possibility is what led local Moscow deputy Yulia Galyamina to call for people to take to the streets. Her march, which was tacked onto an annual anti-fascist rally, brought out nearly 1,500 people, according to White Counter, an NGO that tallies up participants who have passed through the security frames surrounding approved protests.

"This is the beginning of a big civil society campaign," Galyamina promised.

On Monday morning, another local Moscow politician, Ilya Yashin — a Navalny ally — announced a separate march to take place on Feb. 29. This one would likewise be tacked onto a different protest, the annual march for Boris Nemtsov, an opposition politician who was gunned down just steps from the Kremlin in 2015.

"This will perhaps be the most important opposition rally in recent years," Yashin wrote on Twitter.

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Although Navalny retweeted Yashin's tweet — which may have given those anticipating he would join the budding movement hope — he did not explicitly back the protest. In a blog post Monday afternoon, he argued that it's still unclear what exactly the Kremlin is planning.

Plus, he added, nothing has changed: Just like before, Putin, who is Russia's longest-serving

leader since Josef Stalin, is planning to remain in power. Changing the Constitution, Navalny argued, is just another tool in his quest to do so.

"The tactics of our actions will be largely determined by how the Kremlin begins to build the mechanism of lifelong government," he wrote. "This will become clear in the coming weeks."

Those plans are unfurling quickly, if opaquely. On Monday, Putin officially submitted the changes to the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, Interfax reported. Other reports, citing sources close to the Kremlin, indicated that authorities are planning a nationwide vote on the proposed changes sometime in April.

The independent election monitoring organization Golos called for clarity over what the unspecified vote would look like, describing it as "not supported by Russian law" and a "propaganda device aimed at legitimizing decisions that are situationally beneficial to specific political forces."

"It's a classic Kremlin move to suddenly announce something and move very swiftly so that the opposition doesn't have enough time to figure out what is going on and catch up," said political analyst Konstantin Gaaze.

But if the opposition is to mount some semblance of a resistance to the Kremlin's plan, Gaaze said it will need Navalny.

"There is no opposition leader but him," he said. "No one else can rally 20,000 to 30,000 people to the streets."

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Galyamina herself acknowledged as much in an interview with The Moscow Times on Monday. But she also said she was still holding out hope that Navalny will come around.

"It's very important that he agrees with us," she said. "But we can't force him. And if he doesn't join us, we will still go ahead."

Both Galyamina and Yashin have recent experience organizing mass street protests. Just this past summer, they were at the forefront of organizing rallies in Moscow against the exclusion of opposition politicians from Moscow's city council elections. Then, just like on Sunday, the first rally brought out about 1,500 people. Those protests swelled to around 60,000 people at a single rally at the peak of the movement.

But those rallies, from which Navalny initially abstained, also grew on the back of his organizational clout once he threw his full weight into supporting them. They likewise died just as quickly when he decided that street protesting was no longer the correct tactic at the time.

Resistance tactics, moreover, are not the only thing the opposition disagrees on. If this past summer it was clear to all in the opposition that barring opposition politicians from running in elections was an impediment to democracy, the authorities' latest moves are being interpreted in multiple ways.

Some have ventured that Putin's proposals — which include limiting presidents to two total terms in office — are potentially positive changes.

And even if not everyone sees them as good, they are not viewing them in clear black and white terms.

As Yegor Zhukov, an opposition blogger who became a symbol of last summer's protests, put it: "Ensuring that a person cannot hold the office of president for more than two terms in their life, and strengthening the power of the State Duma, are, in principle, awesome changes."

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