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Protests for Jailed Kremlin Critic Navalny Sweep Russia

Police clash with demonstrators in major cities and detain thousands.

By Uliana Pavlova and Felix Light

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Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets in over 100 towns and cities across Russia on Saturday to demand the release of jailed Putin critic Alexei Navalny in one of the broadest waves of nationwide protest the country has seen in recent years.

The anti-corruption campaigner, 44, called for demonstrations after being jailed under a fraud conviction he claims was politically motivated on his return from Germany, where he was recovering from an August poisoning with the Soviet-era nerve agent Novichok.

His backers answered the call, rallying across Russia's 11 time zones despite the clear threat of a government crackdown. Provincial cities including Novosibirsk, Irkutsk and Perm — where anti-government unrest is rare — saw large turnouts, while the traditional protest hubs in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg also drew huge crowds. Thousands of kilometers to the east, protesters in Yakutsk braved temperatures of minus 50 degrees Celsius.

"I'm here because if I didn't come, how would I look my kids in the eye? It's their country, it's their future. I just want what's best for my family," said Konstantin, 45, a scriptwriter protesting in Russia's second city of St. Petersburg.

Related article: As It Happened: Tens of Thousands Rally for Navalny's Release Across Russia

Official figures from the Interior Ministry, which the opposition says downplays turnout at anti-government demonstrations, said around 4,000 people had gathered in central Moscow. Media estimates ranged from 15,000 to 40,000, and the Proekt investigative website said Moscow and St. Petersburg saw their biggest unauthorized protests in almost a decade.

OVD-Info, an independent organization that monitors arrests, put the nationwide tally of detentions at 3,711, including 1,455 in Moscow.

Among those detained in the Russian capital were Alexei Navalny's wife Yulia, who was later

released, as well as his senior aide Lyubov Sobol. On the eve of the rallies, dozens of Navalny's local organizers across the country had already been jailed or fined.

Moscow's normally bustling city center was quiet in the hours before the protest as Navalny supporters moved toward the rallying point on Pushkin Square amid heavy riot police presence.

Though the authorities had feared a large turnout of school and university students — going so far as to warn that those who attended would be expelled from their institutions — the crowd that assembled on Pushkin Square was mostly adult, ranging from veterans of decades of demonstrations to committed Navalny supporters in their 20s.

On the square, two young protesters laughed as they quoted a viral clip from the TikTok video-sharing app earlier this week in which a Russian girl encourages protesters to pretend to be American tourists if arrested by police.

Billion-dollar "palace"

A video investigation released after Navalny's arrest in which he accuses President Vladimir Putin of using fraudulently obtained funds to build a $1.35 billion "palace" on Russia's Black Sea coast seemed to have struck a chord with some protesters. The Kremlin has dismissed the video — which has been viewed 70 million times in four days — as "nonsense."

Vladimir, 15, one of a group of boys smoking cigarettes a few steps from riot police, was attending his first protest despite warnings from his school. He said his motivation for coming out was poverty, as his disabled parents and grandmother only receive 15,000 rubles ($200) a month from the government, which barely covers Moscow rent.

"I am against corruption in our country. I don't like low salaries, low pensions, the fact that the government is stealing and then lying to us," he said.

Other protesters said they had marched for different causes in the past.

"For me, doing nothing is tantamount to collusion with the authorities," said Artyom Manteev, a 25-year-old translator and committed Navalny supporter who attended last summer's small protests against constitutional amendments that reset the clock on Putin's term limits, allowing the president to stay in office until 2036.

"We have to come out here and protest peacefully, because there is no other way to make your voice heard in Russia right now."

Some said their attendance was prompted less by support for Navalny — who had urged people to attend for themselves rather than on his behalf — and more by their opposition to political repression in general.

"We didn't come out for Alexei Navalny, we came out because we live in a regime where a person can be jailed for no reason," said Arina, 20, a university student in Moscow.

"I felt scared to come out today, but it's much scarier to live under this regime and government," she said.

Related article: Alexei Navalny: Russia's Charismatic Anti-Putin Campaigner

Having filled Pushkin Square, parts of the crowd peeled off to march down Tverskaya Street, Moscow's main avenue leading to the Kremlin. With side streets blocked off by riot police, passing motorists sounded their horns in support of the marchers, eliciting cheers.

Some protesters later marched to Moscow's Matrosskaya Tishina prison, where Navalny is being held. Scuffles broke out between police and protesters, with video showing marchers pelting officers with snowballs quickly spreading on social media.

Shortly after the Moscow protest ended, Russia's Investigative Committee announced that it had opened a probe into instances of violence against police. Russian state media reported that around 40 security forces personnel had been injured during the protests.

In St. Petersburg, demonstrators gathered by the city's iconic Bronze Horseman statue of Peter the Great before marching down Nevsky Prospekt, the city's main street.

As in Moscow, many of them were young people angry at the poor living conditions their parents and grandparents are forced to endure.

Alexander, a 19-year-old student, said his 91-year old grandfather lives on a pension of 15,000 rubles a month.

"Russia is one of the richest countries in the world, we have a lot of natural resources. But ordinary people can't profit from it, only Putin and his friends can," he said.

Ksenia Elzes in St. Petersburg contributed reporting.

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