The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Newly Freed Navalny Sets Sights on Mayor's Office (Video)

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July 21, 2013

Alexei Navalny walking with his wife, Yulia, through a crowd of supporters after arriving from Kirov at Moscow's Yaroslavsky Station on Saturday. **Dmitry Lovetsky**

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny, unexpectedly freed by a Kirov court a day after being jailed on embezzlement charges, got a hero's welcome from hundreds of supporters when his train arrived in Moscow over the weekend, and he immediately announced that he would pursue his long-shot bid to become Moscow's mayor.

The court took the unprecedented step of releasing Navalny and co-defendant Pyotr Ofitserov until they have a chance to appeal, saying its decision was influenced by a desire to allow Navalny to run against incumbent Mayor Sergei Sobyanin in a Sept. 8 election.

The surprise ruling energized Navalny's supporters, who had turned out by the thousands in the streets of Moscow and other cities after his conviction Thursday. Scores gathered Saturday at Moscow's Yaroslavsky Station to welcome Navalny back to a city where some had

not expected to see him set foot for five years.

The waiting crowd started clapping when the first passengers alighted from the train, and the applause grew louder, with whistles and cheering, when Navalny stepped off.

Video: Navalny being greeted by supporters at the Yaroslavsky station.

"You have destroyed the main privilege that the Kremlin has claimed — its alleged right to arrest anyone in court and cause that person to disappear," Navalny told his supporters, attributing his release to Thursday's protests.

"It's because of you that we were released the next day. Thank you!" he said. "I never doubted for a moment that we would win and that I would be released early, but I didn't believe that that would happen in just two days. I want to apologize for not believing in you strongly enough."

Navalny promised to continue his mayoral campaign and thanked Ofitserov for his "bravery."

"His hands were not shaking in the courtroom," Navalny said, referring to Ofitserov. "But they're shaking here. There's no force or power in the courtroom. But there is force and there is power here. We are in power here!"

Supporters loudly chanted "Navalny!" "Navalny is our mayor!" and "We are in power here!"

Many wore T-shirts or stickers with Navalny's name. At least one person wore an image of Navalny based on the iconic picture of South American revolutionary Che Guevara, while another, a woman, drew snickers for her T-shirt reading, "Navalny's brother."

Dozens of police trucks were deployed to the train station before Navalny arrived, and a police officer tried to evacuate the area, citing a bomb threat. But the supporters refused to leave, believing that the warning was a ploy. Police made no attempt to force the people to leave.

Supporters drew parallels between Navalny's arrival and that of Soviet revolutionary Vladimir Lenin at St. Petersburg's Finlyandsky Station in 1917 and Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov's return from exile to the same Yaroslavsky Station in 1986. Some also likened Navalny's speech to one delivered by Lenin atop an armored car at the Finlyandsky Station and to President Boris Yeltsin's famous speech on a tank during the coup attempt in August 1991.

Like at Thursday's rally near Moscow's Manezh Square, a mood of euphoria and self-confidence seemed to reign among the activists, with some saying that they had brought the protest movement up to a new level by challenging the government so close to the Kremlin without any official authorization and causing Navalny's release. Several people have said they did not need permission anymore to demonstrate wherever they wanted.

"We have abolished the Law on Mass Rallies and restored Article 31 of the Constitution," opposition activist Olga Faleyeva tweeted late Thursday, referring to the constitutional right for free assembly.

While the police have not acted forcefully against the opposition, they are pursuing vandalism

charges against unidentified people who stuck small stickers with Navalny's name to the State Duma building at Thursday's rally, Itar-Tass reported Saturday. In addition, the Investigative Committee has opened an investigation into an activist accused of assaulting a police officer by allegedly tearing off one of his uniform's shoulder straps, according to Vesti state television.

Despite protesters' cheerful mood, many observers pointed out that Navalny's return and participation in the mayoral election could actually help legitimize Sobyanin's almost certain victory.

"We have made a serious effort to register all candidates, including Navalny," Sobyanin said following Navalny's release. "I believe everything must be done to ensure that all registered candidates participate in the election."

Sobyanin appeared to have known all along that Navalny would stay in the race. On the eve of Navalny's conviction, Sobyanin said the opposition leader would be able to run regardless of the verdict. Under Russian law, convicts are barred from holding public office.

Why exactly Navalny was released remained something of a puzzle Sunday.

According to a number of prominent Russian lawyers, including Genri Reznik and Vadim Klyuvgant, the release of a defendant sentenced to prison until after appeal is unprecedented. While the country's leadership has insisted that it has no leverage over the courts, only 23 percent of Russians actually trust the judicial system, according to a recent poll conducted by the independent Levada Center.

Both Navalny's imprisonment and sudden release are thus seen by some as manifestations of political power game that is being conducted behind the scenes. The fact that a government faction appears to be defending one of the most popular and outspoken critics of the Kremlin marks a shift in politics, analysts said.

"Navalny was never used as a tool in political games before. But now it seems that a group within the elite thought that his sentence was too harsh and thus might undermine its interests," said Mikhail Vinogradov, a political analyst with the St. Petersburg Politics Fund.

Stanislav Belkovsky, a former Kremlin insider and a sharp critic of the government, said that the Navalny case shows that deep contradictions exist within the ruling elite, with one side believing in starting a dialogue with all voters, including Navalny supporters, and the other fighting to keep the status quo of a strong-arm government financed by high oil prices.

"It was in the context of this kind of contradiction that perestroika unfolded in the 1980s, so we will wait for a new one to come soon," he told the Online TV channel.

Navalny's release might also manifest a new stage in an ongoing turf war between the powerful Investigative Committee and the Prosecutor General's Office.

On July 2, former Moscow region deputy prosecutor Alexander Ignatenko, accused of helping to lead a racketeering ring that offered illegal casinos protection from prosecution in exchange for millions of dollars in cash and gifts, was released from a Moscow jail after the term of his pretrial detention expired. The development was seen as a victory for the

Investigative Committee, whose chief had personally ordered the criminal case against Navalny over objections from the prosecution, who had closed it earlier.

"Tensions between the Investigative Committee and the prosecution have definitely contributed to what is happening to Navalny," said Vinogradov, the analyst.

In addition, anger from Western governments over the verdict might have played a role.

Navalny's conviction, coming amid efforts by the U.S. to extradite intelligence leaker Edward Snowden from Russia, have raised questions about whether U.S. President Barack Obama might cancel a planned summit with President Vladimir Putin in Moscow in September.

But Alexander Kynev, a senior official with independent elections watchdog Golos, a former benefactor of U.S. government funds, said he doubted that foreign pressure had played a role.

"What is important is that the people in government have a special mindset. They do not think that society has a role to play," he said.

In any case, he said, Navalny's release almost certainly has increased his chances to achieve a strong showing in the mayoral election.

"This has mobilized the opposition voters — who have not disappeared anywhere, as the protests have shown — around his candidacy," he said.

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Original url:
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