

Navalny Says Experts Prove Forgery in Montenegrin Firm Scandal

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A forensic services firm hired by opposition leader Alexei Navalny has concluded that his signature was forged in the registration documents of a Montenegrin company called MRD, the politician said Thursday on his blog.

Navalny accused the Kremlin of orchestrating the alleged forgery in a bid to smear him during the mayoral campaign for the Sept. 8 election, in which he was the runner-up with 27.2 percent of the vote.

He said Konstantin Kostin, head of the Kremlin-friendly Civil Society Development Foundation, could be involved in the purported forgery. Members of the foundation have actively promoted the issue of the Montenegrin firm in the media, Navalny said.

The anti-corruption campaigner posted scanned photos of the assessment by forensic services company Expert Plus, the company's registration documents and signatures in his

foreign passports. The notary public indicated in the registration documents has also denied ever signing them, he said.

"The documents could have been forged and included in the Montenegrin register in exchange for a bribe," Navalny said.

The opposition leader also accused Montenegrin tax authorities of intentionally dragging their feet to prevent him from getting the documents before the Sept. 8 election.

"The government's unlimited financial resources and colossal capabilities do not help it much," Navalny said. "The only way it can discredit its political opponents is by stealing money allocated for fighting the opposition and then coming up with a fake document that will be exposed in a month."

In August, the Prime news agency published an alleged statement by the Montenegrin tax agency, received by e-mail, saying the anti-corruption activist had co-founded the company in 2007. Pro-Kremlin bloggers argued that this could serve as a basis for removing Navalny from the election, since the company had not been declared by the opposition activist. The statement also indicated that the company had never been registered as a taxpayer and had never declared profits or tax liabilities in Montenegro, meaning it existed only on paper.

Some commentators cast doubt on the authenticity of the Prime report, however, arguing that an e-mail without any addresses, names, stamps or signatures could not be considered an official document or press release.

Navalny's campaign manager, Leonid Volkov, initially said Russian authorities could have hacked into the MRD site to record information about the company. He later said the registration process could have proceeded without the opposition leader's knowledge and consent, attributing the situation to a legal mix-up in Montenegro. He also posted screenshots from OpenCorporates, a site that shares data on corporate entities, featuring the Federal Security Service's site and address as ones belonging to MRD.

Navalny said earlier that in 2007, he and opposition activist Maria Gaidar wanted to buy real estate in Montenegro and register a company for that purpose but subsequently abandoned the idea.

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