

# Rallies in 80 Russian cities protest President Vladimir Putin on his 65th birthday

Protesters turned out Saturday in and around some 80 Russian cities to mark President Vladimir Putin's 65th birthday by calling on him to resign and release opposition activist Alexei Navalny.

Navalny, a Putin political nemesis who vows to run against him in March elections, was sentenced to 20 days behind bars for organizing unsanctioned rallies ahead of a protest in Nizhny Novgorod last week.

The 41-year-old activist's campaign also organized Saturday's protests.

Police allowed demonstrators in Moscow to rally near the Kremlin in an apparent desire to avoid marring Putin's big day with a crackdown, the Associated Press reported.

Interfax quoted the Moscow police department as saying about 700 people, including journalists turned out for the "unpermitted opposition rally" on Pushkin Square.

Interfax said police called via loudspeakers for everyone to disperse and "not to obstruct other people's passage."

TV Rain, or Dozhd, an independent Russian television station noted that Channel 1 Russia, the main TV channel, did not carry a news report on the protest.

Police broke up a larger rally in St. Petersburg, Putin's hometown, after protesters blocked traffic and attempted to break through police cordons.

Novaya Gazeta reports that police at the rally in St. Petersburg detained around 100 people.



This file photo taken on Sept. 29, 2017 shows Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny leaving a police station in Moscow. (Photo: MAXIM ZMEYEV, AFP/Getty Images)

The authorities' decision to refrain from breaking up the Moscow protest contrasted with a more forceful response to previous Moscow rallies called by Navalny, when police detained more than 1,000 demonstrators.

The protesters chanted "Happy birthday, Putin!" "Free Navalny!" "Russia without Putin!" and "Navalny is our president!" Many brought cake or other birthday-themed props with them.

Protesters called on Putin to allow Navalny to run in next year's elections despite a criminal conviction that Navalny says is politically motivated.

Putin hasn't yet announced whether he will seek re-election, but he's widely expected to run. With his current approval ratings topping 80%, he is set to easily win another six-year term in a race against torpid veterans of past election campaigns, like Communist Party chief Gennady Zyuganov.

Navalny argues the high level of support for Putin comes from the lack of real political competition and urged supporters to help him get registered.

"(Putin's) 86% approval rating exists in a political vacuum," he said, according to the Associated Press. "It's like asking a person who has been fed rutabaga his

entire life how edible they find it and the rating will be quite high. Listen, there are other things that are better than rutabaga.”

*Contributing: Associated Press*

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