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## **FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT: Happy Birthday Mr. President**

**Airs 8.30 pm Monday December 4<sup>th</sup> on ABC TV and iview**

**Vladimir Putin crushes opponents, but a growing army of young Russians is fighting back. Their gift to the strongman on his 65th birthday? A show of defiance and a demand to quit. Eric Campbell reports.**

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*Russia without Putin! We are the power here!*

In St Petersburg, where Russia's last Tsar was toppled, another revolt is stirring. It's on the streets where thousands of chanting young protesters are set to march, and online, where memes and piss-takes of President Putin and his comrades go viral.

If the strongman has a weakness, this is it: the many young Russians who have no memory of any leader other than Putin and who are angry about corruption and abuse of power.

*The youth are sick of this drivel. They smell all the lies – **independent politician Maxim Reznik***

On Putin's 65th birthday, protesters want him to do what most Russians do – retire. They will defy official warnings that they will be arrested for demonstrating illegally.

*Meet Saddam and Gaddafi... Spend last years of his life in The Hague - **protesters' encrypted birthday messages for President Putin***

St Petersburg, Putin's old hometown, will be the scene of the biggest anti-Putin protest. Watching events unfold there, along with hundreds of police, is reporter Eric Campbell. As the hours count down to the march, the Night Wolves, a fiercely nationalist bikers' club, rally in Putin's support. Other young Putin loyalists stage their own celebrations.

*One, two, three. Congratulations Vladimir Vladimirovich! – **Selfie birthday message from members of United Russia youth***

Behind the birthday protest are supporters of Putin's chief enemy, the youthful and digital media-savvy Alexei Navalny. Already some volunteers have been detained, and many more face arrest tonight. Navalny himself is in court-ordered detention, banned from running for office for 10 years after being accused of fraud.

*So kid, stay out of politics and give your brain a shower – **lyrics from anti-Navalny pop song***

But Navalny insists he will be a force at the elections next March.

*I am going to these elections to change the government. If I'm not allowed to run... we'll start a big campaign to boycott (the election) – **Navalny interviewed by Eric Campbell***

Navalny is cleverly harnessing the passions of his young backers, but he will need to cut through a pall of cynicism shared by many compatriots.

*Putin is obviously corrupt. But we too give bribes. How can we ask Putin to step down if we ourselves give bribes to traffic police and doctors? We're just as corrupt as Putin – **Dima, St Petersburg man***

Reporter Eric Campbell was the ABC's Russia correspondent during the Boris Yeltsin years, just as Putin's star was rising. Now Campbell looks at modern Russia through the prism of Putin's birthday, which culminates in a protest that suddenly turns frightening.

**Happy Birthday Mr President airs on Foreign Correspondent at 8.30 pm Monday December 4 on ABC TV (repeated 1 pm Tuesday and 11.30 pm Wednesday on ABC TV; 8 pm Saturday and 1 am Sunday on ABC News). Also on iView.**

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