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Berlin Expels 2 Russian Diplomats Over 'State-Ordered Killing'

By Femke Colborne for AFP and Michelle Fitzpatrick for AFP

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Forensics officers secure traces in a folding pavilion at a crime scene in Berlin's Kleiner Tiergarten Park.
Paul Zinken / dpa / TASS

Germany expelled two Russian diplomats on Wednesday after a Berlin court jailed a man for killing a former Chechen commander on German soil in 2019 on orders from Moscow, escalating a growing diplomatic rift.

Judges in Berlin sentenced Russian Vadim Krasikov, alias Vadim Sokolov, to life in jail after finding him guilty of gunning down Georgian national Tornike Kavtarashvili, 40, in a Berlin park in broad daylight on Aug. 23, 2019.

"Russian state authorities ordered the accused to liquidate the victim," presiding judge Olaf Arnoldi said, agreeing with prosecutors that the murder had been carefully planned.

Related article: Russian Hitman Gets Life Sentence for Georgian's Killing in Berlin

The murder was meant "as retaliation" for being a Kremlin opponent, the judge added.

Moscow immediately slammed what it called a "political" ruling against a backdrop of "general anti-Russian sentiment."

"We consider this verdict to be a biased, politically-motivated decision that seriously aggravates already difficult Russian-German relations," Russia's ambassador to Germany, Sergei Nechayev, said in a statement.

The ruling is the first major stress test for Germany's new government, which has vowed a tougher stance towards Russia, and comes amid growing alarm in the West about Russian troop movements on the border with Ukraine.

New Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said she had summoned Moscow's ambassador to inform him that Germany was expelling two Russian diplomats in response to the court's ruling.

"This murder by order of the state as determined by the court today constitutes a serious violation of German law and sovereignty," Baerbock told reporters.

Tit-for-tat

Shortly after the murder in Berlin's Kleiner Tiergarten Park, Germany under then-chancellor Angela Merkel expelled two Russian diplomats in protest at Moscow's perceived lack of cooperation with the investigation.

Russia, denying any connection to the killing, responded with a tit-for-tat move.

According to German prosecutors, the suspect shot Kavtarashvili from behind on a bicycle, firing two shots from a Glock 26 pistol equipped with a silencer.

After the victim fell to the ground, Krasikov is accused of then shooting him in the head, killing him on the spot, before getting back on his bicycle and fleeing.

Police divers later recovered the handgun, a wig and a bicycle from the nearby Spree river.

Calling for Krasikov to be jailed for life as they summed up their case last week, prosecutors said they had identified him as a "commander of a special unit of Russian secret services FSB."

"He liquidated a political opponent," prosecutor Lars Malkies told the court.

But in an earlier hearing, the defendant had told the court through his lawyer Robert Unger that he should be identified only as Vadim Sokolov, who is "Russian, single and a construction engineer."

He denied being known as Krasikov, saying "I know of no one by this name."

Prosecutors say the defendant traveled as a tourist in the days before the murder, arriving on Aug. 17 in Paris where he visited sights before traveling to Warsaw.

Photos of his tourist cover were found on a mobile phone in the Polish hotel where he stayed before heading to Berlin on Aug. 22.

Ukraine tensions

The trial has spanned a period of particularly rocky ties between Berlin and Moscow over a series of espionage cases, as well as the poisoning and jailing of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

Russia denies all allegations.

The verdict also comes as Russia stands accused by the West of planning an invasion of Ukraine and massing tens of thousands of troops near its neighbor's border.

Germany's new government has taken a sharp tone with Moscow, warning that it will not approve the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia in the event of any new "escalation" in Ukraine.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz issued a fresh warning on Wednesday, saying Russia would pay "a high price" if it invaded its neighbor.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has described the Tiergarten victim as a "fighter, very cruel and bloody" who had joined separatists against Russian forces in the Caucasus and also been involved in bombing attacks on the Moscow metro.

Moscow also said it had been seeking his extradition.

According to German media, the victim survived two assassination attempts in Georgia before seeking asylum in Germany, where he had been living for several years.

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