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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

11 Jailed in 2 Trials Tied to Riots

By Lukas I. Alpert

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Other Russia activists Ruslan Khubayev, center, and Kirill Unchuk, right, attending their Moscow trial Friday. **Denis Sinyakov**

Two city courts have simultaneously jailed radical activists accused of participating in December's race riots on Manezh Square and North Caucasus natives accused of triggering the clashes.

The rulings, separate but hardly unconnected, are largely seen as a dual message to nationalists, who accuse the authorities of ignoring crimes by migrants and Caucasus natives and have threatened new mass riots.

But the message is undermined by the fact that convicts in the rioting case are leftist radicals, who, by and large, have no nationalist agenda and are often bitter enemies of ultranationalists.

Kabardino-Balkaria native Aslan Cherkesov, previously convicted of gunning down a Slavic football fan, was sentenced to 20 years in prison on Friday, Interfax reported.

Cherkesov's lawyer said he would appeal the sentence, handed down by the Moscow City Court.

Cherkesov admitted at the trial that he had shot Spartak Moscow supporter Yegor Sviridov, but said he only opened fire to defend friends and had not intended to kill anyone.

Five Dagestani natives were sentenced to five years in prison for their roles in the rumble at a northern Moscow bus stop that left Sviridov dead.

Following the shooting, police released everyone but Cherkesov, sparking outrage among football fans and nationalists — two widely overlapping groups — who believed the men were set free because of ties to powerful figures in the corruption-plagued Caucasus.

That set off a wave of ethnic violence, with Slavic youths attacking anyone who looked non-Slavic.

The tensions came to a head when 5,500 football fans and nationalists chanting racist slogans clashed with police on Manezh Square. It took a personal plea from city police chief Vladimir Kolokoltsev to get the masked protesters to leave.

In the other case Friday, five defendants — including Igor Berezyuk, Kirill Unchuk and Ruslan Khubayev, activists from The Other Russia, a coalition with an anti-Kremlin but not a nationalist agenda — were given sentences ranging from two to five years for inciting racial hatred and attacks on police during the riots.

Some 30 Other Russia supporters protested the sentence outside the Tverskoi District Court. One of them, Dmitry Putenikhin, splashed water in the face of the prosecutor in the case and was immediately detained along with three others. All were to be charged with hooliganism, although a magistrate sent the case back to police on Saturday, citing faulty paperwork, Interfax said.

Many observers — including the nationalists themselves — have said the timing of the trials and sentencing were likely chosen to calm nationalists who plan to participate in a Russian March rally on Nov. 4.

But State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov said Friday that it was not fair to assume the sentencing had been influenced by nationalist fervor or the upcoming rally, picturing the rulings as a warning to unspecified "destructive forces."

"Any crime, regardless of its perpetrators should be punished," he said, Interfax reported. "Last year we all saw how dangerous attempts to destabilize ethnic peace can be."

Editor's note: Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this story identified Aslan Cherkesov as a native of Dagestan. He is actually a native of Kabardino-Balkaria.

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