The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

In Surprise Ruling, Navalny Released From Detention

By Natalya Krainova

July 21, 2013

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, center right, and his wife Yulia, center left, greet journalists and supporters as he was released in a courtroom in Kirov. **Dmitry Lovetsky**

KIROV — Opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his co-defendant, businessman Pyotr Ofitserov, were unexpectedly released by a Kirov court on Friday at the request of prosecutors a day after being detained upon their conviction on embezzlement charges.

On Thursday, Kirov's Leninsky District Court ruled to take Navalny and Ofitserov into custody in the courtroom after sentencing them to five and four years in prison, respectively, on charges of stealing 16 million rubles ($490,000) worth of timber from state company KirovLes in 2009.

Supporters of Navalny, who has led large-scale street protests against President Vladimir Putin’s rule and uncovered corruption of senior officials, view his trial as Putin’s revenge for Navalny’s activities and political ambitions.

A panel of three judges at the Kirov Region Court on Friday overturned Thursday's ruling of a district judge to detain them before the verdict takes effect, agreeing with the argument of regional prosecutors who said there were "no grounds" to imprison Navalny and Ofitserov since they had not violated travel restrictions imposed on them earlier. They also cited Navalny's registration last week as a candidate for the Sept. 8 Moscow mayoral vote as a factor.

By law convicted criminals have no right to run in elections, but Navalny's sentence has not taken effect since his lawyers are preparing an appeal. The guilty verdict does not officially take effect until after the pair has been given a chance to appeal.

"Keeping Navalny in custody puts him in a position of inequality before the other registered candidates," one of the judges said, ruling to release both men "immediately" but impose travel restrictions on them.

Navalny told several dozen reporters outside the courthouse after his release that he would consult with his election headquarters about whether to run in the mayoral race after he returned to Moscow on Saturday but that his campaign would continue "in the form of a boycott" of elections if his sentence took effect.

"I am not some tamed animal to be removed from elections and then be allowed to take part in them for a month," Navalny said.

Following Navalny's release, his campaign promised on Twitter to "set up so many cubes [billboards] in Moscow that residents will forget all the other candidates."

Navalny urged his supporters to use the campaign to "ruffle the crooks and thieves," a name he coined for the pro-Kremlin United Russia party.

Navalny, who spent the night in a solitary cell at a detention center in Kirov, learned about the prosecutors' appeal to release him only after he was brought to the court on Friday, right before the hearing, said one of his lawyers, Sergei Kobelev.

At the start of Friday's hearing, Navalny told the court that he was "much surprised by all that is happening."

When asked by the judge before the ruling if he had any requests, Navalny joked that he wanted the judge to "prove the identity of prosecutor [Sergei] Bogdanov."

"There is a possibility that this is his twin since it was Bogdanov in particular who had demanded that I be imprisoned," Navalny said, eliciting laughter from the several dozen reporters who attended the hearing.

Friday's hearing lasted for about ten minutes before the judges took a 40-minute break to decide whether to free the pair.

Reporters greeted the ruling with a roar of approval. Navalny thanked them for their support, speaking in the courtroom after handcuffs were removed from his wrists.

Navalny's supporters met him at the court entrance with a plate of pancakes, or *bliny* in

Russian, offering Navalny to “eat blinov,” a reference to the last name of district court judge Sergei Blinov, who issued Thursday's guilty verdict and ruled to have Navalny and Ofitserov immediately detained.

Contact the author at n.krainova@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/07/21/in-surprise-ruling-navalny-released-from-detention-a25982