

Putin Critic Gets 5-Year Jail Term, Setting Off Protests



Yuri Kochetkov/European Pressphoto Agency

Russian officers held back protesters in Moscow on Thursday. Crow ds turned out to protest the verdict against Aleksei Navalny. [More Photos »](#)

By DAVID M. HERSZENHORN
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KIROV, Russia — [Russia’s most prominent opposition leader](#) was sentenced to five years in prison on Thursday for embezzlement, setting off protests that condemned the verdict as part of a campaign by President Vladimir V. Putin to corral the opposition and block the rise of a popular challenger.

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[Protests Ignite After Putin Critic Is Sentenced to Jail](#)

Aleksei A. Navalny, who famously branded the president’s United Russia political machine the “party of swindlers and thieves,” was apparently singled out by the Kremlin after having grown in stature from his beginnings as an anticorruption blogger and leader of street protests to a populist candidate for mayor of Moscow.

But it may ultimately be that same popularity — and the threat of further unrest — that keeps him free for at least some time. In what has the fingerprints of a politically designed plan, the public prosecutor, shortly after the handcuffed prisoner was led away, called on the judge to allow his release on Friday pending his appeal. That could keep Mr. Navalny out of prison for more than a month, perhaps temporarily neutralizing the anger at the verdict while allowing him to run for mayor in September.

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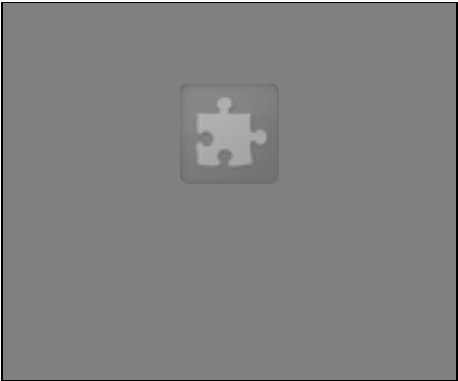
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Aleksei A. Navalny in court on Thursday in Kirov, Russia. [More Photos](#)

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As crowds of demonstrators swirled near Manezh Square in Moscow on Thursday night, Dmitri Gudkov, a political opposition leader and member of Parliament who attended Mr. Navalny's sentencing, wrote on Twitter: "Tomorrow morning he may be released. Manezh, this is thanks to you!" That was later confirmed by Vadim Kobzev, Mr. Navalny's lawyer, who called it "a clearly political decision."

The Navalny case has captivated Moscow. When speaking before a crowd, Mr. Navalny projects a raw, common-man's charisma. He was the point person in a popular opposition movement in which huge numbers of demonstrators poured into the streets demanding the rule of law and political reform. But when Mr. Putin returned to the presidency, his crackdown managed to discourage or frighten many of Mr. Navalny's supporters — young, professional, tech-savvy Russians — into silence.

Mr. Navalny, however, refused to be cowed, and while others fled to preserve their freedom, he willingly stood trial.

The sentence represented a threshold for the Kremlin. For the past 12 years, Russian authorities typically refrained from using blunt force to sideline political challengers. Opposition members would be banned from government-controlled television, overwhelmingly the most powerful influence on public opinion. They would be co-opted with jobs or platforms, discredited by the release of embarrassing material or jailed with 15-day administrative sentences.

But Mr. Navalny's sentence was a rare case in which a political opposition leader was transparently silenced using Russia's criminal justice system.

"I think it's always hard to say which point is the bifurcation point, the threshold after which there is irreversibility," said Sergei Guriev, a public supporter of Mr. Navalny's and a prominent Russian economist [who recently fled](#) to France, fearing his own political prosecution. "But this is certainly one of the big moves."

"The message is that whatever you do, even if you do socially useful things, if you are in opposition to the government, you are going to jail," Mr. Guriev said. He added: "He is the face of the Russian opposition. He is the face of the younger generation. What happens to him determines the future of Russia."

Mr. Putin has shown a willingness to tolerate a certain amount of dissent, particularly on the Internet. But he has drawn the line at political challenges, as he did with the oil billionaire [Mikhail Khodorkovsky](#), who was imprisoned in 2005 after he began backing independent political parties to oppose the Kremlin. He remains in prison.

Mr. Navalny, 37, a lawyer, had long dismissed the trial as a charade based on trumped-up charges, a contention backed by the United States and the European Union. He remained defiant, spending much of the three-hour session in a local court here posting messages and photographs on Twitter, ignoring an order from Judge Sergei Blinov to shut off all cellphones and denouncing the evidence against him as "falsified."

Before being led out of court, he sent followers one last message: "O.K. Don't miss me. And most importantly — do not be lazy."

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If his conviction is upheld on appeal, Mr. Navalny will be banned from public office for life. He has said he wants to be president one day, but he posed a different sort of threat: a steadily growing popularity combined with an incorruptibility that made him impossible to co-opt and a relentlessness in embarrassing officials by disclosing their corrupt dealings.

The case here in Kirov was the most high-profile in a series of politically charged prosecutions of Mr. Navalny and other opposition figures in recent months, as the Kremlin has shown its willingness to use the judicial system for political retribution undeterred by criticism at home or abroad. The verdict incited some calls for boycotts of the Moscow mayoral election and future national ballots, and drew cries of alarm from the West. While the verdict could eventually prove either to end Mr. Navalny's political career or seal its future success, for many in Russia it seemed to be a turning point.

The United States and the European Union condemned the verdict. Jay Carney, the White House spokesman, said the "United States is deeply disappointed and concerned" by the conviction and called the charges "politically motivated." He added, "Navalny's harsh prison sentence is the latest example of a disturbing trend of government actions aimed at suppressing dissent and civil society in Russia."

President Obama has indicated that he may cancel a trip to Russia in September, in part because of this verdict, and the standoff over Edward J. Snowden, the former National Security Agency contractor seeking asylum in Russia.

Catherine Ashton, the European Union's foreign policy chief, issued a statement saying the verdict "raises serious concerns as to the state of the rule of law in Russia."

With the stiff sentences meted out last year to members of the punk band Pussy Riot for a stunt protest in a Moscow cathedral and Mr. Putin's public musing about granting asylum to Mr. Snowden, the president has made clear that Russia's values are its own and that the rest of the world will not tell him what to do.

As the five-year prison sentence was delivered, some of Mr. Navalny's supporters burst into tears. He turned and hugged his wife, then shook hands with some supporters before being led away by guards. Mr. Navalny's parents were also in the courtroom, and at one point bickered with bailiffs who complained that they were not standing up.

Outside the court, Mr. Navalny's wife, Yulia, said that his work would not be halted.

"Aleksei was as ready for this as one can be," she said. "If anyone believes that Aleksei's investigations will cease, that is not the case. The Fund for the Fight Against Corruption will continue working as before."

While the guilty verdict was widely expected, the charges against Mr. Navalny, of stealing nearly \$500,000 from a state-controlled timber company, were considered thin by many legal experts and had been thrown out as baseless after a local investigation. The case was resurrected by federal officials in Moscow, and the Kremlin had made little effort to mask the political motivation of the prosecution.

A spokesman for the federal Investigative Committee, Vladimir Markin, declared publicly that Mr. Navalny had made himself a target through his political activities criticizing public officials.

"If a person tries with all his strength to attract attention, or if I can put it, teases authorities — 'Look at me, I'm so good compared to everyone else' — well, then interest in his past grows and the process of exposing him naturally speeds up," Mr. Markin said.

Mr. Navalny was convicted along with a co-defendant, Pyotr Ofitserov, a businessman who had worked with him on the timber project when Mr. Navalny was an unpaid adviser to the regional governor here. Mr. Ofitserov, a father of five who has not been politically active, was sentenced to four years in prison. Each man was also fined more than \$15,000.

The judge's findings were largely based on the testimony of a third man accused in the case, Vyacheslav Opalev, who pleaded guilty and worked with the prosecution. In his decision, Judge Blinov called Mr. Opalev's testimony trustworthy and reliable. But during the trial, Mr. Opalev at times gave

contradictory evidence, and defense lawyers were not allowed to cross-examine him. In addition, Judge Blinov barred the defense from calling 13 witnesses.

The crime novelist Boris Akunin, who is also a political opposition leader, said the verdict showed there was little hope of changing Russia by democratic means.

“Lifetime deprivation of elections — this is what the verdict means, not only for Navalny but for all who thought it was possible to change this system through elections,” Mr. Akunin wrote. “As long as the Putin regime is alive, there will not be elections.”

Reporting was contributed by Ellen Barry, Andrew E. Kramer, Andrew Roth, Alexandra Kozlova, Anna Tikhomirova and Noah Sneider from Moscow.

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We should all aspire to Navalny's bravery.

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April 4, 2011

Part of Navalny's appeal is his rejection of Russian liberalism, which he sees as being hopelessly out of touch with a country that is fundamentally conservative. His nationalism is unapologetic and even shocking. In a series of humorous videos on YouTube, he can be seen advocating the repatriation of illegals (while footage scrolls of people of Asian appearance moving swiftly through an airport) and the use of pistols against lawless undesirables....

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Rita California

Sounds like he'd be right at home with some of our elected officials. Maybe Pres. Obama can make a deal - The US will take the burden of having both Navalny and Snowden off Russia's hands.

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