The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Navalny Defiant in Closing Remarks

By Natalya Krainova

July 07, 2013

Navalny delivering his closing statements in a Kirov court on Friday. The sentence is to be delivered July 18. **Evgeny Feldman**

Correction appended

Prosecutors on Friday asked a Kirov court to sentence political opposition leader Alexei Navalny to six years in prison and a $30,000 fine on charges of stealing timber from a state-owned company in 2009, but even in the face of such charges Navalny was defiant in closing arguments.

Many view the trial as President Vladimir Putin's punishment for Navalny's political ambitions, particularly his desire to run in the presidential election in 2018 and his campaign for the Moscow Mayoral elections scheduled for Sept. 8.

The majority of observers believe that the court, which is set to convict or acquit Navalny next Thursday, July 18, will issue a guilty verdict — which would bar Navalny from running in elections in the future — and some are convinced that the popular anti-corruption blogger

will be imprisoned.

On Friday, prosecutors asked the Leninsky District Court in the city of Kirov in central Russia to convict Navalny, who was a volunteer aide to Kirov region governor Nikita Belykh in 2009, and businessman Pyotr Ofitserov of making KirovLes executives sell 16 million rubles ($500,000) worth of timber to Ofitserov's company VLK at below-market prices.

Prosecutors asked the court to sentence Navalny and Ofitserov to six and five years in prison, respectively, and a one million ruble ($30,000) fine each, media reports said.

In their final statements Friday, Navalny and Ofitserov pleaded not guilty to the charges.

Navalny vowed to continue his political activities, irrespective of the verdict.

"I declare that my colleagues and I will do everything to destroy this feudal system being built in Russia, to destroy this regime, in which 83 percent of the national riches belong to half a percentage point of the population," Navalny told the court, apparently referring to the Kremlin's management of the country's revenues from oil exports.

In a video of his address posted on YouTube, Navalny called Kremlin officials "a bunch of morons" who "set the Russian people on the track of degradation and alcoholization" in order to "drag out all the national riches."

Navalny pledged to "defend" everyone, including those who sued him, from the current Russian authorities.

As Navalny spoke, the judge, Sergei Blinov, and two prosecutors listened dejectedly. The judge watched Navalny with a solemn expression and fiddled with his pen, and prosecutors looked down at the table.

Navalny also called on the judge and the prosecutors not to convict Ofitserov, who became a suspect "by accident," Navalny said, and who was a father of five and had an apartment on the outskirts of Moscow, 1/4 of which investigators had detained.

When Navalny apologized to Ofitserov and his family while addressing the court, his voice trembled and he swallowed hard. Seeing this, his wife Yulia, who was watching him from the audience, looked away.

Ofitserov said he knew he was innocent and asked the judge to "make an honest decision," opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta reported.

Opposition-minded political analyst and former Kremlin insider Stanislav Belkovsky said Navalny would likely be "slapped with a prison term of several years on the order of Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin]," he said by telephone.

"Vladimir Vladimirovich believes that Navalny is wrong: If you are not as clean as a whistle, you mustn't deal with fighting corruption," Belkovsky said, explaining that Putin probably thought Navalny could not be "as clean as a whistle" since he was a businessman in the past.

Belkovsky predicted that Navalny's imprisonment would "absolutely destroy the trust in the

active part of society," just as in 2003 with the imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, former owner of the now defunct oil giant Yukos, who also had political ambitions when Putin was approaching the end of his first presidential term.

But at the same time, Belkovsky said, Putin "doesn't care anymore" about the active part of society: "His [popularity] rating inside the country will not fall since everyone is afraid of him, and he may still appear on the cover of Time magazine just like he did after Khodorkovsky's imprisonment," Belkovsky said.

Dmitry Gudkov, a State Duma deputy with A Just Russia who co-led anti-Putin street protests with Navalny, refused to speculate on Navalny's conviction but said Navalny's imprisonment would make street protests "uncontrollable," he told Slon.ru on Friday.

"They sent a boomerang flying with an unclear radius: half a year, one year or two," Gudkov said.

Two other co-leaders of the street opposition, Ilya Ponomaryov and Ilya Yashin, believe that Navalny will be imprisoned, they told Slon.ru.

"If there is a real sentence, which seems more likely to me, the number of people who lose the last remnants of their illusions will grow," said Yashin, co-leader of the Solidarity opposition movement.

"This may lead to unpredictable circumstances and end miserably not only for Putin but for the country as well," he said, apparently hinting at the possibility of a violent overthrow.

But pro-Kremlin forces have been known to stage their own rallies to counter opposition protests, and they have also reportedly attacked the opposition verbally and done other publicity stunts.

A newly formed Krasnodar region charity is currently collecting signatures to strip Navalny and several other opposition leaders of their citizenship and deport them, Moskovsky Komsomolets daily reported Friday.

One activist, an unidentified elderly woman, said Navalny and other opposition leaders should be shot dead.

On Saturday, a senior member of United Russia's Moscow branch, Irina Belykh, said the party would help Navalny get the signatures of 110 municipal deputies in order to run for mayor on Sept. 8, Interfax reported.

Political analyst Belkovsky later explained the declaration as "sophisticated mockery" on the part of United Russia, with the party being confident that Navalny wouldn't run in the elections.

In a poll released by the independent Levada Center on Thursday, 44 percent of respondents said the criminal case against Navalny was aimed at "shutting down" him and his supporters. The poll was held among 1600 people in 45 regions and had a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points.

Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this article misquoted Navalny as saying "83 percent of the national riches belong to half of the population." It should have read, "83 percent of the national riches belong to half a percentage point of the population."

Contact the author at n.krainova@imedia.ru

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/07/07/navalny-defiant-in-closing-remarks-a25606