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Russian Journalist Denounces Treason Trial as 'Travesty'

By AFP

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Ivan Safronov's lawyers have said that his arrest was the first time in nearly two decades that a journalist was arrested and jailed on treason charges. **Eugene Razumny / Vedomosti / TASS**

A prominent Russian journalist, who went on trial for treason on Monday, insisted he was innocent and denounced the case that could see him jailed for up to 20 years.

Ivan Safronov, who stands accused of "state treason in the form of espionage," worked for years for business newspapers Kommersant and Vedomosti and was one of Russia's most respected journalists covering defense.

Sitting in a glass enclosure in the Moscow city court, Safronov, 31, looked pale but still managed to smile, an AFP correspondent said.

Journalists were allowed into the court for only the opening of the trial, which is being held behind closed doors.

Russian media have been under increasing pressure in recent years and independent outlets have shut down since the beginning of Russia's military action in Ukraine.

Safronov was arrested in July 2020, after leaving journalism to serve as an adviser to the head of the state space agency.

"For a year and nine months I have been forced to say that I am guilty of high treason," he said in a statement released ahead of the trial.

"But I repeat and will repeat — I am not guilty."

The FSB security service has accused Safronov of collecting confidential information about the Russian military, defense, and security and handing it over to the intelligence of a NATO member country.

Safronov said his reporting was based on analysis of open sources and conversations with officials, adding that he had not been told what constituted treason in his case.

"Just put yourself in my place — they are telling you that you have committed a crime, but they are not telling you what crime exactly," he said.

"How will you defend yourself against this absurdity?" he added.

"This is a complete travesty of justice and common sense!"

Ivan Pavlov, a lawyer who took part in defending Safronov, said he was tried behind closed doors to limit information for the public about the case.

"It is very convenient to judge an innocent person when journalists cannot attend a hearing and tell the whole of Russia that all the charges have been pulled out of thin air," he said on Facebook.

Safronov's arrest sparked an uproar among supporters, some of whom took to the streets of Moscow to protest.

Safronov's lawyers have said that his arrest was the first time in nearly two decades that a journalist was arrested and jailed on treason charges.

A growing number of Russians in other professions have in recent years been accused of high treason or disclosing state secrets.

Safronov followed in the footsteps of his journalist father, who also covered defense for broadsheet Kommersant.

Ivan Safronov senior died in 2007 after falling out of a window. At the time of his death he was working on a story about Russia sending an air defence system and planes to Iran and Syria.

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