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Russia Accuses Google, Apple of Election Interference

By AFP

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A rally in support of Alexei Navalny in Moscow in April 2021. **Andrei Ljubimov / RBC / TASS**

Russia said Thursday that Google and Apple's refusal to remove jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's app ahead of elections could be seen as interference in the country's domestic affairs.

The country is holding parliamentary elections later this month, with nearly all vocal Kremlin critics including Navalny's allies barred from running.

Last month Russian communications watchdog Roskomnadzor demanded that Google and Apple remove Navalny's app from their stores.

Related article: Russia Orders Apple, Google to Remove Navalny App

On Thursday, Roskomnadzor ramped up pressure on the Western tech giants by saying they

could be held criminally liable if they continue to refuse to comply with Russian law.

"Criminal liability is foreseen for organizing as well as taking part in the work of extremist organizations banned in Russia," the media watchdog said in a statement carried by Russian news agencies.

Failure to block the app "can be considered interference" in Russian elections and will lead to hefty fines, the watchdog added.

Foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said U.S. tech giants ignoring requests by Russian authorities to delete "illegal content" had become "systemic."

"Such arrogant, selective behavior and demonstrative disregard for multiple requests by authorized Russian structures regarding content recognized as extremist is becoming truly unacceptable," she told reporters.

Earlier this year, opposition leader Navalny saw his organizations declared "extremist" and banned in the country, while all of his top aides have fled.

The media regulator then barred dozens of websites linked to Navalny including his main website navalny.com.

In a message from prison, Navalny has urged supporters to download an app that aims to help Russians to vote out candidates from the ruling United Russia party in the upcoming polls.

The "Smart Voting" tactic has seen the increasingly unpopular United Russia party lose a number of seats in recent local elections.

"If something can be called 'interference in Russian elections, it is the attempts of Roskomnadzor to block the Smart Voting app," Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh said on Twitter. "Download them ASAP."

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