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Rare Protest In Russia's Coldest Capital Seeks to Defend Mayoral Elections

By Leyla Latypova

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A rally against the abolition of direct mayoral elections in Yakutsk. **t.me/sakhaday**

Residents of Yakutsk, the capital of Russia's Far East republic of Sakha (Yakutia), staged a rare protest on Sunday against the local government's plans to scrap mayoral elections.

Yakutsk, the coldest major city on earth, is one of only four regional capitals of Russia where the local head is still elected by popular vote.

"If they scrap direct elections of the Yakutsk mayor, they will then scrap the elections of district heads. After that, we will not be able to decide anything at all!" rally organizer Anatoliy Nogovitsyn told the small crowd.

While nearly all forms of protest in Russia have been suppressed since the invasion of Ukraine, local authorities allowed Sunday's rally to take place.

A few dozen people gathered in Gagarin Square on the outskirts of Yakutsk — the only place

where local authorities permitted the gathering — braving temperatures of minus 23 degrees Celsius (minus 9.4 degrees Fahrenheit).

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Nogovitsin, who heads the Sakha branch of Russia's liberal opposition party Yabloko, was arrested shortly after the protest on charges of violating pre-agreed rally procedures and ordered to pay a 10,000-ruble ($96) fine by a local court.

"I allegedly stepped one meter outside of Gagarin Square's perimeter during a symbolic march [held during the protest]," said Nogovitsyn. "I did not expect our police to sink so low."

Yabloko's decision to hold a protest was widely discussed in Sakha before the event and criticized by some liberal-leaning public figures.

"I have very mixed feelings about this event. My initial reaction was...to support it, but after thinking it through, I realized it might not be very effective," said prominent Yakutian journalist and former mayoral race candidate Vitaliy Obedin.

"The main beneficiaries [of this protest] would be the security forces, who will inevitably target someone by accusing them of a protest participation violation," he added, noting that authorities could also argue that a low protest turnout means that the public majority supports their decision to scrap the direct vote.

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Yakutsk City Duma deputies proposed to give up the popular vote for a mayor in favor of elections by 29 Duma members earlier this month. If the body passes the proposal at its next meeting, it will stand for a vote in the Il Tumen, Yakutia's parliament.

"This [development] is important because competitive elections in Russia still exist at the local self-government level," independent election watchdog Golos wrote about the move.

"Government-backed candidates sometimes lose in such [competitive] conditions. This means that at the municipal level, people still have a real opportunity to influence election outcomes," said the watchdog.

In September 2018 Sardana Avksentiyeva, who ran as an independent candidate, was elected as the first female mayor of Yakutsk in a vote that drew international attention for being atypically free and fair for Russia's falsification-prone electoral system.

Dubbed the "Iron Lady" by her supporters, Avksentyeva rose to nationwide prominence during her time in office but preemptively stepped down from her post in January 2021 citing health concerns.

Avksentyeva was succeeded by United Russia-backed Yevgeny Grigoryev who narrowly won the race against Just Russia-backed journalist Obedin with 44.3% of votes against 39.7%.

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If the proposed electoral process change is approved, Moscow would be able to guarantee the election of Kremlin-backed candidates in Yakutsk in the future, ruling out possible "anomalies" like Avksentyeva or nearly elected Obedin.

At the outset of Vladimir Putin's rule as many as 75 regional capitals elected mayors by popular vote, but the number fell to just 19 in 2014 and then further to five as of last year.

Sakha is likely to become the second region to have scrapped direct mayoral elections within the past year, following in the footsteps of the nearby Siberian republic of Buryatia.

But protest organizer Nogovitsyn believes the protest wasn't in vain no matter the outcome.

"This rally…showed that there are [people] in our city who are not ready to put up with [official] decisions made behind the backs of the citizens. We know that changes do not come in one day and that any path begins with the first step. And yesterday we took this step together," Nogovitsyn wrote on Telegram on Monday.

"Yes, the situation in the country is difficult, but it is precisely at such moments that it is important not to remain silent. Every voice, every action matters," he added.

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