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## **PUTIN OPPONENT NAVALNY FOUND GUILTY OF EMBEZZLEMENT**

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Alexei Navalny, Vladimir Putins most dogged political opponent, has vowed to force the Kremlin to allow him to run in next years presidential elections, in a move that will test the Russian leaders confidence in his ability to hold on to power.

The lawyer and anti-corruption campaigner said his latest criminal conviction, which under Russian law bars him from running for public office, could not prevent his presidential bid.

We will try to grow support in society until the Kremlin understands that it is necessary to admit me to the elections and the consequences of not admitting me will be even worse, Mr Navalny said in his first interview since he was convicted of embezzlement last week. This is a political campaign for a change of power.

Even Mr Putins critics think it unlikely Mr Navalny would pose a serious threat, given the presidents support ratings of about 80 per cent. But observers believe the way the Kremlin deals with the opposition politician will reflect how safe the Russian leader feels.

A court in the city of Kirov gave Mr Navalny a five-year suspended prison sentence on February 9, mirroring a sentence handed down in 2013. Russias supreme court in December cancelled the earlier ruling after the European Court of Human Rights found Mr Navalny had not been given a fair trial.

None of these legal things matter. Thats only the formalisation, the procedure, Mr Navalny said. The question is a political question. The Kremlin decides the question of elections by not admitting people to [them].

In July 2013, immediately after Mr Navalny registered to run for Moscow mayor, the Kirov court found him guilty on the embezzlement charges for the first time, resulting in a ban on his running for public office. But after supporters gathered in Moscow to protest at his exclusion from the ballot, the court, at the request of the prosecution, freed him pending an appeal □ a step widely seen as ordered by the Kremlin.

Although the Putin-appointed incumbent won, Mr Navalny took more than 27 per cent of the vote, a surprisingly strong result given his total absence from mainstream media and lack of access to financial resources other than private fundraising.

The opposition politician now pledges to repeat his Moscow feat. He would do exactly what we did regarding the mayoral elections in Moscow. We forced them, he said.

Mr Navalny has opened campaign offices in Moscow and St Petersburg, collected more than Rbs15m campaign funds and attracted pledges from more than 25,000 people willing to work as campaign volunteers. Over the next two weeks, the campaign will kick off in Novosibirsk and Yekaterinburg, Russias third- and fourth-largest cities and Mr Navalny aims to have campaign offices in the countrys 77 largest cities by summer.

Alexei Navalny addresses supporters during his bid to become Moscow mayor in 2013 © AP  
By the time we open our 10th campaign office, the level of pushback [from the authorities] will become clear, he said.

A senior official in the presidential administration said Mr Navalnys insistence that he would run for president looked strange as it appears not to be in line with the law. But he said that simply talking about the election and opening offices might not be enough to trigger steps by the authorities to stop him.

Candidates will not be officially registered until December, three months before the polls, and Mr Putin is expected to announce his re-election campaign only then.

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The Kremlin downplays the importance it attaches to elections, and Mr Putins press secretary said last month that next years presidential polls were not yet on the agenda. However, the Kremlin has micromanaged past elections, including allowing selected candidates to run against Mr Putin as a means to make polls more interesting and legitimate.

Of course right now demand for my candidacy is not where I would like it to be; 50 per cent of the citizens of Russia dont know me at all. Where should they know me from? I havent been shown on TV in a neutral context since 2005, Mr Navalny said.

He added that the only opposition politicians widely known to the public were those who had already been active in the 1990s, before Mr Putins Kremlin seized control of television and other mainstream media.

According to the Navalny campaigns own research, his strongest support is among young people and those who usually stay away from the vote because they are disillusioned with the process. The problem is to get them to the polls, Mr Navalny said.

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