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Bolotnoye Case Sentences to Come Monday

By Natalya Krainova

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Defendants in the Bolotnoye case smiling for reporters from behind bars in the courtroom at Friday's hearing. **Igor Tabakov**

A Moscow court on Friday convicted eight people of participating in riots and violence against police at an opposition protest on Bolotnaya Ploshchad in May 2012, as hundreds of supporters rallied without permission outside the court, resulting in nearly 200 detentions.

Human rights groups and Western governments believe that the trial, widely known simply as the "Bolotnoye case," has been orchestrated by the Kremlin with the aim of discouraging ordinary people from participating in opposition street protests.

The trial, already a focus of opposition anger, has taken on additional significance recently due to the political crisis in Ukraine, where over the weekend Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych fled the capital under tenacious pressure from anti-government protesters. Russia's political forces seeking the ouster of President Vladimir Putin have looked partly with

envy at the events in Ukraine, and could attempt to rally their supporters around the Bolotnoye case to spur on their own movement.

"You are delighted by the great deed of the people on Maidan," wrote opposition leader Alexei Navalny in a blog post on Sunday, referring to the main square in Kiev where the protests have been based. "Their self-organization and self-sacrifice. Remember that great deeds begin with small things."

"There is no need yet to face gunfire, but you must come and support the hostages who will be sentenced in the May 6 case," Navalny wrote.

The Zamoskvoretsky District Court is expected to announce the sentences Monday starting at 10:30 a.m. An unsanctioned demonstration against the verdict is planned for Monday evening on Manezh Square next to the Kremlin, although the police typically cordon off the square ahead of planned unauthorized protests.

Prosecutors had asked the judge at Friday's hearing to imprison the defendants for terms ranging from 5 1/2 to 6 years on charges of participating in "riots," for alleged actions including throwing stones at police, hitting and shoving police, taking nonlethal weapons from police and stripping them of their helmets, as well as erecting barriers with metal fences.

On Friday, judge Natalya Nikishina started reading the convictions with a three-hour delay that was not officially explained. Seven of the defendants, all men, listened while standing in the defendants' cage, while the eighth defendant, 20-year-old Alexandra Naumova, stood beside her lawyer.

The seven who stood in the cage — Sergei Krivov, Andrei Barabanov, Stepan Zimin, Denis Lutskevich, Alexei Polikhovich, Artyom Savyolov and Yaroslav Belousov — have all spent numerous months in pretrial detention, many of them for more than a year, and Naumova has been under house arrest.

The judge said the court had determined that the defendants "took part in the riots that took place and were accompanied by violence and destruction of property."

The defendants, "acting intentionally" and "realizing the illegal character of their actions ... used violence that was not health- or life-threatening, toward representatives of the authorities who were performing their duties to maintain public order," Nikishina read in a clear voice at a leisurely pace, contrasting with the hurried whisper of many judges reading sentences in high-profile cases.

The judge said that Barabanov, with a group of unidentified protestors, stripped a police officer of his helmet and took part in his beating, hitting him at least once personally, with a fist to the head. Savyolov "grabbed hold of a police officer's arms and tried to take away his nonlethal weapons," Nikishina said.

Krivov "snatched non-lethal weapons" from a policeman and "dealt a minimum of three blows at his bulletproof vest, causing him physical pain," the judge said.

Several independent inquiries into the violence at the May 6, 2012 rally on Bolotnaya

Ploshchad have found that there were no "riots" as the charges allege, and that the clashes were provoked by the authorities.

A dozen relatives and four reporters stood in the small courtroom, which was packed tightly with people and could not contain several dozen journalists and spectators seeking entrance. Those who did not get into the room watched a broadcast of the verdict on a television screen on the ground floor, sitting on chairs or standing.

The television transmitted not only the judge's voice but the roar and whistles of the crowd gathered outside the building. Nikishina read for about 75 minutes before adjourning until Monday.

Outside the court building, police detained at least 192 protesters, snatching them from a crowd chanting "Freedom!" and "Shame!" Among those gathered were opposition leaders Navalny, Ilya Yashin, Boris Nemtsov, Mikhail Kasyanov and Gennady Gudkov, as well as two members of punk band Pussy Riot, Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, who were released from prison under the Kremlin-backed amnesty in December.

Police detained people holding posters and shouting slogans, including Maria Baronova and Vladimir Akimenko, both of whom were suspects in the Bolotnoye case before being amnestied as part of the same measure that freed Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova.

Emulating the Kiev protesters, the hundreds of people gathered outside the court building chanted "Berkut," the name of the riot police in Ukraine, and at least one man waved a Russian flag — before being detained by police — just as the Kiev protesters have adopted the Ukrainian national flag as one of their main symbols.

The crowd also observed a minute of silence for the victims of the violence in Kiev, and eight white doves, one for each defendant, were released nearby.

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