

Opposition Posterboy Navalny Defies House Arrest ... Again

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Opposition activist Alexei Navalny walking with supporters to an opposition rally in Moscow on December 30.

Opposition firebrand Alexei Navalny has continued to defy what he has described as his "illegal" house arrest by going to work on Saturday, as the European Court of Human Rights prepares to consider his complaint over a recent conviction.

Navalny has vehemently railed against the guilty verdict handed down against him and his brother Oleg on Dec. 30, accusing the court of violating a number of procedural rules in its handling of the case. Navalny and his brother were both sentenced to 3 1/2 years, though the anti-corruption campaigner was given a suspended sentence while his brother was immediately taken into custody to serve out his term in a penal colony.

The brothers were accused of having stolen some 30 million rubles from two companies, including a Russian affiliate of French cosmetics giant Yves Rocher.

Since the verdict, Navalny has broken house arrest a number of times in protest of what he described in his blog as "the genius of Putin's justice system," which saw the court abruptly move up the sentencing date from Jan. 15 to Dec. 30, and then fail to provide the full text of the verdict, a prerequisite before one can file an appeal.

The sudden rescheduling of the verdict hearing was widely seen as an attempt to forestall political protests planned for the original court date, but more than 1,000 demonstrators turned out to Manezh Square on Dec. 30 anyway, despite the short notice. Navalny himself broke house arrest to attend but was scooped up by police before he arrived.

He continued his string of house arrest violations, however, posting photos of his electronic monitoring bracelet cut in half on Jan. 5, followed by photographs of him leaving the house to buy milk. On Saturday, he ventured out again.

"I came to work 'like a boss.' Two cars accompanied me from my house. Two employees of the Federal Prison Service walked me up to my office — one of them a colonel," Navalny wrote on Twitter on Saturday from the Moscow offices of his Anti-Corruption Fund.

Employees of the Federal Prison Service have tailed Navalny all three times he has broken house arrest and filed a complaint over his alleged violations. The Moscow court that handed down the sentences has dismissed the agency's complaint twice, however, RIA Novosti reported last week, citing Zamoskvoretsky District Court spokeswoman Yulia Petrova.

Navalny had been on house arrest since last February, but has maintained that the recent verdict against him nullifies those conditions in accordance with Article 11 of Russia's Criminal Procedural Code.

Last Thursday, Navalny wrote that the European Court of Human Rights had responded to his complaint challenging the Yves Rocher trial, and was preparing to give priority to the verdict against Navalny's brother Oleg, which the opposition firebrand has described as a "hostage" situation, with the authorities punishing Oleg to settle scores with the political leader. The European court has sent questions on the case to Russian authorities, who have until Feb. 13 to respond, RIA Novosti reported.

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