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Witness in Navalny Trial Disputes Earlier Testimony

By The Moscow Times

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Navalny greeting followers Tuesday at a train station en route to Kirov. **Yevgeny Feldman**

At the fifth hearing in the embezzlement case against opposition blogger Alexei Navalny on Wednesday, a Kirov official said Navalny could not have organized the theft of timber that he is accused of because he did not have the authority to do so.

The alleged embezzlement scheme involves a company called VLK LTD, which was co-founded by Navalny and his co-defendant, Pyotr Ofitserov. Prosecutors say the company pressured the heads of logging companies into selling timber at below-market prices.

Sergei Shcherchkov, first deputy head of the Kirov region, testified at the Leninsky District Court that he had never seen Navalny pressure any heads of forestry enterprises into disadvantageous contracts or heard any complaints about Navalny, RBC reported.

Navalny is currently standing trial in Kirov on charges of embezzling 16 million rubles

($500,000) worth of timber from the state-owned company KirovLes while working as an adviser to regional governor Nikita Belykh in 2009.

Wednesday's hearing, which followed a 19-day break for the May holidays, opened with Navalny's lawyers calling for a special ruling against police members who had conducted searches at their offices on May 9.

The lawyers for the defense asked the court to declare the searches unlawful, saying police had gained access to confidential documents in an attempt to scare the defense.

The court turned down the request, however, after the prosecutor argued that police had discovered "extremist materials" being prepared in the offices, Lenta.ru reported.

Shcherchkov's testimony Wednesday was the most thorough of the 12 witnesses who gave evidence, with the 11 other witnesses responding to most questions with "I don't know" or "I don't remember," according to Gazeta.ru.

Shcherchkov disputed earlier testimony from former KirovLes director Vyacheslav Opalev that Navalny had forced directors to sell timber at artificially low prices, saying that Opalev had a personal conflict with Navalny because the anti-corruption campaigner had sought his dismissal.

Natalya Koryetnyuk, another witness and the former head of the Podosinsky logging company, said she and several of her former colleagues believed the case against Navalny was strictly political in nature, Gazeta.ru reported.

"That's my personal opinion," she said, "but other directors feel the same way."

Navalny faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted and would be barred from running for political office in the future, an ambition he has previously expressed.

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