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Yandex Offices Searched During Investigation into Navalny Backers

By Christopher Brennan

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Opposition leader Alexei Navalny takes a picture of journalists leaving a courtroom during his court hearing in Moscow, Russia.

Investigators have conducted searches at the office of Internet company Yandex as well as at the properties of opposition members suspected of pocketing funds designated for opposition leader Alexei Navalny's mayoral campaign last year.

The Investigative Committee released a statement Friday morning saying Konstantin Yankauskas, Nikolai Lyashkin and Vladimir Ashurkov — members of Navalny's campaign for Moscow mayor last September— were suspected of sluicing money from a 10 million ruble ($290,000) fund collected for the opposition leader's mayoral bid through online payment services.

Yankauskas and Lyashkin, who were recently named as candidates for this year's Moscow City Duma elections by the opposition coalition For Moscow, both said on Twitter that police had

arrived and searched their apartments on Friday morning.

The offices of Yandex's payment service Yandex.Money were also searched "in relation to an investigation into several of our clients," press secretary Nadezhda Kiyatkina said Friday. She told The Moscow Times by email that the office and services for customers were working normally.

Navalny's 2013 mayoral campaign had been accused of using the web giant's money-transfer service to receive illegal funds from abroad.

The campaign's use of Internet fundraising was checked by the Moscow City Elections Commission, but did not end up derailing the opposition leader's mayoral bid — in which he eventually garnered 27 percent of the vote but lost in the first round to Mayor Sergei Sobyanin.

Navalny recalled the incident on his LiveJournal blog on Friday and defended his supporters from fraud allegations, saying that "Neither I nor my staff's financial group have any of the smallest doubts that all of the money went to the election campaign."

Navalny, who is currently under house arrest in connection with a separate fraud case against him, said the searches were an attempt by authorities to limit the opposition's ability to raise money through the Internet as well as to discredit Yanukauskas and Lyahskin's bids for the city legislature.

Debates between City Duma candidates vying for seats in the city's 45 districts began this week in advance of nonbinding primaries on June 8 organized by the citizen's group My Moscow.

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