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Kremlin Critic Navalny Loses Appeal Against 9-Year Sentence

By AFP

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Alexei Navalny. **Sergei Karpukhin / TASS**

Jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny on Tuesday lost his legal appeal against a nine-year prison sentence that he and his allies condemn as politically motivated.

His sentencing came as Moscow pushes on with its military offensive in neighboring Ukraine and Russian authorities seek to silence remaining government critics.

A Moscow court ruled to "leave the sentence without changes" and for it to enter into force immediately, meaning that the leader of Russia's embattled opposition will be transferred to a strict-regime penal colony with harsh conditions, including few family visits.

President Vladimir Putin's top foe appeared at the hearing at Moscow City Court via video-link from behind bars at his prison colony outside Moscow, wearing a black prisoner uniform and a fur-collared winter jacket.

He dismissed his trial as "meaningless," saying: "I despise your court, your system."

"It's you, your system and Putin who are traitors against the Russian people," said Navalny, 45.

"I am ready to sit in jail to prove that not everyone in Russia is like this."

Navalny used his speech to condemn the Kremlin and its military campaign in Ukraine.

"What Putin is doing is pointless," he said.

"One crazy thief has seized hold of Ukraine and no one understands what he wants to do with it".

The opposition politician appeared composed during the hearing, even joking about problems with the sound system.

"Your time will pass and you will burn in hell," he concluded his speech.

In late March, he had his jail time extended to nine years after he was found guilty of embezzling donations to his political organizations and contempt of court.

He was already serving two-and-a-half years in a prison around 100 kilometers east of Moscow for violating parole on old fraud charges.

The new sentence will replace the one he was handed in February 2021, meaning Navalny will remain behind bars for another eight years.

Sentence 'unjust'

The hearings started last week but Navalny was granted a week's postponement so he could have a family visit.

His lawyer Olga Mikhailova told the court the sentence should be annulled as it is "unjust" and "contradicts international law," while the prosecutor called it "legal and justified."

Navalny alleged his legal team "caught judge [Margarita] Kotova right in the middle of the trial calling someone from the presidential administration."

Navalny rose to prominence as an anti-corruption blogger and, before his imprisonment, mobilized anti-government protests across Russia.

In 2020, he narrowly survived a poisoning attack with Novichok, a Soviet-designed military-grade nerve agent. Despite accusations from Navalny, the Kremlin denied any involvement.

He was arrested last year on his return from treatment in Germany, sparking widespread condemnation abroad and sanctions from Western capitals.

In 2018, he campaigned as a presidential candidate but was barred from running in the election that saw Putin secure a fourth term in power.

Navalny's political organizations across the country have been declared "extremist" and shut down.

His key allies have fled Russia and several are wanted by Russian authorities on criminal charges.

Navalny's team continues publishing investigations into the wealth of Russia's elites that have garnered millions of views on YouTube.

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