The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kremlin-Critical NHL Star Takes Leave Over Assault Allegations

February 23, 2021



New York Rangers left wing Artemi Panarin warms up before an NHL hockey game against the Washington Capitals in Washington on Feb. 20. **AP / TASS**

NHL star Artemi Panarin will take a leave of absence from the New York Rangers after a Russian tabloid published assault allegations that his team links to his criticism of the Russian government and President Vladimir Putin.

Panarin, 29, was accused of attacking an 18-year-old woman in Latvia in 2011 by his former KHL coach Andrei Nazarov. Speaking in a Saturday interview with the Komsomolskaya Pravda tabloid, Nazarov said Panarin "sent the woman to the floor with several powerful blows."

Embed:

> pic.twitter.com/VcOJ4BqMHm
>
> — New York Rangers (@NYRangers) February 22, 2021

Nazarov said he was motivated to speak about the incident by Panarin's outspoken comments against the Russian government and support for recent protests calling for jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny's release.

Panarin "vehemently and unequivocally" denied the allegations in a statement released by the Rangers on Monday. The team said it would support Panarin throughout the process of finding the source of the "unfounded" allegations.

"This is clearly an intimidation tactic being used against him for being outspoken on recent political events," the Rangers' statement said.

The NHL's deputy commissioner Bill Daly also told ESPN that the league plans to look into the allegations.

It is relatively uncommon for Russian athletes to voice criticism of their home country's government. Fellow NHL star Alexander Ovechkin has been a longtime vocal supporter of Putin.

In a 2019 interview with popular Russian sports news website Sports.ru, Panarin said he was frustrated to see sluggish economic development at home with new wealth mainly going to Moscow's elite.

"I may look like a foreign agent right now, but it's not like that," Panarin said at the time. "I think that the people who hush up the problems are more like foreign agents than those who talk about them. If I think about problems, I am coming from a positive place, I want to change something, to have people live better. I don't want to see retirees begging."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/02/23/kremlin-critical-nhl-star-takes-leave-over-assault-allegations-a73033