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Western Governments Express Outrage Over Navalny Verdict

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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Representatives of the United States, Germany and other Western governments Thursday sharply condemned the conviction of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, saying the ruling represented the highest point in a crackdown by Russian authorities on the opposition.

The foreign governments, which also included the U.K. and other European Union member states, said they were outraged by the verdict issued by a Kirov court sentencing Navalny to five years in prison and emphasized the supposed political motives of the trial. Following the reactions, Russian observers said the ruling would likely significantly worsen Russia's relations with foreign states.

"The sentencing of Alexei Navalny, like those before him, is against Russia's own interests and proves that this is not a government with which the European Union should entertain a strategic partnership," former Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, who heads the centrist ALDE group in the European Parliament, said in a statement.

"We are deeply disappointed in the conviction of Navalny and the apparent political motivations in this trial," said U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul on Twitter, adding that representatives of the U.S. Embassy had been observing the trial and were going to pass information on it to the U.S. government.

U.K. Foreign Secretary William Hague said the verdict showed that there was selective justice in Russia and a lack of adherence to international human rights obligations. The European Union called the charges against Navalny "unsubstantiated" and said the sentence posed "serious questions" about the rule of law in Russia. EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said in a statement that the EU hoped the sentence would be reconsidered in the appeal process.

International human rights groups joined the chorus of criticism regarding the ruling, with Human Rights Watch calling the verdict "shockingly predictable." The group's deputy director for Europe and Central Asia, Rachel Denber, said it was impossible "to see this case through any lens other than a political one." Amnesty International called the trial a "parody" and called for Navalny's immediate release.

Russian observers warned that the verdict could bring about a further cooling of relations between Russia and foreign states.

"This man [Navalny] isn't my associate, but I think this verdict is awful and will lead to disastrous results for Russia," said Svetlana Gannushkina, a veteran human rights activist and head of the Civil Assistance committee, in comments carried by Interfax.

Navalny topped the worldwide Twitter trends at one point Thursday, with many top foreign officials turning to the microblogging service just after the verdict to express concern.

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics called on the Council of Europe and OSCE not to be silent about "politically motivated justice well-established in Russia," while Heidi Hautala, Finland's International Development Minister, said Navalny's five-year sentence must be "the final wake up call for [the] international community about the crackdown on civil society."

The announcement of the verdict coincided with the 95th birthday of Nelson Mandela, the former South African revolutionary leader who spent 27 years in prison before becoming president, in what many Twitter users called an "amusing coincidence." President Vladimir Putin issued a statement congratulating Mandela on his birthday.

Navalny expressed presidential ambitions earlier this year, but under current Russian law he would be prevented from running in the next election in 2018 due to his conviction Thursday.

The French association Russie-Libertés and the American Russian-Speaking Association for Civil and Human Rights created an online petition asking the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to give his assessment of the Navalny verdict. More than 16,000 people had signed the petition as of Thursday.

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