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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Opposition Activist Released Without Charges: Lawyer

By Anna Smolchenko for AFP

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Dmitry Gudkov, who faced possible jail, was released Thursday without being formally charged. **Mikhail Skamyin/TASS**

A prominent Russian opposition activist and former lawmaker, who was detained and faced possible jail ahead of parliamentary elections, was released Thursday evening without charges in a rare about-face.

Russia's opposition says that authorities have in recent months been stepping up a campaign of intimidation against dissenters ahead of a parliamentary vote in September, allegations the Kremlin has rejected.

Earlier this week police had detained Dmitry Gudkov, 41, and another well-known Kremlin critic, Andrei Pivovarov, 39, with the latter yanked off a Warsaw-bound plane minutes before takeoff.

Gudkov was detained over unpaid rent from 2015 and faced up to five years in prison. His supporters called the detention a form of punishment for his plans to take part in elections.

Police also detained Gudkov's aunt and conducted searches at his country house outside Moscow as well as the homes of his allies and relatives.

On Thursday evening, Gudkov — a former lawmaker with A Just Russia party — was suddenly released.

"I am free," Gudkov said on social media, thanking supporters and adding that his aunt had also been set free.

Freed without charges

His lawyer Mikhail Biryukov told AFP that the opposition politician had been set free without being formally charged.

Supporters hailed his release but suggested that he would not be allowed to run for parliament.

Gudkov's release came as the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, often called the Russian Davos, started on Thursday in Russia's second city.

President Vladimir Putin is set to address the forum — the country's main showcase for investors — on Friday.

Gudkov's case brought to mind the sudden release from jail of investigative journalist Ivan Golunov, whose arrest triggered protests in 2019. Supporters said police planted drugs on him as punishment for his work.

Late last month a Moscow court sentenced five former police officers to lengthy prison terms for planting drugs on Golunov in a case allies called a rare admission of wrong-doing from Russian law enforcement.

Kremlin critic Pivovarov remains in jail after a court on Wednesday ordered that he be held in pre-trial detention for two months.

Pivovarov, the former executive director of Open Russia, a recently disbanded pro-democracy group, was pulled off a Warsaw-bound flight on Monday as his plane was taxiing toward take-off.

A criminal probe was launched against the activist for cooperating with an "undesirable organization." Pivovarov faces up to six years in prison if convicted.

Open Russia, founded by self-exiled Putin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, announced last week it was shutting down to shield its members from prosecution.

The group was designated an "undesirable" organization in Russia in 2017 in line with a law targeting foreign-funded groups accused of political meddling.

The European Union has called for Pivovarov's immediate release.

Alexei Navalny, the most prominent Kremlin opponent to emerge in recent years, was imprisoned in February on old embezzlement charges.

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