

Russian court convicts opposition leader Alexei Navalny

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On Thursday, a Leninsky District Court in the Russian city of Kirov sentenced prominent liberal oppositionist Alexei Navalny and businessman Pyotr Ofitserov to five and four years in prison, respectively.

A warrant for their arrest was issued after the verdict but lifted by the Prosecutor General's Office in Kirov on Friday. Navalny and Ofitserov have been released on bail pending their appeal.

Navalny was found guilty of heading a group, including the businessman Ofitserov, that embezzled timber worth \$500,000 in 2009 from the Kirovles state timber company while working as an adviser to the governor of Kirov, Nikita Belykh. Navalny's five-year sentence fell just short of the six years' imprisonment demanded by the charge.

Several thousand people protested the conviction in Moscow and other cities on Thursday evening; hundreds were arrested.

The unusual decision by the Prosecutor's Office to halt the detention of Navalny and Ofitserov came after a furious response by the Western powers to the verdict. Russian media reported that the Kremlin was nervous about the ruling and the international reaction, and pressured the local prosecutor to rescind the immediate arrest warrant.

The trial, which began in April, was a politically motivated attempt by the Kremlin to destroy Navalny's political career after he emerged as a spokesman for urban middle class protests that erupted in December 2011 over rigged parliamentary elections.

While the timber transactions underlying the charges appear to be typical of the semi-legal activities of Russian officials and businessmen, no clear evidence of outright criminal behavior emerged. The testimony given by a key prosecution witness, Vyacheslav Opalev, the head of Kirovles, was contradictory. The

prosecution and the defense largely relied on contradictory interpretations of the same sources, often calling on the same witnesses.

Earlier investigations into the case had been suspended in 2010 in Kirov for lack of evidence. The decision was reversed in the spring of 2011 and then closed again in April 2012. The case was finally reopened in the summer of 2012, under pressure from the head of Russia's Investigative Committee, which is subordinate to the Russian President. By then, Navalny had become the most prominent representative of the Russian opposition.

Since being released, Navalny has returned to the country's capital and begun actively preparing his election campaign for the position of Moscow's mayor. He will stand as the candidate for liberal RPR-Parnas opposition party. He has also announced plans to run for president in 2016, a move widely hailed in the Western press.

Russian media reports suggest that new charges might soon be brought against Navalny, including the alleged falsification of his lawyer license.

The main Russian stock indexes declined by around 1.5 percent each after the verdict was announced. Stockbrokers warned that the verdict would worsen the investment climate.

Their concerns were echoed by Western governments. US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul said the US was "deeply disappointed in the conviction of Navalny and the apparent political motivations in this trial."

A spokesman for German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated the trial "raised doubts about whether criminal justice was the main motive."

These statements come amid deep tensions between the West and Russia, notably over Russia's opposition

to US war preparations against Syria and Iran and, above all, over the revelations of former US government contractor Edward Snowden.

Snowden, who exposed massive Internet spying by the US and European governments, is currently trapped at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport and has requested temporary asylum in Russia. Earlier this week, US officials threatened Russia with "long-term problems" if the Kremlin granted Snowden asylum. Putin replied that he wasn't interested in any deterioration of US-Russian relations over Snowden's revelations.

Attempts by Western governments and media to portray Navalny as an exemplary democrat are no less fraudulent than their own posturing as defenders of democracy and human rights.

Just a few days ago, Navalny--who is notorious for his ties to the far right--co-signed a statement of several prominent far-right politicians supporting the nationalist protests in the southern Russian town of Pugachev calling for mass deportation of Chechens. Navalny backed the protests as a "people's uprising," directed against "foreign aggression" of the Chechen population.

Navalny speaks for discontented layers of the oligarchy and the affluent middle classes in the top ten percent of Russian society, which acquired considerable wealth during the 2000-2008 Russian oil boom. These layers have grown increasingly dissatisfied with the political and economic influence of the state bureaucracy, however, and in particular with the tiny clique of super-rich oligarchs around Putin.

Navalny rose to prominence in 2007 for exposing corruption at Russian state companies in which he held shares. For this, Russian business daily *Vedomosti* named him "Person of the Year" in 2009. In 2010, he participated in the elite US Yale University's "world fellows' program," which was aimed at "creating a global network of emerging leaders."

Within the 2011-2012 protest movement, Navalny held together the various political tendencies in the Russian opposition, ranging from free-market liberal to pseudo-left to far right. He lacks any broad base of support, however. A survey carried out in early July by the Levada Center, an independent polling agency, found that Navalny was likely to garner just eight percent of the vote in the Moscow mayoral elections.

While avoiding any statements on foreign policy,

Navalny supports the economic demands of foreign investors and Western governments: more austerity, public sector job cuts, privatizations of state companies, and a greater opening up of the Russian market to Western companies than that offered by the Putin regime.



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