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Profile: Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny



Alexei Navalny went on long train journeys to the court in Kirov

Russian anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny, 37, was sentenced to five years in prison for embezzlement on 18 July 2013, after a highly controversial trial.

After hearing the sentence he sought to keep up his supporters' morale, with the tweet: "Fine. Don't miss me too much, you guys. And most importantly, don't sit around doing nothing. The toad won't get off the oil pipe by itself." The "toad" was what he called the Russian government in a post on his LiveJournal blog.

That reaction and his use of Twitter to deliver it symbolise his political style - reaching out to predominantly young followers on social media in sharp, punchy language, mocking the establishment loyal to President Vladimir Putin.

He has become a threat to that establishment, says the BBC's Moscow correspondent Daniel Sandford. The Moscow lawyer has hit them where it hurts, by exposing the extraordinary levels of corruption in their ranks. He has written about it with savage ferocity laced with poisonous sarcasm, our correspondent says.

Ignored by the state-owned mass media, he mobilised activists on social media, through his blog and Twitter.

Mr Navalny says the Kremlin and its allies used trumped-up charges against him.

'Sucking Russia's blood'

A court in Kirov, 900km (560 miles) north-east of Moscow, found him guilty of conspiring to steal timber worth 16m roubles (£300,000; \$500,000) from a state-owned firm, Kirovles, in 2009. At the time he was working as an adviser to Kirov's governor.

Alexei Navalny basics

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He denied wrongdoing and told the judge that he would fight on with his colleagues "to destroy the feudal state that's being built in Russia, destroy the system of government where 83% of national wealth is owned by a half per cent of the population".

President Putin's system was "sucking the blood out of Russia", he said.

The case has not stopped him running as a candidate for the post of Moscow mayor, though the incumbent, Sergei Sobyenin, is expected to win the 8 September election easily.

Mr Navalny is assisted by a small team of lawyers and activists.

Freed on bail pending an appeal a day after his conviction, he said he would continue campaigning for the election.

He is no stranger to police custody for his role in demonstrations against ballot-rigging.

His imprisonment will be a major blow to an opposition which for years suffered the lack of a central figure or platform. But Mr Navalny has some critics in the anti-Putin camp, not least for what some see as his flirtation with Russian nationalism.

Taxpayers' champion

Disgusted with parliamentary and presidential elections they saw as rigged, [the opposition elected their own leaders in October 2012](#).

Mr Navalny won the most votes in the three-day ballot, which was conducted online and open to the public.

The turnout was small: just 81,801 people voted, fewer than had attended the mass anti-Putin rallies in Moscow that Mr Navalny had inspired the previous winter.

But he secured a clear lead over other candidates such as veteran Putin critic and former chess champion Garry Kasparov.

His rise as a force in Russian politics began in 2008 when he started blogging about allegations of malpractice and corruption at some of Russia's big state-controlled corporations.

One of his tactics was to become a minority shareholder in major oil companies, banks and ministries, and to ask awkward questions about holes in state finances.

Speaking to BBC News, he suggested the best thing Western states could do for justice in Russia was to crack down on "dirty money".

"I want people involved in corruption and persecution of activists to be barred from entering these countries, to be denied visas," he said.

'Crooks and thieves'

- Born 4 June 1976 at Butyn, in the Moscow region
- Graduated in law at Moscow's Friendship of the Peoples University in 1998
- Became a Yale World Fellow in 2010
- Lives in Moscow with his wife and two children



Mr Navalny is shown here being marched off by a policeman in Moscow in March 2012

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The campaign against corruption took Mr Navalny from criticism of corporations directly to opposition of the ruling party, United Russia.

Ahead of the 2011 parliamentary election, which he did not fight as a candidate, he urged his blog readers to vote for any party except United Russia, which he memorably dubbed the "party of crooks and thieves".

United Russia won the election, but with a much reduced majority, and its victory was tarnished by widespread allegations of vote-rigging that prompted mass protests in Moscow and some other major cities.

Mr Navalny was **arrested and imprisoned for 15 days** following the first protest on 5 December, but emerged to speak at **the biggest of the post-election rallies** in Moscow on 24 December, attended by as many as 120,000 people.

"I see enough people here to take the Kremlin and [Government House] right now but we are peaceful people and won't do that just yet," the fiery rhetorician told the crowd.

However, Mr Putin later won re-election as president easily and, as he settled back in at the Kremlin, Russia's powerful Investigative Committee launched criminal investigations into Mr Navalny's past activities, even **questioning his credentials as a lawyer**.

Besides the case in Kirov, two other fraud cases have been opened against him, which he says are also fabricated:

- he is **accused of defrauding a now-defunct liberal political party** of 100m roubles (£2m; 2.4m euros; \$3.2m) six years ago
- he is **accused of embezzling 55m roubles in 2008-11** while working in a postal business with his brother

Mr Navalny is understood to harbour presidential ambitions. A guilty verdict could keep him in jail until after the next presidential vote in 2018.

The fact he is **a Yale World Fellow**, following a semester he spent there in 2010, has been regarded with suspicion by Russian nationalists, wary of US influence.

At the same time, **his readiness to speak at ultra-nationalist events** and his hard-hitting anti-corruption campaigns such as "Stop Feeding the Caucasus" have caused concern among liberals.

The blogger's appeal to the broader Russian population, outside Moscow and the big urban centres, remains a matter of conjecture.

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