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Russia: A peculiar sentence for Aleksei Navalny

Jadwiga Rogoża

On 30 December a Moscow court ruled in the case of Aleksei Navalny and his brother Oleg on a charge of embezzling from Yves Rocher (Oleg's company provided the company with courier services). Aleksei Navalny was sentenced to 3½ years, suspended for three years, and his brother to 3½ years in prison without parole. On the day of the judgement a spontaneous rally was held in Moscow in support of the Navalny brothers, which amassed from 1500 to 5000 participants. Similar actions also took place in several other Russian cities, although these were even smaller. Navalny himself announced the organisation of protest rallies in major Russian cities over the coming months.

Commentary

- The Navalny brothers' trial was accompanied from the beginning by numerous violations of procedures and the accused men's rights, and there was even doubt as to the prosecutor's main charge (representatives of Yves Rocher testified before the court that no losses had been incurred as a result of their work with Oleg Navalny). The main aim of the trial was to discredit Aleksei Navalny, currently the most important Russian opposition activist, and himself the author of many high-profile investigations on corruption in the Russian ruling elite, which have penetrated the wider public in Russia and been publicised by foreign media. The 'neutralisation' of the main opponent is necessary for the government, as it fears a rise of discontent among the elites and society due to the worsening economic situation.
- Despite Navalny's conviction by the court, the verdict is quite peculiar. He had previously been sentenced to five years' imprisonment suspended, so another verdict should have resulted in a prison sentence without parole. Meanwhile, instead of a prison sentence for Aleksei, which would have brought forth criticism in Russia and around the world, his brother was jailed as a kind of hostage, giving the authorities an instrument to put pressure on their political opponent. In addition, some experts interpret the Kremlin's relatively lenient sentence for Aleksei Navalny and the further court decisions (which dismissed all the charges that he had broken his house arrest) as an attempt to create an atmosphere of ambiguity around Navalny, and to fuel rumours that he is a 'Kremlin project'.
- The political sentence on the Navalny brothers did not cause mass protests. Nor will the growing economic difficulties that have hit the middle classes and some of the elites, as well as the poorer social groups. In the urban middle class – the group that has been

relatively most affected by the crisis – there is a widespread feeling of discouragement, and a growing willingness to emigrate. 2014 saw record numbers of emigration for the whole period of Vladimir Putin's rule (according to Rosstat, over 200,000 people emigrated in January-August), and many prominent figures – Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the writer Boris Akunin, many experts and journalists – have also left Russia. The poorer residents of Russia, despite their dissatisfaction at rising food prices, are not going out onto the streets either. Once again, this shows that the traditional passivity and atomisation of Russian society, together with the increasing repressiveness of the state, have effectively prevented the transformation of real dissatisfaction into protest activity.