

Navalny eliminated from presidential elections in Russia

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On 3 May, the Court rejected an appeal by Aleksei Navalny against his five-year suspended sentence in a case involving fraud in the Kirovles company, which means that the judgement is now final. This decision came after the Russian Supreme Court ordered a retrial in connection with a judgement from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), in which it was concluded that Russia had violated Navalny's right to a fair trial in 2013. Navalny's staff has announced a second referral of his case to the ECHR, as well as an appeal to the Russian Constitutional Court against the regulations that prevent convicted persons from running in presidential elections.

Commentary

- The decision by the court in Kirov means that Navalny has been prevented from participating in the presidential elections scheduled for March 2018. Navalny, who has become the most important figure in the anti-Kremlin opposition, would be an inconvenient opponent for the authorities due to his ability to mobilise people to participate in protests. He proved this by organising the anti-government demonstrations held throughout Russia on 26 March 2017, which were the biggest such protests against the government since the anti-Putin demonstrations at the turn of 2012. Navalny's introduction into the public debate of uncomfortable topics for the authorities, concerning financial abuses among the elite, has caused a rise in public dissatisfaction at the material situation of the Russian people, which is worsening as a result of the economic crisis. Despite the announcement by his staff that he will continue his election campaign, the decision to prevent him standing means he will lose a convenient tool to mobilise support (including easy access to the media and the ability to organise public gatherings).
- In parallel with the ongoing trial, the authorities have sought to intimidate Navalny and paralyse the work of his election committee and the Foundation to Fight Corruption which he leads. In recent months he has repeatedly been the victim of violent individual attacks, court proceedings against individual activists from his organisation have been conducted, and his campaign headquarters have been searched and its lease agreement called into question. As a result of the most recent attack, most likely carried out by activists from the pro-Kremlin SERB movement (which the government employs to fight the opposition), Navalny has lost 80% of the vision in his right eye (in connection with which he has travelled to Spain for an operation).

- The actions against Navalny and his removal from the elections testify to the Kremlin elite's great apprehension before the upcoming presidential elections, in which the authorities are seeking to obtain a high turnout and a very big result for Vladimir Putin (he has not yet formally announced any intention to run). The government's concern at its falling poll ratings and the possibility of a repetition of the protests has also been demonstrated by the postponement of President Putin's annual conference call with the public, as well as emerging speculation about a change in the position of Prime Minister.