

Anti-government protests sweep Russia: what's happening and why?

George Ackerman, Science/International Editor | February 4, 2021



Anti-government protests have been organized the past two weekends in cities across Russia.

From St. Petersburg to cities in Siberia, protestors gathered in response to the Jan. 17 arrest of Alexei Navalny and the release of the documentary film “A Palace for Putin: The Story of the Biggest Bribe.”

The film describes Vladimir Putin’s rise to power and the web of alleged corruption surrounding the

Residence at Cape Idokopas, which the film claims is the largest private residence in Russia, and is shrouded in secrecy. The film goes on to claim that this residence is being built for Putin for the price of \$1.5 billion.

The claims made in the film were disputed by both Putin’s press secretary, Dimitry Peskov, and Putin himself.

“To answer your question right away: nothing that is listed there as my property does not and never has belonged to me or my close relatives,” said Putin during an event for Student’s Day on January 25.

Putin went on to call the film brainwashing.

Navalny is an anti-corruption activist, politician and a well known opposition figure in Russia. In the past Navalny has been convicted for embezzlement, but these convictions are **considered politically motivated**, according to The New York Times.

In August 2020, Navalny fell into a coma during a flight within Russia. The plane landed and Navalny was medically evacuated to Berlin, Germany.

While receiving treatment in Berlin, it was determined that Navalny was poisoned with a nerve agent. Specifically, Navalny was exposed to a Novichok agent, which is a kind of chemical weapon developed in the Soviet Union. This type of nerve agent has been used in **previous**



poisonings which Russia has been accused of, according to The New York Times.

In the past this type of nerve agent has been used to **attempt assassinations of ex-Russian spies** within the United Kingdom in 2018 among other assassinations and assassination attempts since the 1990s, according to The BBC.

In a **joint investigation**, The Insider and Bellingcat found evidence which implicated multiple agents of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor to the KGB, in Navalny's poisoning. The FSB is under Putin's jurisdiction.

By early September, Navalny had come out of his coma and **announced plans** to return to Russia in early January.

"It was never a question of whether to return or not. Simply because I never left. I ended up in Germany after arriving in an intensive care box for one reason: they tried to kill me," Navalny wrote in an **Instagram** post on January 13.

Immediately upon Navalny's return he was taken into custody for violating the terms of his parole by leaving the country.

After his arrest, Navalny called for supporters to **take to the streets**, according to The Moscow Times, and many Western nations, including the US, called for his release.

Protests occurred on Jan. 23 in **122 Russian cities**, demanding the release of Navalny, with the most intense of them taking place in Moscow, according to The BBC. Estimates vary on the numbers of protestors, but OVD-info, an organization that estimates arrests by authorities in Russia, **estimated at least 3,695 people** were arrested, with 1454 of them being in the capital city of Moscow. Top Navalny associates were arrested including Navalny's wife.

"The situation is getting worse and worse, it's total lawlessness," said Andrei Gorkyov, a protester in Moscow in an **interview with the Associated Press**. "And if we stay silent, it will go on forever."

Another round of protests again on Jan. 31. demanding the release of Navalny occurred, with OVD-info reporting that **more than 5,000 people were arrested**. Authorities introduced unprecedented security measures including shutting down metro stations in Moscow's city center.

Despite a last minute change of location, Moscow was once again the center of arrests with 1800 arrests, and St. Petersburg coming in second with 1300.

A common feature of these protests has been harsh police crackdown on protests, with the Associated Press reporting that beatings occurred and police randomly detained protestors in Moscow.

"I'm not afraid, because we are the majority," said Leonid Martynov, a protester, in an **interview with the Associated Press**. "We mustn't be scared by clubs because the truth is on our side."

The response to these protests drew condemnation from the United States' government.

"The U.S. condemns the persistent use of harsh tactics against peaceful protesters and journalists by Russian authorities for a second week straight," said Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, [on his official Twitter account](#), "We renew our call for Russia to release those detained for exercising their human rights, including Aleksey Navalny."

These protests have been a large showing of dissent against the Government, with slogans being directed at Putin specifically.

The New York Times [reported](#) that a coalition of different anti-Putin forces are all coming together to advocate for Navalny despite political differences. According to this story, Navalny has become a symbol of the Russian Government's injustice.

Navalny has since been sentenced to a [three and a half year sentence](#) by a court in Moscow. This comes after a request from Moscow's state prison authority which accused Navalny of violating the terms of his prior embezzlement conviction, according to Reuters.

Navalny allies again called for supporters to gather in Moscow, and according to OVD-info, over 1,000 were arrested.

"Someone did not want me to take a single step on my country's territory as a free man. And we know who and we know why – the hatred and fear of one man, living in a bunker, whom I offended by surviving when he tried to have me killed," said Navalny to the court.

These protests are seen as a large show of discontent from the Russian population, especially with alleged corruption as the most of the country has faced an [economic downturn](#) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to The World Bank.

"I do not want my grandchildren to live in such a country," said 55-year-old protester Vyacheslav Vorobyov in an [interview with the Associated Press](#), "I want them to live in a free country."

About the Writer

George Ackerman, Science/International Editor

[Leave a Comment](#)

If you want a picture to show with your comment, go get a [gravatar](#).

Name (required)

Email Address (required)

Speak your mind

[Submit Comment](#)

International

University of Pittsburgh hosts Celtic culture webinars

On Oct. 24, the University of Pittsburgh's International Education department hosted a series of Webinars connected to Celtic culture and their Nati...

International Education events face major changes in response to COVID-19 regulations

International Education Week has been altered due to COVID-19 and academic calendar changes. "Events will be more virtual with a global focus," D...

Imbalanced power structures overseas lead to protests

Nigerian protestors were attacked last week by a group of men armed with firearms and machetes during a protest to end police violence in Lagos, accor...

International admissions recruitment moves online due to COVID-19

International recruitment of prospective students has to be done entirely online this semester due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and college safety ...

Announcement of a Russian COVID-19 vaccine has experts questioning its legitimacy

On Aug. 11, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that the Gamaleya National Center of Epidemiology and Microbiology started their phase 3 trials...

