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30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kremlin Critic Kara-Murza Sentenced to 25 Years in Prison

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Russian opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza. **Dmitry Lebedev / Kommersant**

Updates with reaction to the sentencing.

A Russian court sentenced opposition politician Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison on charges of treason and "fake news" Monday, capping a high-profile trial of one of the country's most defiant anti-war voices.

Moscow City Court found Kara-Murza, 41, guilty of treason, "false information about the Russian army," and affiliation with an "undesirable organization," Interfax reported.

"Russia will be free, tell everyone," Kara-Murza said after the verdict, according to the independent news site Avtozak.info.

Russia has witnessed a widespread wartime crackdown on dissent, but the severity of Kara-Murza's sentence marks a new record as the Kremlin seeks to muzzle any criticism of its ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

The Western-educated politician was detained in April, 2022, on charges of "spreading false information about the Russian army" in an address to U.S. state legislators a month earlier.

Kara-Murza was later accused of being affiliated with an "undesirable organization" for participating in a conference in support of political prisoners. His treason charges came in October over anti-war comments made at three public events abroad.

Prosecutors had requested a prison sentence of 25 years — the maximum possible jail term — for Kara-Murza.

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"My self-esteem even went up [on the presecutors' request]. I realized I was doing everything right," Kara-Murza's lawyer Maria Eismont recounted her client as saying.

"Twenty-five years is the highest score I could get for what I did, what I believe in as a citizen, as a patriot, as a politician," Eismont quoted him as saying, adding that he greeted the verdict "with a smile."

His trial was held behind closed doors.

Monday's hearing was attended by several Kara-Murza supporters and foreign diplomats including a U.S. embassy official named David Bernstein, according to the Mediazona news site.

The Kremlin declined to comment on Kara-Murza's prison sentence, which his supporters and Western governments slammed as politically motivated.

U.S. Ambassador Lynne Tracy called Russia's criminal prosecution of Kremlin critics "a symbol of weakness, not strength," while Canadian Ambassador Alison LeClaire said Kara-Murza's sentence marked a "dark turn" in Russia's post-Soviet history.

The British Ambassador in Moscow Deborah Bronnert denounced the court ruling and called for the "immediate" release of Kara-Murza, a dual British-Russian citizen.

"The British government expresses solidarity with Vladimir Kara-Murza and his family," Bronnert told journalists from the steps of the courthouse.

A Russian citizen by birth, Kara-Murza received British citizenship after moving to the United Kingdom with his mother when he was 15.

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Russia's Ambassador in London Andrei Kelin was summoned by the U.K. Foreign Office, which condemned Kara-Murza's sentence as a violation of his right to a fair trial under international law.

The European Union denounced Kara-Murza's sentence as "outrageously harsh" and called on Russia to provide access to health care for the ailing Kremlin critic.

The opposition activist suffers from a nerve condition called polyneuropathy which his lawyers say was due to poisoning attempts in 2015 and 2017.

The condition has worsened in prison, and he was too unwell to attend some of his hearings, his lawyers said.

Kara-Murza says he was poisoned twice because of his political activities, but he continued to spend long periods of time in Russia.

Kara-Murza has said he stands by all of his political statements, including those opposing the Ukraine offensive.

"I subscribe to every word that I have said, that I am incriminated for today," Kara-Murza said in his final address to court last week, highlighting his fight against the Ukraine offensive and President Vladimir Putin.

"Not only do I not repent for any of it — I am proud of it," he said.

Germany condemned the "shocking level repression" in Russia on Monday, and Latvia announced it had banned 10 Russian nationals from traveling to the Baltic country in retaliation to the court ruling.

AFP contributed reporting.

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