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‘Final Battle Still Ahead’: Team Navalny Reacts to Rallies

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Tens of thousands of Navalny's supporters took to the streets in major cities Wednesday after his doctors warned that his health on hunger strike has become critical. **Kirill Kudryavtsev / AFP**

Jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny’s depleted team has vowed to press on with its activities despite billing Wednesday’s mass Russia-wide rallies as the “final battle” before authorities drive them underground as an “extremist” organization.

Tens of thousands took to the streets across more than 100 Russian cities to demand Navalny’s release or treatment by outside doctors as he entered the fourth week of hunger strike. Independent observers said nearly 2,000 protesters have been detained, nearly half of them in St. Petersburg, where media reported widespread use of aggressive tactics including tasers by riot police.

Related article: Supporters Protest Across Russia for Release of Ailing Navalny

“When we announced the rally, we had a feeling that this is the end,” Ivan Zhdanov, who

heads Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), said in a live stream on the team's YouTube channel.

"But now the feeling is that we'll continue," his co-host and Navalny's regional network coordinator Leonid Volkov added.

Volkov described the nationwide protests as a success — despite falling short of their targeted turnout of half a million — because of what he called higher attendance and lower detention numbers than the last protests in January and February. Observers had reported more than 10,000 detentions at those protests, which took place after authorities jailed Navalny upon his return to Russia after recovering from a near-fatal poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin.

The latest rallies, which also saw supporters gather in several foreign cities, took place against the backdrop of President Vladimir Putin's annual state-of-the-nation speech where he issued a stark warning to foreign and domestic enemies:

"The organizers of any provocations threatening our core security interests will regret their actions more than they've regretted anything in a long time."

Putin's warning came days after Russian prosecutors asked a court to outlaw Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation and his regional network as "extremist" organizations, equating them to the persecuted Jehovah's Witnesses group. The move would result in jail time for their members or even supporters, with a Moscow court scheduled to hand down the verdict next week.

Several Navalny aides and allies have been arrested and convicted for participating in the winter rallies. Other aides, including Zhdanov and Volkov, have fled Russia to avoid prosecution and carry on the team's work.

Despite the unprecedented pressure, Navalny's team has faced criticism for lacking a clear strategy.

With concerns surrounding Navalny's health, Putin's human rights commissioner told state media Wednesday that four doctors from outside the Russian prison system had visited Navalny and did not raise "serious fears."

In an Instagram post Tuesday, Navalny said he was in good spirits despite his ailments, saying his elevated blood potassium levels — which his doctors say require immediate treatment — are "not terrible" compared to nerve-agent poisoning.

Zhdanov and Volkov, speaking from a studio in an undisclosed European country while the protests were winding down in Moscow, predicted a difficult path for Russia's pro-democratic opposition movement.

"A tough battle lies ahead for free political activity, as well as a chance to express your opinion, participate in elections and take to the streets," said Zhdanov.

"It's obvious that the final battle is still ahead of us," said Volkov.

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