

## International

# Navalny's allies claim symbolic council seat wins in regional polls

## Ruling party faces sinking popularity over economic woes

**NOVOSIBIRSK:** Allies of poisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny said yesterday they had secured city council seats in Siberia as independent monitors condemned a reported "stream" of voting irregularities in regional polls.

In several dozen of the country's 85 regions, Russians voted for regional governors and lawmakers in regional and city legislatures as well as in several by-elections for national MPs.

The polls came a year ahead of parliamentary elections and are seen as a test for the Kremlin, as the ruling party faces sinking popularity and simmering public anger over economic woes. In an effort to fight President Vladimir Putin's electoral machine, Navalny and his team have urged Russians to vote tactically by backing the strongest candidates against the ruling party United Russia.

Some of the highest-profile campaigns have taken place in Novosibirsk, Russia's third-largest city, and neighbouring Tomsk where Navalny travelled last month. On Sunday night, his team said that the heads of Navalny's offices for Novosibirsk and Tomsk both secured city council seats. Navalny had been in Siberia to promote his "smart voting" campaign when he was poisoned with what Germany says was a Novichok nerve agent.

Ksenia Fadeyeva, the 28-year-old head of Navalny's Tomsk office, said she won a city council seat along with another Navalny ally. "This is the first victory of a Navalny office head," Ivan Zhdanov, director of the opposition politician's Anti-Corruption Foundation, said on Twitter.

"It was in Tomsk where Navalny was poisoned," In Novosibirsk, the 37-year-old head of Navalny's local office, Sergei Boiko, also won a council seat. To counter United Russia and the Communist Party, Boiko has created an opposition alliance, which has put forward around 30 candidates for the city legislature. Voter Damir Adgamov, a 26-year-old dental

technician, said he backed Boiko's coalition after watching Navalny's videos on YouTube. "I decided to try," he said. "I don't know if things will be better with Navalny or Boiko or worse, but at least we'll see."

Vladimir Semyonov, a 57-year-old retired army officer, said he had also voted for an opposition candidate, "to change something, so we don't have stagnation".

Boiko said his supporters had recorded dozens of violations, including an attempt to illegally remove observers while a safe containing early votes at one polling station had its seals broken.

United Russia chairman Dmitry Medvedev praised the party's electoral successes,

saying that according to exit polls it was heading for victory in regional legislatures. According to initial results, a second-round runoff was not expected in any of 18 regions that elected governors. Several regions recorded large turnouts in two days of early voting, with more than 50 percent of the electorate casting ballots early in the far eastern Jewish Autonomous Region and in Tatarstan.

The independent election monitor group Golos said it had received a "stream of reports" that observers had been denied their legal rights to view documents and submit complaints, with conflicts sometimes ending in "fisticuffs".

It had also received reports of ballot stuffing and officials switching ballot papers cast by real voters for ones they had filled in, the group added. For the first time, elections in the country were held over three days and some polling stations for early voting were open-air.

Navalny's ally Leonid Volkov said the scheme was thought up to combat the tactical voting system.

"At night, God alone knows what happens to the ballots and it's not clear how to monitor and count this," he said. Electoral chief Ella Pamfilova denounced such "unobjective and mean" accusations.

nese journalists were questioned by Australia's intelligence agency in June, saying an investigation was still underway, but said there was some "activity" by the country's intelligence agency.

"Where (the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) has sufficient grounds for the execution of a search warrant, or for activities otherwise, then they'll undertake that activity," Dutton said on the Australian Broadcasting Corp (ABC) television.

"If people are masquerading as journalists or business leaders or whoever they might be, and there's evidence that they are acting in a contrary nature to Australian law, then .... (the agencies will act.)"

The raids were revealed by China's foreign min-



**NOVOSIBIRSK:** File photo shows Sergei Boiko, the head of Alexei Navalny's Novosibirsk headquarters and the city council candidate in September 13 regional elections, meets with his electorate in Novosibirsk on September 9, 2020. — AFP

"Currently we do not see that many violations," she said. The three-day system was first used this summer for a national vote on constitutional amendments that made it possible for Putin to stay in power until 2036.

Political analysts say the results of the polls will help the Kremlin determine whether the unpopular ruling party needs to be reformed. The poisoning of Navalny could have also influenced voters.

After he was evacuated from Siberia to Berlin, German doctors said Navalny had been poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent. His associates believe the use of the banned chemical weapon shows that only the Russian state could be responsible.

Navalny is now out of a medically induced coma and reacting to speech, the Berlin hospital treating him said yesterday. — AFP

istry last week in the wake of two Australian journalists departing China after questioning by Chinese police. Australia's trade minister said on Friday the agencies acted on evidence related to a foreign interference investigation.

On Saturday, China's state media condemned the raids. Relations between Australia and its top trading partner China have been deteriorating gradually over the recent years and have soured further this year after Canberra called for an investigation into the origins of the novel coronavirus, angering Beijing. China has imposed trade restrictions on products including barley and wine, prompting Australia to tighten national security tests for foreign investment. — Reuters

## Tensions soar over Australia's state border closures

**SYDNEY:** A torrid row over Australia's state border closures has pushed the country's prime minister to tears, sparked bitter recriminations among rival regional leaders and even talk of secession. Travel between the nation's independent-minded states and territories has been mostly banned since Covid-19 hit Australia in March.

But an unhappy federal government is ratcheting pressure on premiers to open up, sending the argument into overdrive. Campaigning media coverage has highlighted the plight of grieving families separated by the closures and targeted state officials they deem responsible.

One family facing a huge quarantine bill to see their dying father received over Aus\$200,000 (US\$148,000) in donations when their ordeal became public. The family of Mark Keans, who has terminal cancer, had previously been told only one of his four children would be able to enter Queensland to see him.

The state currently blocks almost all arrivals from New South Wales — which it considers a Covid-19 hotspot. "How do you choose which child gets that chance to see their dad for the last time?" Keans' sister Tamara Langborne told national broadcaster ABC. Such is the level of anger that Queensland's chief medical officer has been forced to seek police protection after threats on her life.

Australia began life as six self-governing British states and territories that agreed to form a federation around 1900. Rivalry between those regions had persisted — usually on the sports field and in lighthearted jokes — but coronavirus has made regional sentiment more pronounced, and more popular. Many premiers advocating state lockdowns have seen their public approval ratings rocket. West Australia's centre-left premier Mark McGowan was cheered on as he pilloried the "Pinot grigio-sipping" commentator in Sydney — near where he was born — for telling him to open up.

West Australia, he insisted, will remain "an island within an island." An approving local paper declared its own "Westralia Day" and #WAexit has trended on social media, a West Australian echo of Britain's rancorous exit of the European Union.

Labor member of parliament Patrick Gorman, writing in The Australian on Friday, warned such talk cannot be dismissed lightly. "The dangerous idea of secession has been reignited in Perth and across our state," he said. "Those on the east coast of Australia greatly underestimate the damage this might do to the federation." Conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison has even expressed concern that "at times" over the past months "it has felt like Australia could break apart." Although he had long sought to appear above the fray, even as party attack dogs were set on those who support restrictions, he has now joined the fight.

In a recent radio interview, Morrison said he had personally pleaded with the centre-left Queensland premier to allow Sarah Caisip to attend her father's funeral after travelling from Canberra.

"I've appealed to her to overrule the decision that would allow Sarah to go to the funeral," he told 2GB tearfully. "It's not about borders, it's not about federation, it's not about politicians, it's not about elections."

Morrison's critics say that is exactly what the row is about. Many of the border rows are fought down political lines, with Morrison's ruling conservative national government routinely targeting states with opposition Labor party leaders.

Queensland's premier, Anastacia Palaszczuk, happens to be in the thick of a hard-fought re-election campaign against Morrison's conservative coalition candidate. She has since responded, acknowledging "heartbreaking" cases, but insisting she will not be bullied or intimidated over policies designed to keep Queenslanders safe.

Western Australian Premier McGowan suggested Queensland's leader was being singled out ahead of a state election in October. "Tasmania and South Australia have borders — I don't see them being attacked," McGowan said of the Liberal-run states. — AFP

## Australia defends intelligence raids as spat with China grows

**MELBOURNE:** Australia's Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton on Sunday defended the government's right to intelligence raids to prevent foreign interference, after China condemned searches on the homes of its journalists working in Australia.

Dutton declined to directly confirm that the Chi-

## Belarus leader looks to Putin to help him cling on to power

**MOSCOW:** President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus will seek the backing of Russia's Vladimir Putin at a crucial meeting yesterday after a fifth consecutive weekend of huge protests demanding that he step down.

Lukashenko, facing the gravest crisis of his 26 years in power, will travel to Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi with his fate in Putin's hands. Economic and military support from Moscow could help tip the balance in his favour as his security forces crack down hard on the opposition.

The Belarusian opposition accuses Lukashenko of rigging last month's presidential election, which he says he won fairly with 80% of the vote. Since then, thousands of people have been arrested and nearly all the opposition's key leaders have been detained, deported or forced to flee the country.

At least 100,000 protesters took to the streets of the capital Minsk on Sunday, taunting Lukashenko with chants of "You're a rat". Police said they detained over 400 people.

Putin's actions so far suggest he has no desire to see the leader of a neighbouring ex-Soviet country toppled by pressure from the streets — even if Lukashenko has often proved a prickly and difficult ally.

The Kremlin leader said last month he had set up a "reserve police force" at Lukashenko's request, but it would be deployed only if needed. On Monday Russia will send paratroopers to Belarus for joint "Slavic brotherhood" military drills until Sept. 25, RIA



**MINSK:** A law enforcement officer detains a woman with a huge former white-red-white flag of Belarus during a rally to protest against the presidential election results in Minsk. Belarusians have been demonstrating against the disputed re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko for a month, with more than 100,000 people flooding the streets of Minsk for four straight weekends. — AFP

news agency quoted the defence ministry as saying.

Russia has also offered to restructure Belarusian debt and support the banking system. The cost of further Moscow backing could be Lukashenko's acceptance of even greater Russian dominance in the relationship between the two countries.

The Kremlin has long pushed for closer political and economic integration with Minsk, including a joint currency, but Lukashenko has resisted the pres-

Middleton to capture a snapshot of the nation in coronavirus lockdown.

The project received more than 30,000 submissions, from which Kate and four other judges picked 100 final images that will be published online by the National Portrait Gallery on Monday.

"The Duchess of Cambridge and I were inspired to see how the photographs have captured the resilience of the British people at such a challenging time, whether that is through celebrating frontline workers, recognising community spirit or showing the efforts of individuals supporting those in need," the queen said in a letter to entrants.

sure from his more powerful neighbour.

Yet the veteran Belarusian leader's position could become increasingly precarious should the protests persist, and grow. Sunday's demonstration was one of the biggest yet. "We have to show with this march that he doesn't control the country, that he is not in a position to speak on behalf of Belarusians," said Genady, 35, a logistics worker who declined to give his last name. — Reuters

Since its launch in May, the project invited people of all ages from across Britain to submit a photographic portrait they had taken during the COVID-19 lockdown that started in March.

Focused on three main themes: Helpers and Heroes, Your New Normal and Acts of Kindness, some of the photographs will also go on show in towns and cities across Britain later in the year.

Kate — wife of Prince William and a keen photographer herself — and other members of the panel assessed the images on the emotions and experiences they convey rather than on their photographic quality or technical expertise. — Reuters

## Queen applauds photographers in lockdown Britain

**LONDON:** Britain's Queen Elizabeth yesterday congratulated entrants to Hold Still, a photography project launched by the Duchess of Cambridge Kate