

Russia Reopens Its Probe of Activist

MOSCOW—Russia has reopened a criminal investigation into a prominent blogger and anticorruption activist, amid rising signs of intrigue between Kremlin elites over presidential succession next year.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev have so far avoided any overt competition over who will lead the country after elections next year, but analysts say loyalists around them are beginning to clash. While Mr. Medvedev may serve another term as president, Mr. Putin's allies are hoping he will return to the Kremlin.

Alexei Navalny, seen at his Moscow office last year, calls the charges 'falsified.'

The activist, Alexei Navalny, is a lawyer and blogger who rose to prominence in recent years by buying small stakes in state-owned companies and then suing them for greater access to their financial dealings. Many of the state-owned companies targeted by Mr. Navalny have been headed by Putin allies.

Now Mr. Navalny is falling under scrutiny of investigators for his own work two years ago as an adviser to the regional governor of Kirov. Russia's Investigative Committee said it was probing whether he abused his position by leading a local timber company into an unprofitable deal that cost the company tens of thousands of dollars.

A committee spokesman added that Mr. Navalny used "methods employed by corporate raiders" in his dealing with the company, but wouldn't elaborate. The investigative committee is Russia's top law-enforcement group.

Kirov Gov. Nikita Belykh, with whom Mr. Navalny worked at the time as an adviser, called the allegations against Mr. Navalny "groundless."

Mr. Navalny called them "falsified and fabricated" and noted that the investigation is an old one that was opened late last year and since closed. It was likely revived, he said, at the request of officials at state-run companies whom he embarrassed with corruption allegations.

"Apparently, they feel I present such a level of danger to them that they decided to act now," he said.

Mr. Navalny has been a growing force in Russia's vibrant blogosphere, where besides airing corruption allegations he founded an Internet site that monitors tenders of Russia's state-controlled corporate giants. His personal blog has been clogged by hackers, and his critics allege he is funded by Western governments.

The Moskovsky Komsomolets, a newspaper that publishes articles and editorials that have a strong pro-Kremlin slant, last month reported that Mr. Navalny was funded by business, rather than grass-roots supporters.

Mr. Navalny said his website, RosPil.info, has collected more than six million rubles (\$216,000) in donations and uncovered more than 1.6 billion rubles in graft.

Mr. Medvedev, himself an avid user of Twitter and Facebook, has voiced support for Internet freedom, and analysts say the president, who has publicly decried the impact of corruption on Russia's business climate, has tacitly supported Mr. Navalny's agenda.

The latest investigation "just signals that [Mr. Navalny's rivals] are panicking, seeing how their previous attempts to fight Navalny backfired," said Sergei Guriev, rector at Moscow's New Economic School and a member of a commission advising the president on economic projects.

The investigation comes a week after Russia's top Internet search engine, Yandex, said Russia's FSB, the successor to the KGB, asked for information on donors to the Mr. Navalny's website. Yandex said it was obliged by law to surrender the information to the security service.

Mr. Navalny claimed donor data was leaked to a pro-Kremlin youth movement, Nashi, which then phoned the donors to ask why they had contributed. Nashi officials denied phoning any donors.

Several donors posted on the Internet that they received phone calls inquiring about their ties to Mr. Navalny's website, RosPil. One donor, writing under the name Nykolaich, reported receiving a call from a woman who identified herself as a reporter.

Other people used Internet searches to connect the calls to Yulia Dikhtyar, a Nashi commissar. Nashi confirmed that Ms. Dikhtyar is a member of the group, but said she didn't call any donors.

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