The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Governor Defends Crusader Navalny

By Olga Razumovskaya

December 12, 2010

Kirov Governor Nikita Belykh said on his blog Friday that he has no complaints against lawyer and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny, despite the fact that the latter is now being probed by the Investigative Committee.

Navalny, who is now in the United States on a fellowship with Yale University, is being investigated for allegedly causing more than 1 million rubles ($32,000) worth of damages to KirovLes, a state-owned timber company.

"Alexey, when working for the Kirov region, was a member of a working group to reorganize KirovLes and was dealing with the issue of increasing transparency in the timber industry," the governor wrote on his blog, pointing out that Navalny was volunteering as his advisor and was not a government employee.

"Neither the Kirov regional office of the state unitary enterprise KirovLes, nor its founder — the government — has any issue with Alexei. We do have an issue, however, with the former director of KirovLes ... whose testimony, according to the media, is what the case against

Navalny is based on," Belykh wrote.

The case concerns an accusation by Vyacheslav Opalyov, former director of KirovLes, a state-owned timber company now approaching bankruptcy — due in part, the governor says, to incompetent management by Opalyov.

According to Opalyov, Navalny had promised to aide him in securing profitable state contracts in exchange for a loss-making contract with a company called Vyatskaya Lesnaya Kompania, according to Internet portal The Marker.

A lawyer by trade, Navalny is a minority shareholder in many of the country's biggest companies, including Transneft and VTB, and has been filing lawsuits against these companies in a crusade for increased transparency and better corporate governance. He even launched the web site Rospil.info to expose incidents of corruption.

Navalny sees Transneft, the state-owned pipeline company, as the force behind the sudden investigation of something that happened more than a year ago.

He wrote on his blog Friday that late last month, after writing a post about Transneft allegedly embezzling more than $4 billion during the construction of a pipeline connecting east Siberia and the Pacific, several of his clients were approached by people who were fishing for any "interesting information."

Policemen hired by Trasneft could not come up with anything better than to reanimate a case from a year and a half ago, Navalny wrote.

A Transneft spokesman could not be reached on Sunday to confirm or deny the allegation.

The KirovLes accusation was "cooked up by policemen hired by VTB" right before the company's shareholder meeting, Navalny said.

In mid-November, Navalny wrote about "the drill-boring scheme," claiming that VTB's subsidiary, VTB-Leasing, had embezzled a total of $156 million in a deal to purchase 30 drills from the Chinese Sichuan Honghua Petroleum Equipment Company.

A VTB spokesman could not be reached for comment Sunday.

Navalny admitted on his blog that his crusade may be harming his law practice because his clients are being harassed, but his enthusiasm does not seem to be waning.

"My dear thieves! It was obvious that you would come up with something like this, and I was prepared. I am not afraid, and I am coming back to you, my dear corrupt ones," Navalny wrote.

"The case of Transneft (as well as the VTB, Gazprom and other cases) will go on even if tomorrow you launch a case due to my involvement in the stealing of the Golden Fleece, the Amber Room and President [Dmitry] Medvedev's iPad," Navalny wrote.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/12/12/governor-defends-crusader-navalny-a3663