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Azerbaijan Sentences Russian-Israeli Travel Blogger to 3 Years Behind Bars

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Alexander Lapshin **Alexander Lapshin / Facebook**

In a setback for freedom of speech and human rights in Azerbaijan, a Baku court has sentenced popular Israeli-Russian travel blogger Alexander Lapshin to three years in prison, Azerbaijan's Vesti.Az news reported on Thursday.

Prosecutors asked the court to sentence Lapshin to six and a half years for illegally entering Azerbaijan and "propagandizing the separatist regime" in Nagorno-Karabakh. Lapshin denies the charges.

"I'm guilty before the Azeri people only in moral terms, but by no means in a political aspect," Vesti.Az cited Lapshin as saying in his final plea on Wednesday.

Lapshin, who holds Russian, Ukrainian and Israeli citizenship, was detained by police in Belarus in December and extradited to Azerbaijan two months later.

Azerbaijan targeted the blogger over visits to the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh,

which is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan but controlled by an Armenian-majority government.

Lapshin's offending blog post criticized comments made by Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev who said Karabakh would be returned by force. The blogger said Aliyev's rhetoric, "reminds me of the rhetoric of Arab states in relation to Israel: too much pathos and zero results," the Kommersant newspaper reported.

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In December, the head of the Azerbaijan Human Rights Center, Eldar Zeynalov, said "nothing like this has happened before," in reference to Baku's arrest of a foreign citizen for writing on Nagorno-Karabakh, Kommersant reported.

"Those who visited or supported Nagorno-Karabakh were often placed on a blacklist and not allowed to enter the country; but never did they demand another country to extradite a foreigner on this matter; only citizens of Azerbaijan were threatened with this," Zeynalov added.

On Thursday, the Kremlin said it would not intervene.

"This is not a topic for the Kremlin," state-run TASS news agency cited Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying.

Russian human rights ombudsperson Tatyana Moskalkova, however, said that according to international convention, the Russian Foreign Ministry has the right to demand Lapshin be allowed to return to Russia in order to stand trial, Interfax news agency reported.

"Negotiations are underway," the agency cited Moskalkova as saying to reporters.

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