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Ads for Russian Opposition Leader Navalny Removed in Kostroma

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Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny speaks during a meeting with locals for the upcoming Democratic coalition primary election in Novosibirsk.

Authorities in central Russia have removed billboards inviting local residents to attend a Tuesday talk by opposition leader Alexei Navalny, his allies said, marking the latest hindrance to the plans by political opposition to compete in regional elections.

Billboards in Kostroma, about 200 miles northeast of Moscow, were taken down over the weekend, less than a day after they went up, Navalny ally Leonid Volkov said via Twitter.

"In Kostroma, they stole all four billboards. Advertising people have been summoned to the mayor's office and threatened with having their licenses revoked," Volkov said.

The billboards advertised a "meeting with Alexei Navalny" to take place Tuesday, according to a photo posted by the opposition leader.

The billboards were removed just as Russia's President Vladimir Putin suggested in an interview with an Italian newspaper that political opposition in his country was free to express its views.

Asked by a correspondent for Corriere della Sera ahead of his visit to Italy about the reasons Russian television channels rarely air interviews with opposition leaders, Putin responded: "If they become interesting, I think they will be interviewed more often," according to a transcript published on the Kremlin website.

Liberal Russian media, including the independent Novaya Gazeta weekly, published the news under headlines saying that Putin has denied the existence of "political censorship" in Russia.

Navalny said he learned about the removal of the Kostroma billboards "right after reading V.V. Putin's proclamation to Italian journalists that we have no political censorship on television."

The removal of the ad also came a day after Navalny cheered the appearance of the "first billboard in my life."

"Had never been permitted one before anywhere," he said via Twitter, adding: "Kostroma, mon amour."

This weekend, Navalny visited Siberia's biggest city, Novosibirsk, to urge voters to participate in primaries that will choose opposition candidates for regional elections.

It was his first trip out of Moscow in three years.

Navalny was banned from leaving the capital while his trial on corruption charges moved through the system. Navalny's allies described the trial as politically motivated.

In December, Navalny was given a suspended sentence in the case, but his younger brother, Oleg, was sentenced to more than three years in prison.

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