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Navalny Hunger Strike a Dangerous Step After Poisoning, Allies Fear

The jailed Kremlin critic is refusing food until prison authorities allow his doctor to treat crippling back and leg pain.

By Felix Light

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Alexei Navalny. **Navalny Team / YouTube**

Allies of jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny expressed concern for his health Thursday, after his announcement in an Instagram post that he is going on hunger strike until prison authorities allow his doctor to treat severe back and leg pain.

For the 44-year old anti-corruption activist — who fell ill last summer after an apparent poisoning by the military-grade nerve agent Novichok and was jailed on long-standing fraud charges on his return from recuperation in Germany in January — a hunger strike poses unique risks, said doctors.

“Without any doubt, a hunger strike represents a serious danger to his health,” said Andrey Volna, head orthopedic surgeon at Moscow’s Ilinskaya Hospital and one of over 1,000 Russian medical professionals who have signed an open letter in support of Navalny’s demands.

“Navalny has not yet fully recovered from an exceptionally dangerous poisoning. This could seriously compromise that recovery.”

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Navalny’s hunger strike announcement came after he had complained for several days of poor health and ill treatment at the IK-2 penal facility in the town of Pokrov around 100 kilometers from Moscow, one of Russia’s most notorious prisons.

In a March 27 Instagram post, Navalny claimed that prison authorities had given him only two Ibuprofen painkiller tablets after he complained of crippling back and leg pain making it difficult for him to walk.

Navalny had previously said that under prison rules designating him a flight risk, he is woken up eight times a night by guards who are required to check that he has not escaped.

Prison authorities said March 25 that Navalny’s health remains “stable and satisfactory.”

Navalny allies said the opposition leader wouldn’t have taken the decision to go on hunger strike lightly.

“Alexei Navalny understands that a hunger strike is a desperate measure,” tweeted Sergei Guriev, a professor of economics at Sciences Po in Paris and an advisor to Navalny.

“That he’s declared a hunger strike means that he believes he has nothing to lose and that the situation is unbearable.”

Others noted that Navalny had encouraged his team member Lyubov Sobol to end a 32-day hunger strike she had embarked upon after being banned from participating in elections to Moscow’s City Duma in 2019.

“A hunger strike is a symbol of desperation,” Navalny wrote at the time.

Little exposure

Whether Navalny’s hunger strike will help his cause remains to be seen, according to analysts. Though the announcement has received wide coverage in digital media and on the Telegram messaging app, Navalny is rarely mentioned on the flagship state TV channels that are Russia’s most influential news sources.

“It’s unclear what effect, if any, this will have,” said Andrei Kolesnikov, chair of the Russian domestic politics and political institutions program at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank.

“Given the Russian media environment, it is possible that the hunger strike won’t achieve a

wide cut through to the population."

While hunger strikes have a long history in Russia, with prominent Soviet physicist and dissident Andrei Sakharov undertaking several against political repressions in the 1970s, they have not always met with success.

In 2018, imprisoned Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Senstov abandoned a 145-day hunger strike after his health situation became "critical" and authorities threatened to force-feed him.

For Kolesnikov, the biggest obstacle to Navalny's hunger strike causing a swell in support is a sense of fatigue with politics after months of escalating repression against the Kremlin critic and his supporters.

"Even for people who follow politics, a hunger strike is nothing new," said Kolesnikov.

"People know that the authorities are cruel, and that they will stop at nothing to persecute their main opponent."

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However, with the Navalny movement gearing up for a fresh round of protests in the spring after mass arrests ended a series of demonstrations in January, it is possible that the imprisoned leader's drastic action could galvanize public opinion.

In the days before Navalny's hunger strike announcement, his team launched a new website, inviting those willing to attend a protest to anonymously specify their location, in a bid to encourage other sympathizers to attend.

Navalny's team has said it will set the date of a new protest once 500,000 have signalled willingness to attend. Since the website's March 23 launch over 365,000 would-be rally-goers have signed up.

According to Leonid Volkov, Navalny's Lithuania-based chief of staff, registrations on the free.navalny.com website have spiked since the announcement of the hunger strike.

"We've seen higher growth than usual since the hunger strike news," Volkov told The Moscow Times by telephone, declining to provide specific figures.

"Naturally, this news is keeping us in the headlines."

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