

Russia Rises Up Against Putin as Thousands Defy Kremlin's Medieval 'Castle' Crackdown

The Kremlin deployed a brutal “castle” strategy to protect Putin from pro-Navalny protesters but huge numbers are risking beatings and imprisonment to make their voices heard.



Anton Vaganov via Reuters

MOSCOW—The opulent, fortified Kremlin, which stands right in the center of Moscow, looked like a besieged castle on Sunday. Metal fences, traffic cops, and interior ministry riot troops blocked all the streets around Lubyanka square, the Federal Security Service (FSB) headquarters, and Red Square. The metro stations were closed.

It is not COVID-19 that brought on this unprecedented lockdown, it is a man Vladimir Putin refers to only as “a blogger.” Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader is in jail, but he has called on his followers to take to the streets. Last weekend,

they did so in numbers not seen for a decade—thousands were arrested.

This week, a rattled Putin was not taking any chances.

On Sunday, hundreds of policemen surrounded Pushkin square which was flooded with up to 40,000 protesters last weekend. A chain of policemen blocked the way to the square at noon, another group blocked the crossing under Tverskaya avenue. Riot police, covered in black armor from head to toe, dragged a young man in a black face mask outside Chistye Prudy metro station, his feet slipping on the wet snow. Speaking from court last week, Navalny described the regime's actions, as "demonstrative lawlessness."

After thousands of arrests last weekend, the authorities jailed more than 150 people mid-week including key activists from Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, many remained in pretrial detention centers. Police continued detaining journalists, bloggers, administrators of Telegram chats, protesters, and even random pedestrians on Sunday for covering or organizing the unsanctioned rally. By lunchtime, more than 1,000 people were arrested in 40 cities according to OVD-Info, which is an independent police monitor.

Joining the law enforcement officials in Moscow were hundreds of civilian guards wearing the red armbands of the *Druzhina*, a Soviet-era people's militia.

Despite the massive show of force, thousands of protesters defied Putin's crackdown and risked arrest all over the Russian Federation in demonstrations that were hastily rearranged with city centers locked down.

In Ekaterinburg, east of the Ural Mountains, social media images showed the crowd walking across a frozen river to escape the riot police. In Moscow, thousands converged on Komsomolskaya Square after Navalny's team tweeted the new location to protest.

State television channels were operating a news blackout so Russians turned to social media and independent live streams to follow the growing protest. The authorities responded by announcing that spreading any "fake news" about the protests was now illegal and people spreading the word about the size or location of demonstrations could be prosecuted.

Yet, still, images of crowds being beaten and pushed back by riot police continued

to spread online.

“There will never be enough police to arrest everybody. There are 11 million people in Moscow, millions of us support the opposition,” Alexei Zhukov, 28, told the Daily Beast.

OVD-Info claimed that cattle prods and tasers were being used on peaceful protesters as violations by law enforcement agencies reached an unprecedented level for post-Soviet Russia.

Vitaly Pavlenkov, a 26-year-old programmer working at a state-owned bank, knows what will happen to those arrested on Sunday. He was one of the people swept up in last week’s arrests.

While he was inside a pretrial detention center on Vernadskogo Prospekt with dozens of young professionals and university students, he received a text from his wife, who was waiting for him outside the police station: “The guards are talking about a ‘castle plan.’” From that point, no lawyers were let inside to see their clients.

Pavlenkov was no stranger to the world of law enforcement, he had spent a year working in the secret units of The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Service, also known as GU—previously the GRU. He had nothing to hide from state officials, he was a responsible citizen with two young daughters at home, a professional with valuable skills, determined to spend his life in Russia.

He decided to participate in the opposition rally in support of arrested opposition leader Navalny, but he was careful not to break any rules; he stayed on the sidewalk and did not block the street. “I joined a street protest for the first time in my life, after reaching my own boiling point: Navalny’s arrest was outrageously unlawful. But I did not march with any crowds, did not yell any slogans,” Pavlenkov told The Daily Beast.

Russia’s State Constitution, says, “Any person detained, taken into custody... shall have the right to receive assistance of a lawyer from the moment of detention.” But many of nearly the 4,000 Russians who were detained for supporting Navalny remained in jail for days without a chance to see their lawyers, even when they appeared in court.

The “castle plan” effectively means the drawbridge has been raised and Russia’s elites and law enforcement centers will be sealed off from the real population locked outside the ramparts.

Alla Frolova, coordinator of OVD-Info, which also provides legal assistance for political prisoners, told the Daily Beast: “The ‘castle plan’ commands police to defend the actual police buildings from any threatening enemies; but in reality, it stops lawyers from seeing their clients—we are taking the state to court for their ‘castle plan.’ It is against the law,”

“The decision to build the ‘castle’ was made at the top level of security services: thousands in Russians were detained,” she said. “Authorities seem terrified by the opposition’s plans to hold more rallies: The Interior Ministry has closed all metro stations in the center, blocked public transport all over Moscow for this weekend—these measures are terrifying for the public. We’ll see if the state has enough resources to keep this plan under control.”

Pavlenkov spent three days in jail, where he struck up a kind of friendship with one of the police lieutenants who asked Pavlenkov questions about his family, and why most of the detainees seemed to be well educated and have successful careers. “The cop had tears in his eyes—he had been convinced that all of the protesters were some agents going to attack police with Molotov Cocktails, he asked me who paid us and how much for our participation. I am against violence, revolutions, unlawful actions, I genuinely want positive changes in my country. The policeman was totally confused, he was convinced we are Russia’s enemies and that it was the job of the police to defend the country from us,” he told The Daily Beast.

“I neither had a chance to see a lawyer in jail nor at the court. My entire family, all my friends, even those who liked Putin before, now have changed their mind because of my terrible experience.”

Another of those arrested was Ksenia Golubtsova, a communications manager on maternity leave. She saw police keeping male detainees out in the cold for hours, without letting them go to the toilet. “People were humiliated, threatened, beaten,” she told The Daily Beast.

Police detained Golubtsova, 30 when she was taking a picture of the riot, on the corner of Tsvetnoi boulevard last weekend. She spent almost 48 hours in police

vehicles, waiting all night to be interrogated in a tiny room. Police took her phone away, so she could not call her husband. Her interrogator, an elderly woman, finally searched her. “Why do you, a young mother, need this, why do you get involved?” the policewoman asked her. Ksenia’s eyes filled up with tears. She recalled: “I wanted to tell her I protest, so people like you would not question innocent women like me, so such persecutions would not happen to your grandchildren to my children.” But Golubtsova could not get the words out, she felt humiliated and hurt, she said.

Despite Putin’s efforts to shield himself from the uprising and silence the voices of ordinary Russians who are no longer willing to put up with his crackdowns and kleptocracy, the outcry grows louder. “Putin is a thief!” reverberated all over the country on Sunday and the echoes, fueled by social media, could be heard loud and clear behind Putin’s fortifications.

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