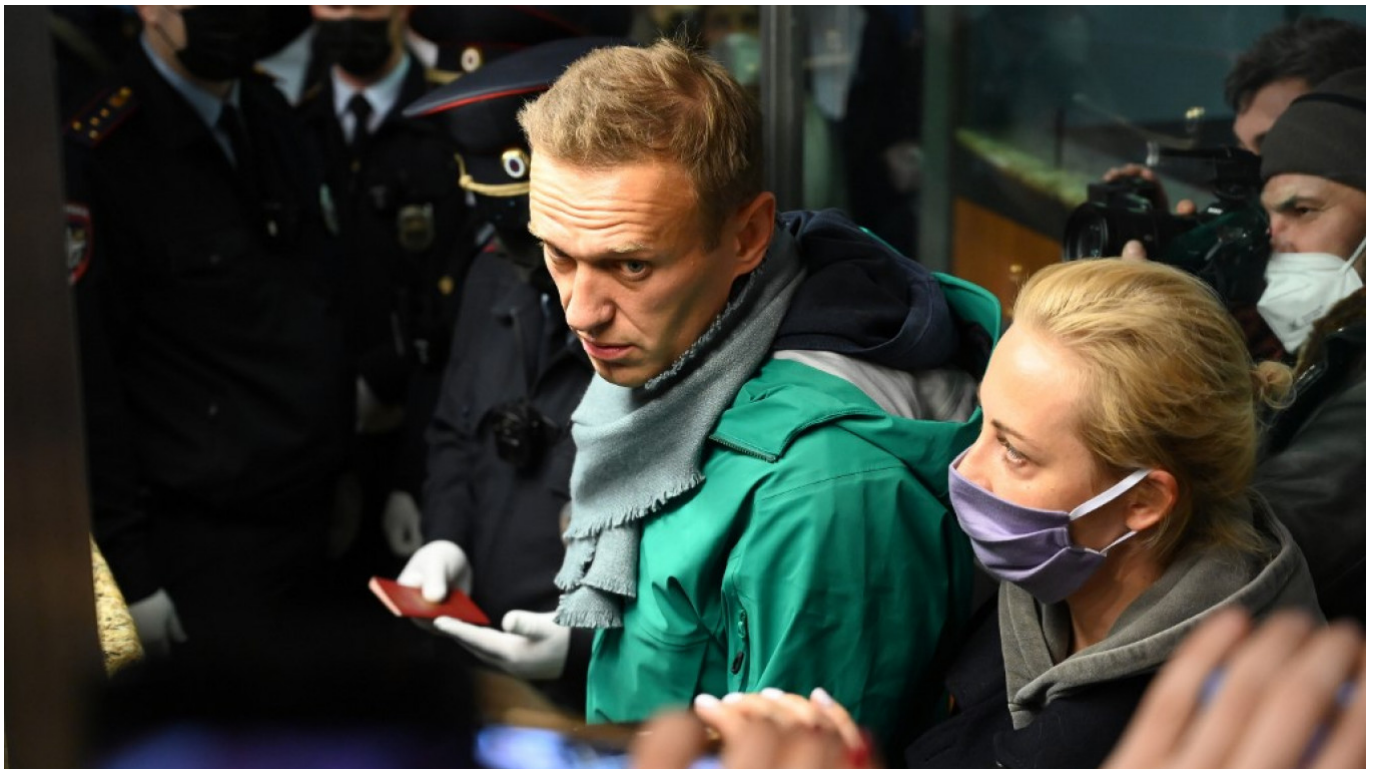


Russia Detains Poisoned Kremlin Critic Navalny on Return to Home Soil

The opposition leader has spent months in Germany recovering from an attack with a poison Western experts concluded was Novichok.

By [Felix Light](#) and [Uliana Pavlova](#)

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Alexei Navalny and his wife Yulia at passport control minutes before his detention. **Kirill Kudryavtsev / AFP**

Russian police detained prominent opposition leader Alexey Navalny Sunday on his arrival in Moscow from Germany, where he had been recovering from an attempted poisoning by the nerve agent Novichok.

Navalny — who became a thorn in the Kremlin’s side through his campaigns against corruption and rigged elections in Russia — had been added to Russia’s national wanted persons list on Dec. 29 for parole violations related to a suspended sentence for fraud. Navalny maintains that the fraud case against him is politically motivated.

Western experts concluded he was poisoned with Soviet-designed nerve toxin Novichok while Navalny alleges the attack was carried out on Putin's orders. A recent investigation by the Bellingcat website indicated that Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) was behind his poisoning.

Related article: [Alexei Navalny: Russia's Charismatic Anti-Putin Campaigner](#)

At Moscow's Vnukovo Airport — where Navalny's plane had initially been scheduled to land — hundreds of supporters had braved temperatures below minus 20 degrees Celsius to welcome the opposition figure home.

A group of journalists and supporters who had arrived at the airport before OMON riot police began expelling people crammed into a small pen in the arrivals terminal, surrounded by metal barriers and police officers, only to learn that the plane had been redirected on approach to Sheremetyevo Airport, around 50 kilometers away, for technical reasons.

A massive police presence had escalated throughout the day with officers in full riot gear and police trucks deployed around the building after thousands responded to a Facebook event encouraging wellwishers to greet Navalny on arrival.

Several Navalny supporters, including his brother Oleg and Lyubov Sobol, his lawyer and producer of his popular YouTube channel, were arrested inside the terminal building hours before the activist's plane was due to arrive.

Though airport security told Navalny supporters that only passengers with valid tickets were allowed to enter the terminal, hundreds of fans of pop singer Olga Buzova — said to be returning from a holiday in the Maldives — were allowed in. Some Navalny supporters had bought tickets to gain access, and said they saw the rival welcome as a Kremlin strategy to divert attention from the activist's return.

Riot police

The atmosphere inside Vnukovo airport was febrile.

An elderly man in a red coat waving a Russian flag and shouting, “Navalny is our president, Putin is a thief and a bitch” only got a few chants in before being carried out by OMON riot police.

Olga Solena, who declined to give her exact age but said she is over 60, came to Vnukovo to support Navalny after seeing that more than 9000 people had signed up to attend the Facebook event in his support.

“I came to meet Navalny because he is able to speak in a way that inspires people,” Solena told The Moscow Times.

Solena said Navalny makes her and others like her optimistic about political change in Russia.

“Navalny comes along and instills new hope that the people will begin to rise, to think how we can change something. We still have to change the president,” Solena said.

As Solena finished speaking, riot police began removing people from the terminal building. Navalny supporters erupted in chants, calling the officers “fascists.” Several supporters who tried to resist were detained.

Related article: [‘Meet Me,’ Alexei Navalny Wrote](#)

Stranded outside in freezing temperatures, many supporters continued to wait for Navalny outside the airport.

Alexander Menshikov, 28, could barely see through the frozen fog of his glasses, but said the bitter cold was a small price to pay.

“It seems to me that you need to show respect for people who are capable of brave decisions that you yourself could not make,” he said.

Other supporters The Moscow Times spoke to echoed this sentiment.

“I came to support Alexei Navalny to show him that he is not alone, we are with him, we are loyal,” said Vladimir Duraev.

“He returns to the country where they poisoned him, where he will get arrested if he returns, and yet he is relentless,” he added.

Before Navalny’s arrest at Sheremetyevo Airport, where he landed after an hour and a half delay, the opposition leader gave a short speech to journalists, claiming that the charges against him are fabricated, and apologizing for the inconvenience his presence on the flight had caused.

“I have not only truth on my side, but also justice. I am not afraid,” he said.

Goodbye kiss

Shortly afterwards, the Kremlin’s most prominent critic was detained at passport control and led away by police officers after he kissed his wife Yuliya goodbye.

In a short statement, Russia’s Penitentiary Service confirmed that Navalny had been arrested in connection with multiple parole violations, and would be detained pending a court hearing.

“Further measures in relation to Navalny will be determined by the courts,” it said.

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