

Russian Court Quashes Latest Bid to Jail Kremlin Critic Navalny

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Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny smiles before a hearing at the Lublinsky district court in Moscow, May 13.

A Moscow court on Wednesday rejected a bid by law enforcement officials to have Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny jailed for violating the terms of his suspended five-year sentence on embezzlement charges.

Navalny, who led mass street protests against President Vladimir Putin in 2011-12, denies any wrongdoing in the 2013 case that saw him convicted for stealing from a state firm and says it is part of a Kremlin campaign to stifle dissent.

A judge ruled that any violations of his suspended sentence were not "systemic" and that he could remain at liberty.

"It looks like the presidential administration decided that the cost of jailing me would be too big for now," a smiling Navalny said after attending the hearing with his wife and two defense

lawyers.

"We understand that this is all about threats and pressure but we will continue our work. Now our efforts are aimed at preparing for the elections," he said, referring to regional and parliamentary elections scheduled in Russia this year and next.

Navalny is also serving another suspended sentence of three and a half years in jail for a separate conviction last year that saw his brother Oleg imprisoned.

The Kremlin denies using the courts to persecute its opponents. But many opposition activists have faced court cases and jail time or have fled Russia to avoid prosecution after Putin returned to the presidency for a third term in 2012.

Another prominent Russian opposition figure, Boris Nemtsov, was shot dead in central Moscow in February.

Kremlin critics including Navalny say Putin bears political responsibility for Nemtsov's death, accusing him of fomenting an atmosphere of hatred and intolerance towards his opponents.

Putin has called the killing of Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister, a shameful tragedy and the Kremlin has said it was a "provocation" designed to discredit the president.

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