

Navalny Faces New Pressure as Mayoral Race Heats Up

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Sergei Sobyenin explaining recent changes in the city to Muscovites gathered at Nikolskaya Ulitsa on Thursday. **Alexander Zemlianichenko / AP**

The mayoral campaign of opposition leader Alexei Navalny faced a new wave of pressure by authorities Thursday as the Moscow Elections Commission warned he could be struck from the ballot and police raided a printer of his campaign materials.

With just over two weeks left before the mayoral election and Navalny steadily rising in the polls, the 37-year-old lawyer speculated that ruling party United Russia, which backs acting Mayor Sergei Sobyenin in the race, may act to have him removed from the Sept. 8 vote. But some observers said removing Navalny from the ballot would only increase his political popularity, making it an unlikely move for the government to make.

Moscow Elections Commission head Valentin Gorbunov said Thursday that Navalny's campaign was suspected of distributing materials that lacked mandatory labels indicating

that they were paid for by his official campaign fund. He said the commission may ask a court to have him removed from the race as a result of the alleged violations.

An elections commission representative told Interfax that the suit would have to be filed by Aug. 30 and that a court would have to make a decision regarding whether to remove Navalny from the race no later than Sept. 2.

Also on Thursday, police searched a Moscow printer that publishes campaign materials for Navalny and the Communist Party, saying they had been tipped off about possible violations by Just Russia mayoral candidate Nikolai Levichev. Officers confiscated financial documents from the printer, a police representative told Interfax.

Last week, police and Levichev came to an apartment of Navalny's supporters in central Moscow, saying it contained illegal campaign materials. Navalny's campaign headquarters said it had nothing to do with the materials and that the people living in the apartment operated "independently of the Navalny campaign staff."

The elections commission on Friday will consider Levichev's complaint in which he accused Navalny of organizing an illegal campaign headquarters, referring to the apartment of his supporters.

Navalny said Thursday that the latest threats were the result of authorities' fear of a second round in the elections, which he said could open the door to his winning the race.

"Of course, United Russia and Sobyenin are afraid that there will be a second round ... That is why they will do everything to prevent this scenario from happening. And that is why they have started to talk about ousting me," he wrote in a blog post on the website of radio station Ekho Moskvyy.

According to a poll conducted Aug. 15-21 by market research company Synovate Comcon, Sobyenin still holds a significant lead over all his competitors, boasting the support of 62.5 percent of Muscovites who said they planned to go to the polls and had chosen who to vote for. Navalny was behind him with the backing of 20.3 percent of that group, followed by Communist candidate Ivan Melnikov with 8 percent and Yabloko candidate Sergei Mitrokhin with 5 percent. Levichev and Liberal Democratic Party hopeful Mikhail Degtyaryev each polled at under 3 percent.

But of the 1,200 people polled, only 60.2 percent said they had decided who to vote for. The poll was conducted by phone and has a 2.5 percent margin of error.

Sobyenin, who will face a runoff against the second-place finisher if he receives less than 50 percent of votes, said he is prepared for that possibility.

"It is Muscovites who define the number of rounds — I'm ready to work in every scenario," he said in an interview published Thursday by Interfax.

Navalny failed Thursday in his own attempt to have Sobyenin removed from the race on the grounds that he had not presented a document granting him permission to run from President Vladimir Putin — a document that is required when an official runs in early elections for a post he just vacated.

But the elections commission said it had such a document in its possession, and the Moscow City Court ruled Thursday that Sobyanin's registration as a candidate was legal.

Navalny's campaign chief, Leonid Volkov, said in an interview with Dozhd television that he doubted the seriousness of the elections commission's warning regarding Navalny's candidacy. But one observer said the threat was real.

"The authorities are confused about what to do with Navalny: whether to put him in prison, or use him to democratize the elections. That's why they've undertaken a number of contradictory actions. But warnings against Navalny should always be taken seriously," Dmitry Travin, a professor at European University in St. Petersburg, said by phone, adding that more pressure could be added on Navalny ahead of the elections.

A month ago, the authorities seemed to make it obvious that they wanted Navalny in the race, perhaps to lend legitimacy to a Sobyanin victory. After being convicted on embezzlement charges in the town of Kirov and being led away in handcuffs, Navalny was promptly released at the request of prosecutors pending an appeal.

Many believe that the conviction, evidence for which Navalny says was fabricated, only increased the anti-corruption blogger's popularity, and some believe that removing him from the mayoral race at this stage would have a similar effect.

"Such assistance to Navalny is unnecessary," political expert Yevgeny Minchenko told Interfax. "He won't win the elections anyway, and they would be pinning the victim label on him, mobilizing his supporters."

"The best possible result for him will only be around 20 percent. No more. Why remove him from the election?"

Travin said the process of campaigning itself could help Navalny in his political goals even if he won't come close to defeating Sobyanin in the mayoral race.

"This is not a campaign that will determine who will be the next mayor — it's clear that Sobyanin will win — but a campaign that will determine what kind of politician Navalny will be. That is why he is showing that he is not afraid to oppose top politicians," Travin said.

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