

The Navalny problem: can't convict him, can't silence him

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On 16 October the regional court in Kirov handed down its sentence to the opposition leader Aleksei Navalny. He was found guilty of organising the theft of timber belonging to the state-owned Kirovles enterprise while working as an advisor to the governor of the Kirov region. The court upheld the sentence of five years' imprisonment, but suspended the sentence for that period of time. Navalny cannot change his place of residence and is required to report to a police station twice a month.

Commentary

- In the short term, the court's verdict restricts Navalny's political activity; having a criminal conviction (even suspended) prevents him from running in elections for the duration of the sentence (in accordance with the Constitutional Court's ruling of 10 October 2013). In addition, the threat of being imprisoned will be hanging over him if he breaks the law (for example, if he breaches the vague legislation on rallies) or is found guilty in another court case (several of which are in progress).
- Along with the drawbacks, the persecution of Navalny has brought him certain advantages. His visibility has increased by leaps and bounds; according to the Levada Center he is now recognised by 51% of Russians, and 19% would consider voting for his party if it is registered (at the same time, however, he has a sizeable negative constituency). During his run for mayor of Moscow, in which he achieved a surprisingly good result, Navalny presented himself as a charismatic and modern politician, who sharply criticised the government despite the judicial pressure on him. He has displayed a good sense for popular sentiments: one of his flagship initiatives is a public plan for a bill to introduce visas for citizens of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Yet at the same time, despite his nationalist views, he has shied away from the radical anti-immigrant initiatives that have sprung up recently. Recently he took up another important social problem: the state's acquisition of some pension insurance premiums to balance the state pension fund. Over the last year, Navalny has advanced to become the outright leader of the opposition, which contrasts with the general condition of the Russian political opposition – divided, unable to take up serious social problems, or compromised as opportunists, like Mikhail Prokhorov, the former candidate of the 'middle class'.
- The emergence of a smart and skilful player within the opposition, together with the unfavourable evolution of anti-government sentiment, are posing challenges which the Kremlin is combating with only limited effectiveness. The trial of Navalny and the

elections in Moscow showed chaos in the decision-making process and the lack of a coherent strategy by the Kremlin towards a leading opponent. The fundamental reason for this is a competition between the supporters of using force in politics (the Investigative Committee, the FSB, and Sergei Ivanov, the head of the Kremlin administration) and those who believe similar goals can be achieved by more moderate means (Moscow's mayor Sergei Sobyanin and Vyacheslav Volodin, the deputy head of the Kremlin administration among others). For the moment, Vladimir Putin seems inclined to favour the moderate faction; the 'lenient' sentence for Navalny is intended to block his political activity but avoid an escalation of discontent from socially active groups, as well as repercussions from abroad. But so far the government does not seem to have any idea