

'We Are Many': Russian Exiles in Lithuania Join Global 'Noon Against Putin' Protest

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VILNIUS, Lithuania — By noon on Sunday, a line of hundreds of Russian citizens occupied a narrow sidewalk behind the Russian embassy.

Almost all had come to vote in their country's presidential election despite the remote location, rain, Western leaders [questioning the vote's legitimacy](#) and the certainty that President Vladimir Putin would win. And unlike this month's [memorials](#) to late opposition leader Alexei Navalny, this time the slow-moving line was full of smiling faces.

"I'll professionally spoil the ballot," said Marina Maksakova, a member of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance activist movement.

"We were denied the right to vote freely years ago, elections were less and less fair each time.

Yet we need to participate: Boycotting elections makes sense only when around 80% of voters support [the boycott]. That's not the case right now — and voicing our opinions is better than doing nothing and then complaining about things getting worse," she said.

The mood toward the election's outcome among the voters was largely pessimistic — none even voiced hopes that Putin would lose. But for some, their reason for coming had nothing to do with the election to begin with.

"Everyone understands the results are predictable," said Yulia, who moved to Lithuania as soon as the invasion of Ukraine started two years ago. "Yet, I never supported Putin and never voted for him. And I came here today to see and support people like me. I also believe that it's vital for us, democratic Russians, to be visible in the West, and these elections are a great chance to show that we are many."

In the run-up to the vote, Russia's opposition figures had hotly debated the best strategy to deploy during the election.

While some, including Navalny's team, promoted voting for [anyone but Putin](#) or spoiling the ballot, others, like opposition politician Maxim Katz, [promoted voting for Vladislav Davankov](#), the least pro-war candidate who [promised](#) "peace and negotiations on our terms" with Ukraine.

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"I voted for Davankov. Why? I believe it's the best opportunity to stand up against the current government," said Diana, a civil rights activist who lives in Lithuania. "Voting for Davankov is the only rational course of action. I don't believe he'll ever win, but if he does, I'll surely be confused. I'll certainly pop the champagne if that happens."

Some said Davankov appeared to be the lesser evil compared to the other candidates.

"I think spoiling the ballot doesn't make any sense. I voted for Davankov by process of elimination: [Leonid] Slutsky is a sexual maniac, [Nikolai] Kharitonov is a delusional ultra-conservative and Putin... I don't want to swear, but you get the idea. So, Davankov it is," said Alexander, an engineer from Novosibirsk.

A fraction of the crowd that assembled around the embassy had come to protest the idea of voting altogether.

For instance, the Russian nationalist Vladimir Ratnikov came to the event waving the flag of the Russian Volunteer Corps, a far-right paramilitary group of Russians fighting against the Russian army in Ukraine.

"I won't vote. Everyone understands there is no such thing as fair elections in Russia — and I don't want to help Putin increase the turnout," Ratnikov said.

"There isn't even a way to catch the authorities in rigging the elections — they have eliminated all the election monitoring organizations in Russia. But I believe showing that

there are a lot of anti-Putin Russians is critical — so I came here to support ‘Noon Against Putin’ today.”

Apart from voters, protesters, police and journalists, there was a place for activists during the day. Most were gathered around the embassy’s entryway to conduct exit polls for the independent “Vote Abroad” organization supporting the electoral rights of the Russian diaspora.

“I try to participate in the electoral activities every year. This time I chose exit polling. And doing this is more important than one might think,” said Alexander Larin, an activist who moved to Lithuania to study two years before the invasion of Ukraine.

“Right now we can see the numbers published by the Russian Central Election Commission — and they are quite different from the ones coming from [ex-presidential hopeful Boris] Nadezhdin’s team conducting the polling in Russia,” Larin said. “According to them, Davankov is finishing in second place, while the government claims Kharitonov got the most votes after Putin. We are yet to publish the results of the foreign exit polling.”

According to the CEC’s initial exit [polling](#) results released Sunday night, Putin leads with 87.86% of the votes, with 26% of ballots counted.

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