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# The Rapist and the Thief

## Alexei Navalny's presidential bid is now in jeopardy, but Russia doesn't always scorn its convicted criminals

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**Pixabay**

Alexei Navalny, activist crusader and leader of Russia's anti-Kremlin opposition, is a convicted felon once again. In a ruling on Wednesday that surprised no one, the plucky anti-corruption activist was handed a verdict and five-year suspended sentence that are almost identical to the results of his previous conviction in 2013 for the same charges.

Groundhog Day was a week ago, but Navalny's life suddenly resembles the famous Bill Murray comedy in all the worst ways.

And yet, as The Moscow Times' Eva Hartog reports, Russia's opposition leader isn't giving up his bid for the presidency next year, despite miserable odds and a federal law of questionable

constitutionality that bars convicted felons in Navalny's situation from running for elected office.

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And If Navalny is able to overcome the retrial verdict, he wouldn't be the first in Russia to fight the law and win. In fact, there are other public figures guilty of far worse who have gone on to escape serious punishment and some have even won elected office, later in life.

To get a better sense of how courts and voters in Russia handle the nation's criminal public figures, consider Evgeniya and Anton.

### Evgeniya Vasilyeva, the defense minister's ex

Vasilyeva was 36 years old when she was convicted on eight counts of criminal activity. She sold boatloads of real estate owned by the Defense Ministry at bottom-barrel prices in exchange for kickbacks, laundering the money through a company called Oboronservis, which the Defense Ministry used to handle property sales.

It's estimated that the scheme cost the government about 3 billion rubles ($50 million) — almost 200 times the amount of money Navalny allegedly misappropriated from a state-owned lumber company. In Navalny's case, prosecutors asked the court to send him to prison for six years. In Vasilyeva's case, prosecutors requested only a suspended sentence.

In the end, however, the judge sentenced her to five years in prison — a surprisingly harsh ruling, and one that led experts to believe the state was trying to make an example of her.

It seemed like a real crowd-pleasing move to throw Vasilyeva under the bus and behind bars. Throughout her trial, which she spent under house arrest, she regularly performed attention-seeking antics that probably would have gotten Navalny hard time, if ever he'd attempted anything similar during his house arrest in 2014.

In October 2014, while still on trial, Vasilyeva even released a music video called "Slippers" — apparently an inside reference to Anatoly Serdyukov, Russia's ex-defense minister and her former beau.

**Embed:**

In the end, Vasilyeva spent less than four months in jail, and even during that time her whereabouts were often a mystery. Weeks before she was suddenly granted parole, she was reportedly spotted strolling about Moscow.

On August 25, 2015, a Russian court released Vasilyeva from prison. Her lawyers said she paid full compensation for the losses suffered by the Defense Ministry.

### Anton Sekerzhitsky, Tver's rapist lawmaker

Last September, voters in Tver elected a convicted rapist to serve in the region's parliament.

The ballot even mentioned Anton Sekerzhitsky's rape conviction, but voters either didn't notice or didn't care. He still ran as a member of the country's ruling political party, United Russia, taking 31 percent of the vote and winning.

Sekerzhitsky raped a woman back in the 1990s, and he served out his sentence by 1997, making it lawful for him to hold elected office today. Nevertheless, ahead of last September's elections, rivals in the Communist Party notified Tver's governor that Sekerzhitsky tried to hide his criminal past from the public, complaining that the rape conviction was missing from voter information published on the Tver regional parliament's website.

Sekerzhitsky has served as an elected official since 2004, when he was elected as a city councilman, focusing most recently on ethics and anti-corruption activity.

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In a country where the defense minister's mistress can steal millions of dollars and become a pop star, and a rapist can join a state commission on ethics and anti-corruption work, it's not hard to imagine a world of opportunity for Alexei Navalny, in the years ahead.

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