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Who Is Opposition Activist Vladimir Kara-Murza?

By Novaya Gazeta Europe

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Russian opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza. **Anton Novoderezhkin / TASS**

A Russian court on Monday sentenced journalist, activist and Kremlin critic Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison on charges of treason. But who is Kara-Murza and for what is he famous? In this short biography, we look at his family history, his entry into politics and the two apparent attempts to poison him.

Family Origins

Vladimir Kara-Murza comes from a family of intellectuals and dissidents. His grandfather, Alexei, was a historian who survived a Soviet labor camp in the 1930s and later worked as a war correspondent covering the Battle of Stalingrad. Meanwhile, Kara-Murza's maternal great-grandfather, Voldemārs Bisenieks, a Latvian revolutionary, was executed at the height of Josef Stalin's purges. His great-great-uncle, Georg Bisenieks, a Latvian diplomat and politician, was accused of being involved in the assassination of the Soviet politician Sergey

Kirov, as well as spying for Latvia and Britain. He was also executed.

Kara-Murza's father, Vladimir Kara-Murza Sr., was a historian and renowned journalist. In the 1990s and early 2000s, he worked for the NTV news channel, which was famous for its scathing criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin. However, in 2001, state-controlled energy giant Gazprom forcibly took over NTV, leading Kara-Murza Sr. and his colleagues to resign in protest.

Kara-Murza Jr. was enrolled by his parents in a school that had an unusually liberal curriculum for Soviet times. Students were encouraged to think critically and form their own opinions. It was at this school that Kara-Murza met his future wife, Yevgenia.

After completing his studies, Kara-Murza Jr.'s parents sent him to the U.K. to study at the University of Cambridge, where he obtained a master's degree in history.

Career in Journalism

During his studies in the U.K., Kara-Murza took his first steps into the world of journalism, writing for local British newspapers and later for Russian publications like Novye Izvestia, Kommersant, and Russian Investment Review. In 2004, he was offered to head the Washington bureau of RTVI, a global Russian-language media company.

Up until his recent arrest, Kara-Murza contributed articles to The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times, World Affairs, the National Post, The New Times, Novaya Gazeta, and Ekho Moskvy.

Political Life

But Kara-Murza was also interested in politics. At just 18 years old, he joined the liberal Democratic Choice of Russia party, which eventually disbanded and reformed into the Union of Right Forces. It was within this party that Kara-Murza met politician Boris Nemtsov, who had previously served as governor of Nizhny Novgorod and in the Kremlin. This encounter would prove to be pivotal for Kara-Murza's future.

In 2003, Kara-Murza made an unsuccessful bid for public office in the Russian State Duma. His opponent, Vladimir Gruzdev of the ruling United Russia party, attempted to disqualify him during the election campaign, and on election day, voting fraud was observed in Kara-Murza's district.

The Union of Right Forces, Kara-Murza's political party, soon crumbled and merged with Right Cause, a party with backing from the Kremlin. In protest, both Nemtsov and Kara-Murza resigned. Nemtsov later founded the Solidarity movement, and Kara-Murza emerged as a leading member.

Magnitsky Act

In November 2009, the death of Russian tax lawyer Sergey Magnitsky in a Moscow prison provoked international outrage. Magnitsky had been investigating a case of corruption involving a group of interior ministry officials who fraudulently took over three companies

belonging to Hermitage Capital, an asset management firm. While most of Hermitage's employees fled Russia, Magnitsky stayed to continue the investigation. However, he was arrested and died in prison after apparently being assaulted by prison guards.

Years later, the U.S. Congress passed the Magnitsky Act, which enables the U.S. government to impose sanctions on foreign government officials linked to human rights abuses anywhere in the world. Nemtsov and Vladimir Kara-Murza were instrumental in advocating for the act's passage.

Kara-Murza was eventually fired from RTVI, a decision that many believe was connected to his work in lobbying for the Magnitsky Act. His journalist accreditation in the U.S. was canceled at the behest of Russian Ambassador to the U.S. Sergey Kislyak.

Nemtsov's Assassination, Kara-Murza's Poisoning

In 2015, Nemtsov was shot and killed near the Kremlin. To this day, the perpetrators of his murder remain unknown, despite evidence pointing to the involvement of officials with ties to Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

Just four months after Nemtsov's killing, Kara-Murza suddenly fainted while working for the Open Russia organization, which has since been deemed "undesirable" by Russian authorities. At first, doctors suspected a heart attack, but it was later discovered that he had been poisoned.

After being treated in Moscow, Kara-Murza underwent six months of rehabilitation therapy with his family in the United States. Testing of biological samples by a French laboratory revealed the presence of heavy metals in his body. However, a forensic examination in Russia did not confirm poisoning, and Russian officials refused to initiate a criminal case.

Despite the poisoning, Kara-Murza continued to travel to Russia, using a cane to walk. He chaired the Nemtsov Foundation, shot a documentary about Nemtsov, and traveled across the country for film screenings. Following a trip to Kazan in February 2017, Kara-Murza was hospitalized in critical condition with the same symptoms he had previously experienced.

Bellingcat, an investigative journalism group, later published data showing that Russian security service officers had followed the same route as Kara-Murza on both occasions when he was hospitalized with poisoning symptoms.

The group also found that these same officers had followed opposition activist Alexei Navalny on his trips around Russia before he, too, was poisoned.

On the Eve of War

Kara-Murza continued his work as a vice president of the Free Russia Foundation after recovering from his second poisoning, during which time he also shot a documentary. He continued his work of touring around Russian cities for screenings and open discussions.

This was all happening amid a highly charged political climate in Russia, with several opposition activists and organizations facing legal challenges or imprisonment. Navalny, who had survived a poisoning attempt, had returned to Russia and was serving prison time. Andrei

Pivovarov, the former director of Open Russia, was arrested after attempting to flee Russia. Meanwhile, the oldest human rights organization in the country, Memorial, which had kept alive memories of Stalin's terror, was shut down.

War and Arrest

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kara-Murza became a member of the Russian Anti-War Committee, a group of politicians, businesspeople, and academics who collected humanitarian aid for Ukraine and helped those fleeing political persecution in Russia.

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The committee also called on the international community to label Russia's political leadership as war criminals.

In March last year, during a speech at the Arizona state legislative assembly, Kara-Murza openly denounced the Kremlin and the Russian bombing of residential buildings in Ukraine. He delivered a similar speech at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in April.

Despite the dangers, Kara-Murza returned to Russia and was later detained in the courtyard of his own house in Moscow. A criminal case was then opened against him for "spreading fakes about the Russian army motivated by political hatred," and his speech in Arizona was cited as evidence. A few days later, Russia's Justice Ministry declared him a "foreign agent."

Four months later, Kara-Murza was charged with "running an undesirable organization." He was accused of using the funds of the Free Russia Foundation to host a conference in support of Russian political prisoners at Moscow's Sakharov Center in the fall of 2021.

Finally, in October, Kara-Murza was charged with treason. He was accused of providing help to organizations from NATO countries aimed against Russia's security because of his advocacy work on the Magnitsky Act.

The court hearing for Kara-Murza was held behind closed doors. During the trial, Kara-Murza's health deteriorated, and he started losing sensation in his limbs. Doctors diagnosed him with polyneuropathy, a nerve disorder that can be grounds for someone not serving a jail sentence. Despite this, the judge refused to authorize a medical examination, and doctors even refused to let Kara-Murza attend a number of his own hearings.

In early April, prosecutor Boris Loktionov demanded a 25-year sentence for Kara-Murza, describing him as an "enemy of the people." At sentencing Monday, the judge delivered exactly that sentence.

In a letter sent to Novaya Gazeta before his sentencing, Kara-Murza wrote: "I am certain that my verdict will be as bad as it can be. I realized it when I saw people in black masks running after my car in my house's courtyard on 11 April, 2022. This is a show trial. And the result should also be symbolic. But I also know that the verdict will have little to do with reality. Political prisoners do not serve their time under formal prison sentences but depending on the political situation. And in our country, it has a tendency to change and change

unexpectedly."

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