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‘I Had Just Weeks or Even Days’: Lawyer of Jailed Kremlin Critic Kara-Murza Flees Russia

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Lawyer Vadim Prokhorov. **Sergei Bobylev / TASS**

The lawyer who defended Kremlin critic Vladimir Kara-Murza at his trial that ended in a 25-year prison sentence this week, told The Moscow Times he fled Russia after receiving warnings that he, too, could be jailed.

Vadim Prokhorov has defended a string of prominent Kremlin critics in court over the years, including Kara-Murza, Ilya Yashin and Boris Nemtsov, who was assassinated in 2015.

“It was always clear that the Russian authorities were not pleased with me,” Prokhorov said in a phone interview from Washington.

“But everything escalated with the Vladimir [Kara-Murza] case.”

While Russia’s wartime crackdown on dissent has largely targeted opposition activists and independent journalists, it has also sent a chill through Russia’s legal community with some

prominent lawyers fleeing abroad, giving up their practices — or even being jailed.

Prokhorov left Russia before the anti-war Kara-Murza was found guilty and was not in court to see his client handed a 25-year sentence on charges of treason and spreading "fakes" about the Russian army.

The trial was widely condemned by the international community, with the U.K. announcing Friday it was sanctioning five Russians linked to Kara-Murza's arrest and alleged poisoning.

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"I knew I had just weeks or even days left [to get out of the country]," said Prokhorov, after he was warned by the judge in Kara-Murza's trial, prosecutors and a Russian politician that he could find himself the target of a criminal probe.

Prokhorov told The Moscow Times on Thursday that he had been under increased surveillance during Kara-Murza's trial, which was held behind closed doors.

In particular, he said he was warned about disclosing state secrets during media interviews about the course of the legal proceedings.

"For an imprisoned political leader, it is very important to be heard by people, society, and colleagues," Prokhorov said.

"I had no intention of shutting my mouth."

While one of the most high-profile lawyers to flee abroad, Prokhorov is far from the first to fall foul of the widening crackdown on what the Kremlin sees as dissent.

Lawyer Ivan Pavlov, who defended jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's foundation and journalist Ivan Safronov, who was convicted on treason charges, left Russia in 2021 after the authorities opened a criminal case against him.

A year later Pavlov was deprived of his lawyer status, which means he can no longer officially represent clients in Russian courts.

Another lawyer who defended jailed Safronov, Yevgeny Smirnov, was also forced to leave Russia in 2021 following an investigation initiated by the Federal Security Service (FSB).

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Human rights lawyer Dmitry Talantov, who also worked on the Safronov case, was arrested last year and accused of spreading false information about the Russian Armed Forces.

His supporters believe the arrest was revenge for his work as Safronov's lawyer. If convicted, Talantov faces up to 10 years in prison.

In total, at least eight lawyers who have defended Russian journalists and opposition activists have been designated “foreign agents” by the Russian authorities.

And last year, a number of Russian lawyers, including prominent lawyer Henry Reznik, left the Russian Federal Bar Association. While Reznik didn’t comment on the reasons for his exit, two other lawyers Vadim Klyuvgant and Konstantin Dobrynin cited “recent decisions of the Russian authorities" as behind their decision to quit.

Russian lawyer Mikhail Benyash was deprived of his lawyer status in February for an alleged violation of professional ethics linked to his criticism of the government.

While Prokhorov hasn’t been deprived of his lawyer status, he said he believes that it’s “just a matter of time” before it happens.

After announcing publicly Tuesday that he had fled Russia, Prokhorov told The Moscow Times that he has no concrete plans for the future.

But he said he will continue to work on human rights issues, aiding Russian activists and opposition figures.

“I'll do my best to be of help,” he said.

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