The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Opposition Figures Convicted of Organizing Mass Riots at Bolotnaya

By Allison Quinn

July 24, 2014



Opposition activist Sergei Udaltsov gesturing in court Thursday. He faces up to 15 years in prison after being found guilty of organizing mass riots.

A Moscow court on Thursday found two opposition activists guilty of inciting mass riots at a 2012 anti-Kremlin protest that erupted in violent clashes between demonstrators and police.

The Moscow City Court concluded that Sergei Udaltsov and Leonid Razvozzhayev had accepted funding from Georgian politicians to organize mass riots on the eve of President Vladimir Putin's inauguration ceremony in an attempt to sabotage the launch of his third presidential term. They had intended to orchestrate similar mass riots throughout the rest of the country, the court found, RIA Novosti reported.

Udaltsov was among the most recognizable opposition activists at the helm of the anti-Kremlin protests that shook Moscow between late-2011 and mid-2012, before newly beefed-up public protest legislation caused fines and punishments for unsanctioned rallies

to skyrocket.

The sentences were due to be announced Thursday evening, but journalists were ejected from the courtroom at 6 p.m. and there were no reports of the sentences handed down as this newspaper went to press.

Though prosecutors requested minimum sentences of eight years each, they face up to 15 years under the Russian Criminal Code.

Heightened Security

Perhaps symbolic of the heightened tensions surrounding the case, which has dragged on for about two years and has seen dozens of protesters prosecuted over the now infamous Bolotnaya Ploshchad rally in central Moscow, security was ramped up around the courthouse ahead of the verdict.

Riot police stood by in case of a protest. Last summer, a guilty verdict in an unrelated case against Alexei Navalny — another opposition activist who helped lead the Bolotnaya protest — provoked outrage, triggering an unsanctioned protest along the periphery of Red Square.

On Thursday, three judges who presided over the case ruled that the actions of the police that day were fully legal. The Kremlin's human rights council criticized the conduct of police in the aftermath of the clashes.

Legal proceedings were launched against Udaltsov and Razvozzhayev on Feb. 18. Both men have maintained their innocence ever since, claiming the charges against them were politically motivated and part of a wider crackdown on the Russian opposition.

The Verdict

The men will appeal their convictions, their attorney Dmitry Agranovsky said.

"We did not have any illusions; we started working on the appeal before the judge had even finished reading out the verdict," Agranovsky told RIA Novosti.

Navalny's Twitter account read Thursday: "The verdict in the case against Udaltsov and Razvozzhayev is just the indictment rewritten." Navalny's account is currently administered by his wife and other supporters, as the anti-corruption campaigner himself is under house arrest and restricted from social networking.

Several of Udaltsov's supporters were removed from the courtroom for laughing as the verdict was delivered, and another was kicked out for shouting that it was an "endless lie," Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty reported.

The judge promptly ordered a bailiff to eject "the more emotional citizens" present in the courtroom.

Tightening the Screws

The verdict comes just days after Putin told Russia's Security Council that the country would not resort to a "tightening of the screws" to achieve its aims, stressing instead that the nation would realize its ambitions by "relying on civil society."

Many opposition activists have accused Putin of having tightened the screws considerably since the start of his third presidential term in May 2012.

Udaltsov, who has been under house arrest since February 2013 in connection with the case, has chalked up more than 100 arrests for unsanctioned protests during the course of his political career.

Razvozzhayev has been in pretrial detention since his extradition from Ukraine in October 2012. The court cited earlier statements made by Razvozzhayev as a confession, though Razvozzhayev later claimed those statements were given to investigators under duress.

The Other Defendants

Another figure in the case, Konstantin Lebedev, was sentenced to 2 1/2 years behind bars last year after striking a plea deal with prosecutors. In May, he was released on parole.

More than 400 people were detained at Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploshchad on May 6, 2012, and dozens were later charged with participating in mass riots. Eleven of those charged were later granted amnesty and released.

Demonstrators from the protest have disputed authorities' claims that there were mass riots, an allegation that has served as the basis for the charges.

Navalny testified on July 16 that the chaos resulted from city authorities changing the route of the sanctioned march and intentionally neglecting to inform the organizers of the changes.

See also:

Moscow Court Sanctions Arrest of Ukraine Tycoon Governor Kolomoisky

Contact the author at a.quinn@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/07/24/opposition-figures-convicted-of-organizing-mass-riots-at-bolotnaya-a37664