

Court Softens House Arrest for Opposition Leader Navalny

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Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny reacts as he arrives to attend a court hearing in Moscow.

A sliver of new-found freedom was extended by a Moscow court on Thursday to opposition firebrand Alexei Navalny, who has been under house arrest since February in connection with an embezzlement case pending against him, ITAR-Tass reported Thursday.

He now enjoys the privilege of being able to communicate with his co-defendants in criminal cases pending against him, according to the report.

Previously, Navalny — a famed anti-corruption blogger and one of the leaders of the mass anti-Kremlin protests that took Moscow by storm in 2011 and 2012 — had only been allowed to communicate with members of his family, certain law enforcement officers and members of his legal team, according to legal news agency RAPSI.

Navalny stands accused alongside his brother Oleg of having embezzled more than 26 million rubles (\$716,000) from a Russian subsidiary of French cosmetics company Yves Rocher.

Navalny has claimed that this and a series of other criminal cases launched against him are simply part of an effort to prevent him from engaging in politics.

Navalny, who ran in Moscow's mayoral elections in 2013, was also handed a five-year suspended sentence after being convicted last summer of having embezzled funds from Russian timber company KirovLes.

On Wednesday, Navalny was ordered to pay 600,000 rubles (\$16,500) to Moscow Deputy Mayor Maxim Liksutov, after a court ruled that the anti-corruption campaigner had defamed him, ITAR-Tass reported.

The ruling came in connection with Navalny's popular blog, where he had written in January that Liksutov and his wife owned assets abroad, suggesting the deputy mayor had violated federal legislation forbidding government officials from owning assets overseas.

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