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Russia: harsh sentences after a show trial

Jadwiga Rogoża

On 10 February, the Volga District Military Court sentenced seven representatives of leftist-anarchist groups from Penza and St. Petersburg to long jail sentences. They had been found guilty of belonging to a terrorist organisation called Network. The court ruled that the defendants had planned to create armed groups and cause acts of terror during the presidential elections and the World Cup football tournament in 2018. The main defendant was sentenced to 18 years in a maximum-security penal colony, while the others were sentenced to between 6 and 16 years' imprisonment. Most observers and human rights activists considered the case to be fabricated: they emphasised the flimsy nature of the evidence, the numerous procedural irregularities, and particularly the fact that the confessions underlying the allegations were extracted under torture (and then withdrawn by the defendants). It was pointed out that most of those sentenced did not know each other at all before the trial, and the charges brought against them during the investigation were changed dramatically (at first they were accused of belonging to an extremist right-wing group, then to being members of a left-wing terrorist group). Likewise, there was no official reaction to reports that the defendants had been tortured, although doctors and human rights defenders had reported this, and the Presidential Human Rights Council had publicly drawn Vladimir Putin's attention to the matter.

Commentary

- The investigation into the Network group, including the interrogation of the suspects, was carried out by the Federal Security Service. It is significant that the sentences handed down by the court coincided exactly with the prosecution's demands. The Network trial resembles another well-publicised case from recent years: that of the *Novoye Vielichie* movement, a group of young people who were accused of being involved in an extremist organisation which sought to overthrow the government. In the opinion of many experts, the matter bore the hallmarks of a provocation by the FSB (one of whose officers started the group on the internet, incited young people to make subversive statements, and then handed them over to investigators); the Memorial Association recognised the accused as political prisoners. Many opposition activists have been harassed by the security agencies; they have been attacked by pro-Kremlin militias, and reports of torture during the investigations have made their way into the public space. The increase in repression against opponents of the regime results from the atmosphere (created by the Kremlin) of consent to the power structures' practices and guaranteeing their effective impunity. Many of the activities carried out by the *siloviki* and the judiciary recall Soviet-era

traditions of repression.

- The sentences handed down in the Network case, although they are harsh, fit within the logic of the Russian regime, which treats repression as one of the basic instruments for managing its citizens. Such punishments serve as warnings to the Kremlin's opponents meant to discourage them from undertaking more active forms of protest. The authorities are seeking to instil terror in society, especially among the young who have become involved in protests. It is also a response to the generational change within the ranks of the opposition and the political mobilisation of the younger generation of Russians, who are less burdened by a fear of the government than their parents or grandparents. At the same time, this escalation in repression proves that anxiety is growing within the ruling camp, especially in the face of the Kremlin's falling popularity numbers, and the signs that the public – while for the most part remaining passive – is becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the situation in the country. We may expect the echoes provoked within Russia by the trial of the Network group to activate some part of the hitherto passive public; this could include boosting the numbers of those expected to attend the Nemtsov March which the opposition plans to hold in Moscow on 29 March.