

Witness in Navalny Trial Backs Prosecutors' Allegations

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A witness in the trial on embezzlement charges against opposition leader Alexei Navalny testified Thursday that the defendant had offered a disadvantageous contract to the state company that he is accused of defrauding.

Larisa Bastrygina, deputy director of KirovLes, told the Leninsky District Court in Kirov that Navalny, who stands accused of embezzling 16 million rubles (\$500,000) worth of timber from the company while working as an adviser to regional governor Nikita Belykh in 2009, offered an unfavorable contract to her company, Interfax reported.

Navalny cross-examined Bastrygina for over an hour and accused her of providing false testimony. He also said that he had earlier accused her of being behind a corruption scheme.

Bastrygina's testimony comes a day after another witness in the case, first deputy head of the Kirov region Sergei Shcherchkov, told the court that Navalny could not have committed the

crime he is accused of because he didn't have enough power to do so.

A number of other witnesses have already given testimony in the case, with several saying they could not remember dealings with Navalny or did not know the answers to prosecutors' questions, and one witness saying Navalny forced businessmen into disadvantageous contracts.

The contract mentioned by Bastrygina obliged KirovLes to sell all its timber to VLK LTD, which was co-founded by Navalny and his co-defendant, Pyotr Ofitserov, but the terms of the sales were to be spelled out in additional agreements regulating each sale separately, she said.

The terms of payment for the timber were also disadvantageous to KirovLes, she said.

According to Bastrygina, the board of KirovLes decided that the contract was nonetheless beneficial to their companies because Ofitserov promised to buy all the timber, even substandard.

A 2009 audit of KirovLes showed a decline in the implementation of the contract, meaning it was unprofitable, Bastrygina said.

Navalny opposed an audit of KirovLes and later said the findings of the auditors were wrong, she said.

Following the check, KirovLes director Vyacheslav Opalev was fired, and the new director, Pyotr Tyshlik, terminated the contract with VLK, but KirovLes still had debts and fines to pay to VLK.

Many observers view the case against Navalny as politically motivated, noting that the probe was opened after Navalny led thousands of people at an authorized anti-government rally in Moscow last May. If convicted, Navalny will be barred from running for political office.

He faces up to 10 years in prison.

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