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Russia

# Mass protests calling for Navalny's release on 23 January, set to continue

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**On 23 January, large-scale protests were held in Russia, the main unifying demand of which was the release of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who had been arrested a week earlier just after his return from Berlin (where he was being rehabilitated after being poisoned).**

On the eve of the rally, after his arrest, Navalny's campaign team presented a video about Vladimir Putin's secret palace, which cost about 100 billion roubles (about \$13 million) and was astonishingly opulent and senseless. Against a backdrop of economic stagnation, rising inflation, and unemployment, the story of this palace resonated enormously (over 90 million views on Youtube at the moment) not only as an example of corruption, but also as a demonstration of colossal social inequality in modern Russia. Unlike the previous Navalny investigations in which high-ranking bureaucrats and oligarchs close to power have been the heroes, this time it is the authoritarian leader himself whose sustained popularity has until recently provided the legitimacy of the regime. Not surprisingly, the publication of the film and the call to go out into the streets provoked a panicked reaction from the authorities: "preventive" talks were held at every school and university, informing students that their participation in the protests would lead to "problems", and all TV channels explained that the palace did not really belong to Putin, who preferred an ascetic way of life.

In addition, on the eve of the rally, all of Navalny's key activists were arrested on various pretexts. The effect of these actions by the authorities was just the opposite: the January 23rd protest surpassed in number of participants all the opposition rallies of the last decade. The main qualitative change, however, was the geographical expansion of the protest: thousands of people took to the streets in major regional centres such as Vladivostok, Irkutsk, Samara, Kazan, and many others. Despite the fact that the Kremlin media constantly tried to portray the protest mainly as the entertainment of irresponsible teenagers influenced by social media, in reality the majority of the participants were young working people, aged 20-40. The turnout of thousands of people in the Russian regions (the protests were held in approximately 120 cities across the country) showed that this time the opposition protests were able to attract a new audience that had never participated in rallies before.

The protest in St. Petersburg, previously seen as more politically passive than Moscow, was unexpectedly massive: here about thirty thousand people marched down the city's main street, Nevsky Prospect, and then occupied the famous Senate Square. In Moscow, about 40 thousand protesters came out and faced aggressive actions from the authorities - during the day, there were several open clashes with the police in the city centre, resulting in the detention of about 1300 people.

This new quality of the protest, the inclusion of an increasingly broad strata outside the traditional liberal opposition, also provides more opportunities for leftist forces to participate. Thus, the Russian Socialist Movement with its slogans and materials took part in the rallies in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg, and in Izhevsk it practically led the column of protesters.

After last Saturday's rallies, Navalny's headquarters announced that they would now hold rallies every week. While it is hard to say how much such a call will contribute to the growth of the protest movement, it is already clear - after 23 January it has already moved to a qualitatively new level.

*26 January 2021*

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