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Navalny Ally Running for Local Office Faces Court-Approved Forced Hospitalization

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A court ruled to hospitalize Violetta Grudina in a Covid-19 ward at health authorities' request despite her testing negative. **violetta.grudina / VKontakte**

An ally of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny who is running for local office has said that she faces a court-approved forced hospitalization in a coronavirus ward despite her negative Covid-19 test, preventing her from submitting election paperwork on time.

Violetta Grudina, who had headed Navalny's political network in the far northern city of Murmansk, had her office attacked several times and staff members detained after she announced plans to run for the Murmansk City Council in April.

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Grudina, 31, and her colleagues have also faced harassment from law enforcement authorities and been fined several hundred thousand rubles (1 ruble = $0.013) since the Murmansk Navalny office's 2017 opening. A Moscow court ruling banned Navalny's political network as "extremist" last month, putting members like Grudina at risk of up to six years in jail.

On Wednesday, Grudina said that a Murmansk district court ruled to hospitalize her in a Covid-19 ward at health authorities' request despite her negative test from a clinic certified by the same authorities.

"All this is being done so that I can't file paperwork to the Central Election Commission on time," Grudina wrote on her social media account.

"Think about it: A completely healthy person is forcibly hospitalized to eliminate them as United Russia's political opponent," she added, referring to the pro-Kremlin party that dominates Russia's political field.

United Russia is seeking to retain a supermajority in Russian parliament, the State Duma, during high-stakes elections this September. Critics and analysts link the Navalny network's "extremist" designation in June and a wave of raids and detentions of opposition members in recent months to these efforts.

Grudina's associates said an ambulance was called in after she lost consciousness and began convulsing after the court ruling.

Grudina said later Wednesday that Health Ministry officials allegedly forced the paramedics to diagnose her with pneumonia and take her to a Covid-19 ward.

She said the brigade refused to follow orders and drove her home instead.

Human rights lawyer Pavel Chikov, whose team is defending Grudina, said the activist is also targeted in a criminal case for "inciting mass violations" of coronavirus restrictions during this winter's pro-Navalny protests.

Several key Navalny supporters, including his brother Oleg and two Pussy Riot activists, are under house arrest and face up to two years in prison under the same charges.

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