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Russia Threatens Arrests, Prosecutions for Promoting Navalny Protests

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Unauthorized rallies in Navalny's support are scheduled in at least 50 Russian cities this Saturday. **Pavel Golovkin / AP / TASS**

Russian police threatened to prosecute those who spread calls to join nationwide protests in support of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny amid the authorities' campaign to discourage attendance, Interfax reported Thursday.

Unauthorized rallies are scheduled in at least 50 Russian cities this Saturday, galvanized by Navalny's arrest upon his return from treatment in Germany for Novichok poisoning and his viral video exposé of President Vladimir Putin's alleged $1.3 billion seaside palace.

Related article: Navalny Urges Russians To 'Take To The Streets' Over Jailing

TikTok videos promoting the Jan. 23 rallies racked up more than 200 million views, prompting Russia's state censor to urge social media platforms to ban content inciting young Russians to turn out. The Prosecutor General's Office also ordered the censor, Roskomnadzor,

to block access to pages that call for protests.

School and university administrators were reported to have threatened to expel students spotted at the rallies in Navalny's support. The anti-corruption campaigner's close allies and opposition-leaning news outlet editors reported police visits on the eve of the protests.

Related article: Young Russians Flood TikTok With Navalny Protest Cries

Deputy Interior Minister Alexander Gorovoy meanwhile threatened arrests and charges ahead of the nationwide rallies.

"We have all the legal grounds to charge with misdemeanor offenses ahead of the event all those who [promote it] in person, online and in written form," Interfax quoted him as saying at a board meeting.

Gorovoy linked the upcoming protests to unrest in neighboring Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, where people took to the streets last year to protest what they said were rigged elections, according to the state-run TASS news agency.

"There are many interested stakeholders from abroad, political parties, quasi-politicians who try to rattle the situation in the year of an important political cycle," Gorovoy said.

Facebook event pages for the protests show at least 12,300 "going" responses for the Moscow rally alone as of Thursday afternoon.

The Kremlin said Wednesday it was not spooked by Saturday's protests.

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