

# Verdict in Navalny Trial Looms Large

By [The Moscow Times](#)

July 17, 2013

**The  Moscow Times**

Alexei Navalny's energy and charisma propelled him from a lonely role blogging about corruption to wide renown as the country's leading opposition activist. His projects have attracted hordes of volunteers and fundraisers. Now comes a day that looms large for Navalny and the opposition: A court hands down its verdict Thursday in an embezzlement case that could send him to prison for six years.

In the four years since Navalny began blogging about Russia's endemic corruption, the 37-year-old lawyer has become the most prominent figure of the nascent opposition. He spearheaded the wave of massive protest rallies that arose in late 2011, riveting crowds of 100,000 or more. Even as his embezzlement trial proceeded in the provincial city of Kirov, Navalny pushed forward his movement by declaring himself a candidate for this fall's Moscow mayoral election, attracting a wave of eager young volunteers.

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He and many observers are sure a conviction is coming in what they describe as a politically motivated case. What seems less certain is the impact: If he goes to prison, it could sap his movement by taking away its galvanizing figure — or make supporters more determined.

Navalny is charged with heading a group that embezzled 16 million rubles (\$500,000) worth of timber from state-owned company KirovLes while he worked as an unpaid adviser to the provincial governor in Kirov in 2009. Although the case is murky, the only question is "whether there will be a conditional sentence on trumped-up charges or a prison sentence on the same trumped-up charges," Navalny told Ekho Moskv radio last week.

Navalny began his rise to prominence by blogging about his investigations into corruption at state-owned companies where he owned shares. His best-known project, the Rospil website, monitors state contracts and appeals to law enforcement agencies to get the dodgy ones annulled. It employs six lawyers who have overturned nearly 130 contracts since 2010, worth 59 billion rubles (\$1.8 billion) in taxpayer money. Other Navalny projects rely on crowdsourcing, attracting information about various grievances from potholes on the roads to leaking pipes in apartment blocks.

Navalny has also plumbed property registers abroad to name and shame top officials and lawmakers for owning undeclared foreign assets and holding foreign citizenship. One of them, Vladimir Pekhtin, the former head of the ethics commission in the State Duma, resigned in February after Navalny blogged about Pekhtin's luxury property holdings in Miami Beach.

Lilia Shevtsova, a political analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center, said Navalny's anti-corruption campaign has inflicted "painful bites on the system," turning the blogger into a political leader.

Unlike many of his peers in the Russian opposition, Navalny poses a tangible threat to the government because he doesn't only "sign petitions against the bloody regime" but actually does something every day, said Leonid Volkov, head of Navalny's election headquarters.

"Navalny is the only person in Russia who views politics as routine 24/7 work," Volkov said. "Navalny always has something going on. He's always busy."

His Foundation for Fighting Corruption, an umbrella organization for projects, is run by Navalny himself and Vladimir Ashurkov, a U.S.-educated former asset manager who has been the key fundraiser for the foundation. Ashurkov refused to comment on the prospects of Navalny's projects until the verdict is announced. But some of his employees voiced confidence that Navalny's anti-corruption efforts would not be affected by his possible prison sentence.

Lyubov Sobol, a lawyer who has worked for Rospil for two years, is optimistic that she and her colleagues will be able to carry on. Navalny and his team have talked about the possibility of a

prison sentence and "different scenarios for development," Sobol said.

"We came to a conclusion that what we do at the Foundation will go on regardless," Sobol said. "All of the employees are independent and know their job well."

At Navalny's election headquarters in central Moscow, dotted with bright pink desks and white chairs, dozens of cheerful volunteers canvass voters by phone and push Navalny's mayoral candidacy on social media. The possibility of prison for their candidate does not seem to faze them.

Volunteer Oleg Kozlovsky, 29, said the lawyer's supporters "try to focus on things that we can change" rather than on something "as unpredictable as the weather."

"If Alexei gets a prison sentence, the number of volunteers and supporters will only increase," he said.

But Navalny's conviction could undermine the fund's activities by robbing it of its vocal leader. Imprisonment could also spook potential donors.

"Navalny will carry on with his activities in so far as it's possible in incarceration, but it's impossible to fight corruption out of prison," said Alexei Makarkin of the Center for Political Technologies.

According to Makarkin, potential donors became more cautious bankrolling the opposition since President Vladimir Putin's crackdown on the protest movement last spring, and their fears could get even worse.

"They may have problems with the financing," Makarkin said. "In financing, a lot of things are based on personal relations, and Navalny is a charismatic figure, he was able attract investors and donors."

The protest rallies of 2011 and 2012 were largely peaceful, authorized gatherings, attracting thousands of middle-class Russians who had not been to the largely marginal protests of the past decade. But this may be changing with Thursday's verdict for the central leader of those protests. Navalny's supporters are already planning a rally that evening just outside the Kremlin walls — despite the fact that authorities refused to give the green light. The Facebook page of the event has more than 6,500 people listed as going.

Campaign volunteer Alexei, a 20-year-old law student, said he had never been to an unsanctioned rally, but would take the risk Thursday if Navalny were sentenced to prison.

"Moscow authorities left us no choice," said Alexei, who asked that his last name not be used for fear of being expelled from university, something he has seen happen to his friends before.

A guilty verdict for Navalny is "probable and even inevitable," said Shevtsova of Carnegie, but it still has yet to be seen how strong a blow for the opposition movement this will be. "So far, Navalny is not a Boris Yeltsin," Shevtsova said, referring to Russia's first president, who rode an unstoppable popular movement to power.

Longer-term consequences of Navalny's convictions could be more dangerous for the

Kremlin than unsanctioned protests on the day of the verdict. State-television has vilified Navalny, portraying him as a corrupt rich Muscovite who defrauded an impoverished timber company.

But his imprisonment alone could turn Navalny into a victim of the Kremlin intrigue.

Makarkin said a conviction could give Navalny a new role: "People's martyr sent to jail by corrupt officials."

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