

Kozlov Loses Latest Court Challenge

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Alexei Kozlov showing a surprisingly upbeat reaction to the Thursday ruling, in which a judge reaffirmed his 2008 guilty verdict and prison sentence. **Anton Golubev**

The judge presiding over the retrial of former businessman Alexei Kozlov issued a ruling Thursday upholding Kozlov's 2008 conviction on fraud and money-laundering charges and handing him a five-year prison sentence.

Presnensky District Court judge Tatyana Vasyuchenko hastily read out the verdict for more than an hour in front of Kozlov and his wife, Olga Romanova, a prominent journalist.

Because Romanova is a key figure in the opposition movement against President-elect Vladimir Putin, the outcome of the high-profile case is widely seen as the first hint of how Putin plans to deal with challenges to his rule.

Surrounded by a phalanx of reporters covering the proceedings, Romanova listened calmly as the verdict was read. But after the reading, she had some choice words for Vasyuchenko, shouting "Damn you, b----."

The verdict was relayed to dozens of Kozlov supporters outside the courtroom who were out of earshot. Once they knew how Vasyuchenko had ruled, they started chanting "Shame!"

As Kozlov and his wife exited the courtroom, supporters chanted "Vasyuchenko, get behind bars" and "Alexei."

Kozlov will be given credit for time served after his first conviction. With that subtraction from his sentence, he will be back behind bars for nearly two more years.

Romanova and Kozlov hugged briefly on their way out of the courtroom. Kozlov was shielded from reporters by court marshals and police officers, who told the reporters to leave and did not let them talk with him.

As Kozlov was led out of the courtroom, spectator Lyudmila Milovidova began weeping. She was wearing a white ribbon, and she told The Moscow Times that she is a close friend of Romanova and her husband and is worried very much about them.

"What happened today confirms once again that there is no fair trial in our country," said Milovidova, a freelance journalist. "As long as the person who we have just elected [president] remains in power, lawlessness will continue."

Kozlov's lawyer, Yury Kostanov, said the verdict will be appealed. He refused to express his opinion about the verdict when asked by several reporters, saying "all this will be typed in my constitutional complaint."

Prosecutor Dmitry Dyadura told reporters that he and his colleagues were "satisfied with the fact that the court accepted the indisputable evidence that the prosecution provided. "As one famous personage said, 'Thieves must go to jail.'"

Reporters and spectators started gathering in front of the courtroom more than an hour before the hearing Thursday.

Dozens of reporters and Kozlov supporters waited for more than an hour and a half after the hearing for Kozlov to be led out. Some of them climbed nearby trees or stood on the windowsills of buildings outside the court.

One supporter brought paper cups filled with tea to keep the bystanders warm.

They chanted several slogans, including "Freedom to Alexei Kozlov," "Hang in there, Alexei" and "We will not forget, and we will not forgive."

Romanova was holding carnations and received a hug from a supporter.

Many people see Kozlov's trial as a symbol of government-sanctioned corruption. The former businessman contends that the case against him was fabricated by onetime business partner and former Federation Council Senator Vladimir Slutsker.

Kozlov also writes a blog on Slon.ru about his experiences in prison. That has given greater visibility to his case, making him one of the most well-known prisoners in the country.

Kozlov was originally sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of illegally obtaining shares in Iskoz, a company headed by him but controlled by Slutsker's Fininvest holding. In July 2011, the Moscow City Court reduced Kozlov's term to five years.

In September 2011, the Supreme Court overturned the verdict and ordered a retrial. Kozlov was released after signing a pledge not to leave the city.

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