

Opposition Posterboy Alexei Navalny Is Not Yet a Free Man

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After a Moscow court ruled Tuesday that Alexei Navalny must remain under house arrest until mid-February, the firebrand opposition activist announced plans for a massive protest in the city center.

Navalny and his brother Oleg were convicted in December of embezzling some 30 million rubles (about \$442,000 at the present exchange rate) from two companies, including a Russian branch of French cosmetics giant Yves Rocher, in a case critics claim was politically motivated.

Considered one of the Kremlin's most vocal antagonists, Navalny was handed a suspended sentence of three-and-a-half years, while his brother was sentenced to serve the same amount of time in prison.

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He has frequently defied the order in recent weeks, cutting off his electronic monitoring bracelet and making numerous public appearances, including at an unsanctioned protest on the day of the sentencing. While law enforcement authorities have mostly refrained from stopping Navalny from leaving home, he has been closely followed by police during each foray into the outside world.

The court ruled on Tuesday that Navalny will have to remain under house arrest until Feb. 15 despite the fact that the case has ended. His release date was set by court decision prior to the announcement of the verdict in the case, state news agency RIA Novosti reported.

Navalny and his defense team objected to the decision, arguing there was no legal basis to keep him behind closed doors after his sentence had been handed down. "I do not believe that I am currently still under house arrest now," Navalny told the court on Tuesday, according to Russian legal news agency RAPSİ.

Earlier this month, Navalny turned to the European Court of Human Rights to complain about the lengthy house arrest order. His lawyer had received a letter saying the court had accepted the complaint on a high-priority basis, according to the activist's blog.

The decision does not seem to have dimmed his defiant spirit. Navalny, who was among the leaders of many of Moscow's large-scale opposition rallies between 2011 and 2012, published a blog post Tuesday announcing his plan to seek permission to host a 100,000-strong rally in the city center.

Protesters attending the march will demand a series of political and socio-economic changes in the country, including "the immediate cessation of war and any aggressive actions toward Ukraine" and the "cessation of the injection of hundreds of billions into state-owned companies," he wrote.

"The idea behind the march is simple: Those sitting in the Kremlin have not managed and will not be able to manage [the current crisis]," Navalny wrote, referring to the Russia's current economic woes.

A similar mass protest had been planned for Jan. 15, the day the Navalny brothers' sentencing was initially set to take place. The hearing was then moved to Dec. 30 on short notice, a decision widely viewed as an attempt to foil the scheduled rallied.

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