

Navalny Backs Economic Amnesty, Windfall Tax on Privatized Assets

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Mayoral candidate Alexei Navalny has voiced support for an economic amnesty and a windfall tax on some privatized assets at a high-profile meeting with businessmen and top executives, Vedomosti reported.

The event was the first public meeting with entrepreneurs during Navalny's campaign, with the previous ones held privately. It was also the first such meeting with an independent politician since at least the early 2000s, when businesses shied away from dealing with the opposition in the wake of the Yukos case.

But this has recently changed, with 204 entrepreneurs signing a "social contract" with the opposition leader since Aug. 7.

Navalny said in his LiveJournal blog Tuesday that this was an unprecedented meeting that broke with Russian political traditions.

"Such events are an integral part of a normal election campaign in developed countries," he said. "But here nobody holds them: there's no such tradition... The only subject of negotiations is the government, and there's nothing to discuss with anyone else."

The meeting, held late Monday at the luxury Ritz Carlton hotel, a stone's throw from the Kremlin, had originally been intended as a closed session, but the heightened interest in the event had defeated earlier plans to keep it secret, Navalny said.

Economist Sergei Guriev, who wrote the economic part of Navalny's mayoral program, addressed the businessmen via Skype. Guriev, former rector of the New Economic School, emigrated to France in April, citing pressure by authorities as a result of his support for the opposition.

Commenting on ways to fight corruption, Navalny proposed delegating more power to local and municipal authorities and giving them additional means of control.

He also spoke in favor of tougher punishments, including prison terms, for those convicted of corruption crimes, while supporting an amnesty for unjustly convicted entrepreneurs. He added that the economic amnesty and the fight against corruption are not mutually exclusive processes.

Navalny himself was convicted on July 18 on embezzlement charges and sentenced to five years imprisonment. He has appealed the sentence.

The opposition leader also supported a proposal to introduce a windfall tax on assets sold at privatization auctions in the 1990s, which are perceived by some as unfair.

Speaking about the issue of immigration, Navalny called for replacing an economy based on cheap labor with one relying on high labor productivity, thus decreasing dependence on migrant workers. He dismissed accusations of nationalism, saying he was committed to equal treatment of all ethnic groups.

Outlining his views on the current political system, the opposition leader criticized what he perceived to be the president's excessive authority and suggested introducing stronger local government and elements of a parliamentary republic.

Asked about his position on Syria, Navalny said a thorough investigation of the supposed use of chemical weapons should be conducted before resorting to any military action.

He also reiterated that he supported Russia's actions in the war with Georgia in 2008.

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