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Norway Clears Ex-Putin Ally's Son of Illegal Drone-Flying Charges

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Andrei Yakunin **Elden Advokatfirma AS / Privat**

A court in Norway has acquitted the dual-national son of Russian President Vladimir Putin's former ally on charges of defying a ban on flying drones, media reported late Wednesday.

Andrei Yakunin, 47, was arrested in October on accusations of launching drones from his luxury yacht over the strategic Arctic archipelago of Svalbard last summer.

Yakunin, who was born in Russia and is a dual Russian-British citizen, is the son of former Russian Railways chief Vladimir Yakunin, who is sometimes referred to as Putin's confidant.

A district court in northern Norway's Troms og Finnmark county ruled that Yakunin did not commit a criminal act because small drones are not covered by the flight ban, according to the NRK broadcaster.

Unlike Yakunin, other Russian nationals arrested on similar drone-flying charges have been handed prison sentences of several months.

Related article: Russian Jailed in Norway for Illegal Drone Flight

“The other judgments must be quashed as they are based on an incorrect understanding of the law,” Yakunin’s attorney John Christian Elden was quoted as saying.

NRK said the prosecution, which had requested a three-month jail sentence for Yakunin, plans to appeal the ruling.

Yakunin told the court he was not aware of the drone ban and should be regarded as a citizen of Britain. Yakunin obtained British citizenship in 2014.

Yakunin’s lawyers argued he has “marginal” ties with Russia after having left St. Petersburg in 2008 and now living in Italy.

Yakunin publicly condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine earlier this year.

Like the European Union, of which it is not a member, Norway has banned Russian citizens and organizations from flying over its territory following Russia's invasion of Ukraine — a rule that also applied to the use of drones.

Norway, which has become Europe's main supplier of natural gas, is particularly concerned about protecting its strategic sites, particularly its energy installations.

Includes reporting from AFP.

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