

Opposition Leader Udaltsov Put Under House Arrest

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Udaltsov, left, with his wife, Anastasia, outside the courtroom Saturday. **Mikhail Metzel**

A Moscow court on Saturday placed outspoken leftist opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov under house arrest in connection with criminal charges that he orchestrated anti-government riots last year.

The ruling marks the first time since the rise of the opposition movement in December 2011 following disputed State Duma elections that a prominent anti-Kremlin figure has faced such a restriction.

Udaltsov, leader of the Left Front, had been under travel restrictions since October but had repeatedly violated them, Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said Friday. His violations forced investigators to ask the court to limit his freedom further, Markin said.

Under the new restrictions, Udaltsov will be prevented until April 6 from leaving his Moscow

apartment without permission, and from communicating with anyone except his family, lawyers, investigators or prison officials by any means, the Basmanny District Court ruled.

On Friday, Udaltsov denied that he had violated the travel restrictions imposed on him in October, saying authorities were seeking to limit his public activism.

Political analyst Pavel Salin said Udaltsov was likely correct.

"[Udaltsov is] one of the few people who can lead a crowd," Salin said, while "objective reasons for [public] discontent are growing."

"The authorities understand perfectly that [discontent] can flare up anywhere," Salin said.

Before the decision was announced Saturday, Udaltsov told journalists and supporters outside the court building that he thought the authorities were seeking to put him under house arrest because the protest movement had subsided and they were not afraid of a backlash from the opposition.

He said authorities would further clamp down on dissent and may arrest fellow opposition leader Alexei Navalny unless there was a new upsurge in protest activity. He called on anti-Kremlin activists to respond by stepping up their activities.

Navalny is a suspect in three separate criminal cases.

Investigators initiated a criminal investigation against Udaltsov and fellow Left Front activists Konstantin Lebedev and Leonid Razvozzhayev in October on charges of orchestrating mass disorder on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on May 6. An opposition rally that day ended in clashes between police and protesters.

Lebedev and Razvozzhayev have been jailed since October. Each of the three faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted. About 20 other activists face charges in connection with their alleged participation in the May 6 violence.

The charges against Udaltsov, Lebedev and Razvozzhayev are based on an exposé aired on NTV television in October that showed men resembling the trio in talks with senior Georgian politicians about how to mount riots in Russia.

The judge on Saturday cited a variety of justifications for assigning Udaltsov new restrictions, including that he was a flight risk and could continue illegal activities, threaten suspects, destroy evidence or influence the investigation in some other way because of connections to senior officials and human rights activists.

In a bizarre episode, the judge also said that Udaltsov and his wife, fellow activist Anastasia Udaltsova, fought frequently and that Udaltsova had left for Ukraine because of her husband's threats.

People in the courtroom burst into laughter at the claim, since Udaltsova was standing right in front of the judge at the time. She put her finger to her temple and turned it back and forth to indicate what she perceived as the absurdity of the statement.

"I just found out from the judge's statement that I'm currently in Ukraine because Udaltsov is threatening me," she joked on Twitter.

Udaltsov's lawyers filed a motion to question Udaltsova as a witness, but the court rejected it.

The small courtroom was crowded with journalists and supporters of the opposition leader. Camera operators blocked the view of the judge's bench, so people could see it only through the bars of an empty defendant's cage. One spectator remarked that it was an interesting angle from which to view the proceedings.

During the hearing, a few dozen Left Front activists and protesters wearing white ribbons gathered near the court building. Some of them quipped that it was no coincidence the case was being heard at Basmanny District Court since it was the epitome of "Basmannoye justice," the Russian term for a kangaroo court.

When the judge finished reading the decision, Udaltsov's supporters shouted "shame" and "free Udaltsov."

On Sunday, Udaltsov's aides announced a protest on his Twitter account to take place later that day in front of the Investigative Committee in support of political prisoners.

About 50 activists, some wearing T-shirts with the names of alleged political prisoners, took part in the protest, yelling slogans and holding banners, Kasparov.ru announced. Police asked the protesters to stay out of the way of traffic but otherwise did not interfere.

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