

Navalny Ally Testifies in German Trial Against Suspected Hacker 'Hell'

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Anna Veduta

A German court case against Sergei Maximov, the man believed to be infamous pro-Kremlin hacker "Hell," has burst back into the spotlight following a guest appearance by a close associate of Russian opposition firebrand Alexei Navalny, whose personal and professional e-mails were published for all to see following a series of hacks in recent years.

"Alexei [Navalny] was supposed to testify himself, since he was one of the hacker's actual victims," Anna Veduta, Navalny's former spokeswoman, told The Moscow Times on Sunday. "But he was denied an international passport by Russia's Federal Migration Service because of the [two suspended] sentences he's serving, and couldn't make it to court, so I was chosen as his number two," as she had witnessed the fallout of the hacks, she said.

Maximov, 41, a German national of Russian descent, has been charged with theft and deletion of data in connection with the high-profile hacking antics of Hell. If convicted, he faces up

to three years in prison, Russian state-run news agency RIA Novosti reported last week.

During the first day of trial, which got under way in Bonn on June 24, he denied that he was Hell, and claimed he had contacted the shadowy hacker in order to help him prepare for trial.

Veduta flew from the United States to participate in the trial. She is currently based in New York, where she is enrolled in a master's program at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

In court last week, Veduta testified that Navalny's e-mail and Twitter accounts were hacked in 2011 and 2012. She said that the private e-mails published by Hell served as a basis for some of the criminal charges later launched against him.

Furthermore, having been a practicing lawyer at the time, Navalny lost several of his clients due to the privacy breach, Veduta said.

She also claimed that several volunteers for Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation lost their day jobs and faced pressure from the authorities after their identities were exposed by the hacker.

Maximov's lawyers, Veduta told The Moscow Times, tried to shift the blame from their client by asserting that Navalny had no shortage of enemies, any number of whom could have hacked into his accounts as retribution. "They introduced an article from Jerusalem Post to the court [implying Navalny had enemies in Israel]," Veduta said.

"The judge didn't allow it into evidence, because it was in English, and the court only accepts documents in German," she added.

Veduta remains confident that Maximov is the hacker, due in part to Hell's reaction following her testimony. "After the hearing, Hell's Twitter account exploded with postings calling me names," she said. "There were details of the hearing that only a person present in the courtroom could have known. Hell claimed in his tweets someone told him all about the hearing, but I'm sure [it was Maximov]," she told The Moscow Times.

"I guess my testimony got to him," she said.

But Maximov's defense team is just as confident that they will succeed in proving their client's innocence. "[At the next hearing] the defense plans to introduce motions and depose several witnesses. ... We will be able to prove the defendant isn't hacker Hell," Maximov's attorney Hans-Karl Hassel was cited by German news site Deutsche Welle as saying after the hearing.

Court spokeswoman Birgit Niepman said the facts of the case were highly unusual, noting there was little if any precedent for German courts to try a suspect accused of having used his hacking skills to tamper with political processes in another country, Deutsche Welle reported.

The next hearing in the case is set to take place on Aug. 5.

Citing an unnamed court representative, RIA Novosti reported that the trial had been postponed to allow for the introduction of an affidavit written by Navalny. Meanwhile,

the defense team reportedly wants to hire a technical expert to establish whether Navalny's e-mail account had been hacked at all.

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