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French Court Approves Extradition of Kazakh Tycoon to Russia or Ukraine

By The Moscow Times

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France's highest appeals court paved the way on Wednesday for the extradition to either Russia or Ukraine of jailed Kazakh tycoon Mukhtar Ablyazov, accused of embezzling up to $6 billion from his former bank BTA.

Ablyazov has denied accusations that he embezzled billions from BTA, the bank in which he held a majority stake and which was eventually seized by Kazakh authorities and declared insolvent in 2009. Prosecutors said he made loans to front companies he controlled which were never paid back.

The decision by the Cour de Cassation rejected an appeal by Ablyazov and upheld a ruling by a lower court that approved the extradition of the former Kazakh government minister, arrested near the Riviera resort of Cannes in 2013.

France does not have an extradition treaty with Kazakhstan, which wants to put Ablyazov

on trial, but it does with Russia and Ukraine.

Ablyazov's lawyers have argued that if he is extradited to either of those countries, he could be sent on to Kazakhstan, where Ablyazov says he is being pursued for political reasons for being an opponent of President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

"I am extremely disappointed because I think there is a real problem if Mr. Ablyazov is sent back to Russia or Ukraine," his attorney Claire Waquet said.

The decision by the Cour de Cassation does not automatically prompt an extradition. Under French law, it must next by approved by governmental decree.

When Ablyazov was arrested in July 2013, he had been in hiding since being sentenced to prison for contempt of court by an English judge in 2012. Ablyazov was granted political asylum by Britain after he moved there in 2009.

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