The Moscow Times
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‘Poisoned’ Kremlin Critic Navalny Arrives in Germany for Treatment

The opposition leader’s team had claimed the authorities were delaying his transfer to cover up traces of a poisoning attempt.

By Evan Gershkovich

August 22, 2020

Navalny's wife outside Omsk Emergency Hospital No. 1 Friday. She appealed to Vladimir Putin after doctors barred her husband's evacuation. **AP/TASS**

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny arrived in a stable condition for medical treatment in Germany Saturday after appeals by his team that included his wife writing directly to President Vladimir Putin.

Navalny, 44, fell violently ill and lost consciousness an hour into a flight from the Siberian city of Tomsk to Moscow on Thursday. After his plane made an emergency landing he was transported to Omsk Emergency Hospital No. 1, where a doctor told journalists the hospital was “working on saving his life.” Navalny has remained in a coma and on a ventilator since.

The opposition leader's close aides had pushed for the Kremlin critic to be transferred to a leading German toxicology center, citing a lack of vital equipment at the Siberian regional hospital and a worry that Russian doctors would be pressured by the authorities to withhold details of the cause of his illness.

An air ambulance left Berlin early Friday morning to collect Navalny and bring him to the Charité hospital in the city, but the Omsk hospital's head doctor Alexander Murakhovsky said Navalny's condition was unstable and he could not be transferred, triggering a standoff.

But late Friday evening, around 10 pm Omsk time, deputy chief doctor Anatoly Kalinichenko told journalists gathered outside his hospital that the Kremlin critic's condition was now stable enough for him to fly.

"We do not object to transfer to another hospital. It will happen today," the state-run TASS news agency cited him as saying.

Related article: Opposition Figure Navalny 'Poisoned': The Latest News

In a joint press conference on Thursday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron said their countries were ready to provide Navalny with medical support.

After Russian doctors barred his transfer, Navalny's wife appealed directly to President Vladimir Putin in a letter. Asking for permission that he be allowed to be transferred to Germany, she wrote that her husband "needs qualified medical assistance."

On Thursday, the Kremlin had wished Navalny a speedy recovery and said that if he needed to leave the country for treatment, the necessary travel requests would be considered. Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov also urged people not to speculate about the cause of Navalny's illness and to wait for test results.

In a video recording published Friday afternoon, Omsk head doctor Murakohovsky described one of local doctors' "five working diagnoses" on Navalny's condition as "a metabolic disorder, caused by a sharp drop in blood sugar levels during the flight." He added that tests would be ready in two days.

That statement, however, conflicted with his deputy Kalinichenko's claim that test results had already been returned. Kalinichenko said doctors had all but ruled out poisoning.

"Neither poisons nor their traces have been found in blood and urine samples," the state-run TASS news agency cited Kalinichenko as saying. "The diagnosis of poisoning will remain at the back of our minds. But we don't believe the patient was poisoned."

Related article: Doctors Bar Navalny's Evacuation to Germany as Confusion Surrounds Presence of Poison in System

Adding to the confusion over the true state of Navalny's condition was a claim by the head of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation Ivan Zhdanov, who was also at the Omsk hospital, that

police reported that a "deadly toxin" was found in Navalny's system that is "dangerous to those around him," but that law enforcement wouldn't name the substance.

Later Friday the Omsk regional police department told Interfax they had identified an industrial chemical substance in Navalny's system. They said the substance, 2-ethylhexyl diphenyl phosphate — mainly used in plastic packaging for food — could have entered his body through contact with a plastic cup.

Navalny's team believes a toxic substance was added to a cup of tea he drank at an airport cafe in Tomsk.

Navalny's allies said the conflicting details and shifting stance from doctors point to pressure from the authorities who hope that toxins will leave his body before German toxicologists are able to examine him. Before the Omsk hospital approved his transfer, Navalny's aides had appealed to the European Court of Human Rights for support, the court said Friday.

"Until now doctors had said that they are ready to authorize transportation. That is why we organized it in the shortest possible time," Yarmysh wrote on Twitter Friday morning. "Now, at the last moment, doctors are not giving permission. This decision, of course, was not made by them but by the Kremlin."

In a separate tweet Yarmysh called the move to bar Navalny from being transported an "attempt on his life."

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Navalny was returning to the Russian capital on Thursday after touring Siberia in support of independent candidates running in local elections next month. On Wednesday, he posted a photo on Instagram from the city of Tomsk with the caption: "Crooks wont kick themselves out of the city parliament!"

A longtime critic of the Kremlin and Russia's de facto opposition leader, Navalny has faced pressure for his activism for years.

While serving a 30-day prison sentence last summer for calling on people to attend an anti-government protest, Navalny suffered an acute allergic reaction. At least one doctor said he may have been poisoned.

In 2017, a pro-Kremlin activist threw a chemical dye at him that left him partially blind in one eye.

That year, Navalny triggered some of the largest anti-government protests for decades after his Anti-Corruption Foundation published an investigation into corruption by then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. On Thursday, the local Taiga.info news website reported that Navalny may have been in Tomsk to work on an investigation into local deputies representing the ruling United Russia party.

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There is a history of Kremlin critics having been poisoned.

In 2006, former Russian spy turned critic of President Vladimir Putin Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned by tea laced with a radioactive isotope while in exile in the U.K.

In 2018, the U.K. accused Russian military intelligence of poisoning former Russian spy Sergei Skripal with Novichok, a military grade nerve agent.

That same year, Verzilov was rushed to a Moscow hospital after suddenly losing his sight, hearing and mobility. After four days, the same German NGO that is working to airlift Navalny organized Verzilov's medical evacuation to Berlin's Charité hospital, where Navalny is expected to arrive later Friday or early Saturday.

In 2018, doctors there said Verzilov's symptoms were strongly indicative of poisoning.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/08/22/poisoned-kremlin-critic-navalny-arrives-in-germany-for-treatment-a71218