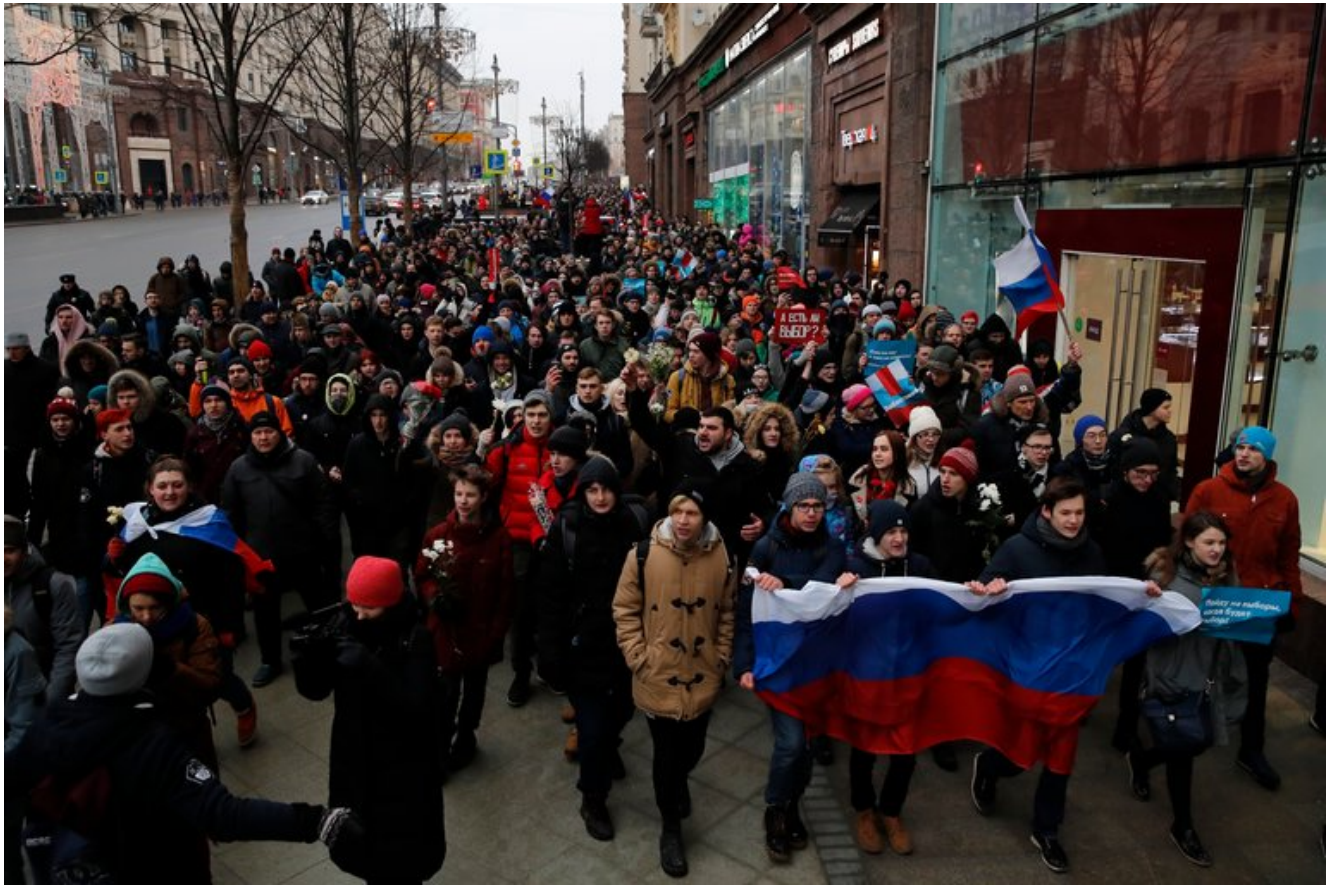


Russians Brave Icy Temperatures to Protest Putin and Election



Protesters on Sunday in Moscow, where rallies called by the opposition leader Aleksei A. Navalny were banned. “You have your own life at stake,” Mr. Navalny said in a recorded message. Credit Pavel Golovkin/Associated Press

MOSCOW — Protesters across Russia braved icy temperatures on Sunday to demonstrate against the lack of choice in the March election that is virtually certain to see President Vladimir V. Putin chosen for a fourth term.

“What we are being offered right now are not elections, and we must not participate in them,” Yevgeny Roizman, the mayor of the central Russian city of Yekaterinburg and a rare elected official from an opposition party, told a crowd of hundreds that had gathered in protest.

The protests in scores of cities — from Vladivostok in the east to Kaliningrad in the west — were called by Aleksei A. Navalny, the charismatic, anticorruption opposition leader, after he was barred from running for the presidency because of

legal problems that he said had been manufactured to prevent his candidacy.

“You have your own life at stake,” Mr. Navalny said in a recorded message urging protesters in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where the rallies were banned, to turn out. “Every additional year of Putin staying in power is one more year of decay.”

Attacking the government as thieves, he said: “How many more years will you keep getting a lower salary than you are due? For how many more years will your business receive less revenue than it is due?”

Mr. Navalny was detained before he reached the several thousand demonstrators gathered in Pushkin Square in central Moscow and other main avenues closer to the Kremlin. Video footage showed police officers, who over all were far more restrained than during previous demonstrations, tackling him and dragging him onto a bus.

A police statement, which put attendance at 1,000 people, said he would be charged with organizing an illegal gathering. Later on Sunday, Mr. Navalny said in a post on Twitter that he had been released. His lawyer, Olga Mikhailova, told Reuters that he would have to face court at a later date.



Mr. Navalny was detained by police officers in Moscow on Sunday. CreditEvgeny Feldman/Associated Press

In June, Mr. Navalny was arrested as he emerged from his apartment to attend an unauthorized anticorruption protest, and he served 25 days in jail. This time, he first stayed in an undisclosed location, taunting the authorities by saying he would announce his whereabouts, and then giving the address where Mr. Putin is registered to vote.

After he was detained on Sunday, Mr. Navalny posted a message on Twitter urging protesters to carry on without him.

The boisterous crowd in Pushkin Square chanted slogans including, "These are not elections!" and "Down with the czar!"

Mr. Navalny organized anticorruption protests across Russia in March and June, mobilizing middle-class youths in particular, and his campaign has vowed to organize repeated protests before the March 18 election to underscore that the vote is a fraud, with the Kremlin manipulating the entire process.

The numbers on Sunday were smaller than previous protests, not least because an election boycott is a less-galvanizing issue than corruption.

"People did not come out for an unsanctioned event," Marat Guelman, a leading cultural figure, wrote on Facebook. "It's a defeat. Moscow does not want tensions."

But even those who despaired of change thought that showing up mattered.

"The boycott won't likely change anything, but there are two different factors that work against Putin," said Sergei Zhilkin, 32, a mathematician and IT engineer. "First, he gets older and is increasingly detached from what modern life is like; second, the new generation becomes more and more active in the society."

Mr. Putin, 65, has refused to even say Mr. Navalny's name, warning that protest movements would only bring chaos to Russia.



Demonstrators also gathered in St. Petersburg on Sunday. Mr. Navalny urged protesters there and in Moscow to turn out, as rallies in those cities were banned. CreditAnton Vaganov/Reuters

The demonstrations were generally peaceful, with some 240 protesters detained nationwide, according to OVD-Info, an independent organization that tracks arrests. In the far eastern part of the country and in Siberia, crowds gathered despite frigid temperatures, with Yakutsk approaching minus 50 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 45 degrees Celsius).

Numerous provincial cities granted permits, although the protests were often shunted to remote locations.

Kazan was typical. The city offered organizers the parking lot of a garbage processing plant in an industrial district 30 miles north of the city, then erected a 10-foot wall of snow with bulldozers so that no passing cars could see the protesters.

Not to be deterred, a number of the roughly 600 demonstrators clambered atop the barricade to wave their protest signs despite the biting wind.

"I'm 23, and Putin's been in power 18 years, practically my whole life," said

Grigory Bochkarev, an IT specialist. He was not there so much to support Mr. Navalny, he said, but for freedom of choice.

“I pay taxes, and my money goes toward corruption — not toward new roads or my relatives’ welfare, but for expensive cars for officials,” he added.

Another man, who identified himself only as Khaliulla, 79, said he had spent his whole life sacrificing in order to build socialism and now he could barely survive on his pension, forced to choose between rent and medication. “I thought my retirement would be decent,” he said.

He also objected to the forced location of the gathering at a garbage plant. “What are we: trash or something?” he said.



Security forces gathered in Moscow on Sunday ahead of a demonstration there. Credit Alexander Nemenov/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia’s two largest cities, law enforcement officials had warned that they would crack down on illegal gatherings. About 2,000 people demonstrated in St. Petersburg, according to the local news website Fontanka.ru.

State television broadcasts largely ignored the protests. Pictures posted on Mr.

Navalny's website showed the police taking a saw to the door of his headquarters in order to interrupt a live webcast describing events around the country. The police said that they were responding to reports of a bomb in the headquarters, Mr. Navalny said. But the webcasts continued all day anyway from an undisclosed location.

Mr. Navalny's call for a boycott puts him on one side of a dispute among the opposition about whether exercising the right to vote, however futile, might be preferable.

"Russia has matured to the stage for elections to take place not as a production with Putin seeking pseudo-opponents and everyone goes out and performs," Vladimir Milov, an opposition figure supporting the boycott, said during a debate on the Echo of Moscow radio station.

Maksim Kats, another opposition politician from one of Moscow's district councils, countered that voting was crucial, even if the outcome was precooked.

"I think that the most appropriate means is to vote for the candidate that suits you," he said. "But even if not, then at least spoil the ballot. And vote against Putin."

Even among the protesters, there was some support for this position, with one man yelling, "Don't support the boycott! You will be helping Putin if you do!"

Some political analysts also suggested that the boycott was a poor tactic. The absence of Mr. Navalny's supporters at the polls would most likely not be enough to make a significant difference in the turnout, which is already expected to be lower than usual. The lack of intrigue in the race is expected to hobble the effort to muster a record turnout for Mr. Putin.

He has ruled Russia since 2000, governing as president for all but a four-year stretch, when term limits forced him to serve one term as prime minister. A fourth presidential term — lasting for six years until 2024 — would make him the longest-serving leader since Stalin.

Matthew Luxmoore contributed reporting from Kazan, Russia, and Sophia Kishkovsky and Oleg Matsnev from Moscow.

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