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Verdict Against Kremlin Critic Navalny Abruptly Moved to Tuesday

By Allison Quinn

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Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny (C) arrives at a court hearing in Moscow on Dec. 19, 2014.

The ruling in the fraud case against opposition campaigner Alexei Navalny has been unexpectedly moved up from Jan. 15 to Dec. 30 amid speculation that the decision could trigger mass street protests.

Navalny announced the news on his official website late Monday afternoon. "Five minutes ago we were all informed (my lawyers, myself and Oleg) that the verdict will be tomorrow, Dec. 30 at 9 a.m.," Navalny wrote.

Navalny and his brother Oleg are accused of stealing 30 million rubles ($540,000) from French cosmetics company Yves Rocher between 2008 and 2012, charges which they have both denied.

Navalny, who has been under house arrest since the spring in connection with another case against him, has said the charges are politically motivated and meant to destroy any chances he has of a political career. He emerged as one of the strongest leaders of the anti-Kremlin protests that erupted in 2011 and 2013.

The date of the ruling had originally been set for Jan. 15, with supporters of the prominent anti-corruption campaigner planning a mass protest the day of the decision.

More than 12,000 people said on Facebook earlier this month that they would attend the rally in support of Navalny, but the Facebook page was blocked on Dec. 21 at the request of the Prosecutor General's Office. Critics said the move demonstrated the authorities' determination to crack down on any opposition sentiment in the country amid the current difficult economic situation.

The organizers of the Jan. 15 rally reacted quickly, however, moving up their protest to Tuesday at 7 p.m. on Manezh Square. Police appeared to respond quickly too: On Monday evening, many Muscovites reported on Twitter that police vans were already parked at the square.

Navalny wrote Monday that his acquaintances had warned him to expect such a sudden rescheduling.

"A lot of people said to me, 'this seems strange, they may reschedule it, make it earlier and abrupt.' But we didn't consider this possibility, since it's just impossible," Navalny wrote.

"But, as it turns out, there are no exceptions that can't be made for good people," he added with a none-too-subtle irony.

The news created an uproar on social media almost immediately, with many journalists and Navalny supporters declaring the move a blatant attempt to prevent the protests that were expected on Jan. 15.

Others noted that the verdict would fall on a disturbing anniversary. "Dec. 30, 2010, is the day when jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky was convicted in his second trial. History is repeating," Nataliya Vasiliyeva, a correspondent for The Associated Press in Moscow, wrote on Twitter.

Like Navalny, who has maintained his innocence throughout both criminal cases against him, Khodorkovsky has described his imprisonment as the Kremlin's way of settling score.

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