

Russian Opposition Split by Appeal to EU for Sanctioned Billionaire

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Leonid Volkov. **Julien Warnand / EPA / TASS**

Alexei Navalny's top aide Leonid Volkov resigned from the board of the jailed Kremlin critic's Anti-Corruption Foundation on Thursday, as the political fallout over a letter in defense of oligarch Mikhail Fridman continued to rock Russia's fragmented political opposition.

The letter, which was signed by a group of Russian opposition politicians and activists and addressed to the European Commission, called on the EU to lift its sanctions on Russian businessman Mikhail Fridman and other prominent shareholders in his Alfa Group consortium, according to a copy of the [letter](#) shared by Alexei Venediktov, the former editor-in-chief of the *Ekho Moskvy* radio station, on Wednesday.

Within hours of its publication, Volkov, whose name and signature appeared in the copy of the letter published by Venediktov, had announced his resignation.

While Volkov [denied](#) signing the letter, saying his signature had been "photoshopped," he did admit to authoring a similar [letter](#) written in defense of Fridman that was sent to the

European Commission in October, which he admitted he had signed on behalf of Navalny's organization.

Volkov [called](#) the October letter a "big political mistake" and admitted to signing it without consulting his colleagues in the organization.

"I had a feeling that the situation at that moment ... was critical, and that by setting a precedent, a chain reaction of public condemnation of the war and disunity in the Russian elites could be triggered. I was wrong," Volkov wrote on Telegram.

The latest letter — dated Feb. 7, 2023, and addressed to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell — labels sanctions against Fridman and his partners Petr Aven, German Khan, and Alexei Kuzmichev "unreasonable" and asked the EU adopt a more "nuanced" approach to sanctioning private Russian businesses over the war in Ukraine.

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"Our understanding is that Alfa Group companies are not included in the circle of companies close to the Russian authorities, President Putin, or anyone else from the highest echelons of power in the Russian Federation," the letter read.

"In Russian business circles, Alfa [Group] has always been regarded as the most pro-Western business structure. Following the imposition of sanctions, Mr. Fridman and his partners have completely withdrawn from managing assets based in Russia," the letter added.

The letter also emphasized Fridman's close connection to the late Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, his Ukrainian heritage, and long-running history of charitable and business investments into the Ukrainian economy, as well as financial support for Ukrainian war refugees.

"For almost 30 years, Mr. Fridman and his partners ... have been among the largest private investors in the Ukrainian economy," the document said.

Signatories to the letter, including independent journalist Leonid Parfyonov, TV Rain founder Natalya Sindeyeva and businessman Yevgeny Chichvarkin, said the European Commission's decision to lift the sanctions on Alfa Group "would establish a constructive motivation for all Russian businessmen to follow a similar line of conduct."

Fridman, who according to Forbes [ranks](#) among Russia's 10 wealthiest billionaires, has been living in Britain since 2015 and now invests primarily in the U.S. and EU markets, according to the letter.

The Alfa Group Consortium is an international investment group that was co-founded by Fridman and Anatoly Potik in 1989 and currently owns stakes in Alfa Bank, Russia's largest food retail operator X5 Retail Group and Turkey's largest mobile operator Turkcell.

Earlier this week, Navalny's team [identified](#) Venediktov among the key beneficiaries of a corruption scheme spearheaded by Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin in a move that is believed

to have caused considerable damage to the journalist's reputation, though he has [denied](#) any wrongdoing.

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