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Navalny's Taunts Led to 'Speedy' Investigation

By Jonathan Earle

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Alexei Navalny

Days before the much-anticipated trial of opposition leader Alexei Navalny is scheduled to begin, an Investigative Committee spokesman has suggested that Navalny's constant criticism of the government caused investigators to "accelerate" work on the case against him.

When someone "uses all his energy to bring attention to himself" and "provokes the government," his past attracts more attention, and the process of exposing him "accelerates," spokesman Vladimir Markin told Izvestia in a interview published on Friday that was remarkable for its open distain.

The government had previously denied any link between Navalny's politics and the criminal case, and Markin again insisted that the charges were not politically motivated, but rather "Navalny ... banal," he said, correcting a dubious slip of the tongue.

At several points in the interview, Markin seemed to express outright contempt for the opposition leader, calling him a foreign puppet, accusing his projects of "parasitizing" government mechanisms, and saying his anti-corruption skills could come in handy in prison.

Navalny, 36, a lawyer who rose to prominence as an anti-corruption blogger, currently operates several Internet-based projects that investigate government spending, spread anti-government propaganda, and make it easier for tenants to report problems to utilities companies.

On Wednesday, he will go before a judge to face allegations that he led a criminal group that stole 16 million rubles ($516,000) worth of timber from a state-owned company in 2011-12, a crime punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

He has denied any wrongdoing, and on Friday, he joked that he would give 20 cubic meters of fir lumber to anybody who could find evidence for the accusation in the indictment.

Security has reportedly been beefed up at the courthouse in Kirov, about 800 kilometers east of Moscow, and city officials have sanctioned a small rally in support of Navalny to take place on Wednesday morning across from the building.

Arguably the opposition's most popular leader, Navalny has had several criminal investigations opened against him in recent months, a period that has also seen the government pass new restrictions on public demonstrations, defamatory speech, and non-governmental organizations.

The court case looks likely to become the most widely discussed case since last year, when three members of the band Pussy Riot were tried for performing a profane "punk prayer" in a Moscow cathedral, and the outcome has become the subject of intense speculation.

Alexei Makarkin, deputy director of the Center for Political Technologies, said Navalny would likely be convicted, thereby making him ineligible to run for public office and marking him as a "criminal" for many Russians, who believe that "where there's smoke, there's fire."

About 55 percent of respondents who have heard of Navalny — or about one in three Russians — think he is guilty, according to the results of a March poll by the independent Levada Center.

"The government wants to take Navalny out of politics, to neutralize him. The question is, 'Will he be jailed, or will he get a suspended sentence?" Makarkin said by telephone on Friday.

If Navalny is imprisoned, he'll become a symbol for the opposition. But years in prison could also erode his political strength as it has for jailed former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, said Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, by telephone on Friday.

Navalny has said in several recent interviews that he is ready for jail. "Inside, I'm ready for it. I've written letters of attorney, and talked it over with my wife many times. If they jail me, they jail me. ... But, of course, the prospect doesn't evoke any positive emotions," he told The New Times.

Earlier this month, Navalny announced presidential ambitions, causing critics from the ruling United Russia party, which Navalny has dubbed "the party of crooks and thieves," to accuse the opposition leader of attempting to paint himself as a political prisoner.

The next presidential elections are scheduled for 2018, and while 55 percent of respondents told the Levada Center in March that they did not want President Vladimir Putin to be re-elected, only 14 percent said they would vote for Navalny.

In another political move, a group of Navalny allies on Wednesday submitted documents to register a new political party, called the "People's Alliance." While Navalny is not a party member, he is an "inspiration and supporter," the head of party's branch in Kirov said by telephone on Friday.

The trial that begins on Wednesday could last a week, or it could take months, Navalny told Dozhd television last week.

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