

What Now for Navalny's Groups After Russia's 'Extremist' Ban?

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Navalny's hundreds of thousands of supporters face consequences ranging from real prison time to being banned from seeking office. **Kirill Kukhmar / TASS**

A Moscow court has [outlawed](#) the political and activist networks of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny as “extremist” in a closed-door hearing Wednesday.

Here's what it means for Russia's most potent opposition force moving forward:

Why did the court declare Navalny's groups “extremist”?

The Moscow Prosecutor's Office, the plaintiff, had argued that Navalny's organizations “aim to create conditions for changing the foundations of the constitutional order, including through ‘color revolutions’.”

It also claimed that the groups “created conditions for destabilizing the social and sociopolitical situation” in the country “under the guise of liberal slogans.”

The hearing took place behind closed doors because the authorities said case materials contained classified information. The court struck down all of the defense's motions to declassify some of the evidence.

Are Navalny's groups on the same list as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda?

No. Russia's "terrorist" and "extremist" directories are two separate lists with different procedures and punishments, human rights lawyer Pavel Chikov tells *The Moscow Times*.

Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are on Russia's list of banned "terrorist" organizations. Navalny's groups are on the list of banned "extremist" groups alongside the Jehovah's Witnesses religious organization.

Why are they being labeled "extremist" now?

Navalny's political and activist network has been blacklisted three months ahead of key parliamentary elections where the pro-Putin ruling party will battle historically low approval ratings amid stagnating real incomes to maintain its supermajority.

"This case has been linked to the law that bans all those who are connected with [Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation] FBK from getting elected," defense lawyer Yevgeny Smirnov said during the hearing, according to a [translation](#) by the U.S.-funded news website RFE/RL.

The retroactive law, which President Vladimir Putin signed on Navalny's 45th birthday last week, bans leaders, rank-and-file members and even financial donors of "extremist" groups from seeking office for periods of 3-5 years.

What's the punishment for supporting Navalny?

Under existing [criminal laws](#), Navalny supporters found guilty of "organizing actions aimed at continuing or renewing the illegal activities of a banned organization" face a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.

Accusations of recruitment, as well as more rarely used accusations of financing extremist activities, carry maximum sentences of 8 years in prison.

Those found guilty of participating in extremist activity face up to 6 years in prison.

The jail terms are often accompanied by compulsory labor and fines of up to 1 million rubles (\$14,000).

Simply displaying symbols associated with the groups is punishable by fines up to 2,000 rubles (\$27) or up to 15 days in jail.

When do the jail terms and fines go into force?

One month after the Moscow City Court ruling, unless Navalny's defense is handed an unlikely win of its appeal in higher courts.

How did Navalny react to the ruling from jail?

Navalny — who was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in February on old fraud charges he calls politically motivated after surviving a nerve agent poisoning he blames on the Kremlin — has slammed the court decision to bar him from participating in the hearing and expressed defiance in the face of the “extremist” designation.

“We’re not a name, not a piece of paper, not an office. We’re a group of people who unite and organize those Russian citizens who are against corruption, in favor of fair courts and equality of all before the law,” he said.

“There are millions of them. You are them. As long as you are there, we’re not going anywhere,” Navalny wrote on Instagram, urging supporters to vote against pro-Kremlin candidates in the legislative elections this September.

How has the rest of the world reacted?

The U.S. State Department [compared](#) the ruling to Russia’s “extremist” designation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2017, which has led to the imprisonment, harassment and discrimination of hundreds of worshippers.

“While the scale of today’s action is particularly disturbing, it is indicative of the Russian government’s widening crackdown on political opposition, civil society, and independent media,” it said.

British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab [condemned](#) the court decision as “perverse.”

“It is another Kafka-esque attack on those standing up against corruption and for open societies,” he said, accusing the Kremlin of effectively outlawing “genuine political opposition in Russia.”

The European Union also denounced the ruling, calling it “unfounded,” and reiterated its calls for Navalny's release.

“Yesterday's ruling ... marks the most serious effort to date by the Russian Government to suppress the independent political opposition and anti-corruption investigations,” EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a statement on behalf of the 27 member states.

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