

Alexei Navalny sentenced to prison

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On 2 February, the Moscow city court granted the request from the Federal Prison Service to convert Alexei Navalny's suspended sentence from the so-called Yves Rocher case of 2014 to a prison term of three and a half years; this was in response to Navalny's alleged repeated violations of the conditions of his probation period (which expired on 30 December 2020). The opposition leader will be sent to a penal colony for 2 years and 8 months, as the court took the period of his previous house arrest into account. Navalny will remain in custody until a higher court considers an appeal against the sentence, which his defence team are expected to file soon. They are also expected to submit a complaint to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

On the day of the court session, the court's premises, surrounding streets, nearby metro stations and public transport stops were occupied by police and Rosgvardia forces, with several of the surrounding streets being closed to traffic. Throughout the day, police forces detained people who were gathering in front of the court in solidarity with the opposition leader, and they also checked and frisked most young men coming out of the metro. In the afternoon, in response to appeals by Navalny's team to gather in his support, large numbers of uniformed forces were deployed to the centres of Moscow and St Petersburg, as well as several other large towns and cities, and some squares and streets were closed. People were violently detained, at times with the use of tasers, and in several cases, journalists covering the events were apprehended. The monitoring organisation OVD-Info reports that more than 1400 people were detained in both cities. The scale of the evening demonstrations was estimated at several thousand people in Moscow and several hundred in St Petersburg, although estimates were made difficult as the protesters were dispersed by the law enforcement bodies.

Commentary

- This verdict is the logical consequence of the authorities' earlier actions against Navalny. The court carried out a political order from the Kremlin aimed at removing Navalny from public life for the next few years. The government hopes that it will be thus possible to avert the most serious political crisis during Vladimir Putin's presidency, marked inter alia by the mass protests the activist has inspired over recent weeks. The repression against him represents a demonstration of power, as does the wave of harassment against peaceful demonstrators.
- The Kremlin is likely to keep Navalny in prison until the presidential election scheduled for March 2024, so the authorities may target further repression against him. In the near

future, he faces another sentence for allegedly embezzling funds raised for his Anti-Corruption Foundation (up to 10 years' imprisonment; the case was initiated in late December 2020). Pressure from the West is unlikely to lead to Navalny's release from prison, but along with the wide media coverage of his case, it may contribute to ensuring his personal safety while in custody.

- Navalny's imprisonment, and the government's determination to escalate violence and harassment against its opponents, may further fuel the discontent expressed by the majority of Russian society and the belief that the state is becoming increasingly repressive and alienated from its citizens. However, these sentiments may be combined with fear, which in the short term may discourage mass participation in protests. Another challenge for the opposition may be the difficulty in mobilising dissatisfied citizens effectively without the personal involvement of the charismatic Navalny. Nevertheless, the growing disillusionment of the Russian public, caused by the corruption and lawlessness of the authorities, is likely to gather steam due to the deteriorating social and economic situation. It is therefore highly likely that the potential for protests will peak in different situations and on different scales, such as the elections to the State Duma scheduled for September this year.