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Russia Jails Ex-Teacher 5.5 Years for Calling Crimean Bridge Blast 'Putin's Birthday Gift'

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History Teacher Nikita Tushkanov. **Photo from personal archive**

A Russian court has sentenced a former teacher to five and a half years in prison for referring to last fall's Crimean Bridge explosion as President Vladimir Putin's "birthday gift" online, independent media reported Thursday.

Nikita Tushkanov, 28, was accused of "approving of" the blasts, which badly damaged the bridge linking mainland Russia to annexed Crimea, on the popular social network VKontakte.

"A birthday gift for Putler," Tushkanov wrote in an Oct. 8, 2022, VKontakte post, using a derogatory portmanteau combining Putin's and Hitler's names.

Russia's Second Western Military Garrison Court found him guilty of justifying terrorism and discrediting the Russian military, according to the Mediazona news website.

It handed Tushkanov a 5.5-year sentence in a penal colony.

Prosecutors had requested a six-year prison sentence for Tushkanov.

Tushkanov remained defiant in his opposition to the war while giving his final court statement transcribed by Mediazona.

“I condemn war and think it’s criminal, as is any aggression,” he said.

Addressing the judge, the ex-teacher said: “I don’t want to ask you for justice and can’t ask you for charity.”

Tushkanov was held in pre-trial detention since late 2022 and added to Russia’s database of extremists and terrorists in December.

He was fired from his job as a public school history teacher in Russia’s republic of Komi for picketing in support of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny in early 2021.

Russia effectively outlawed most forms of dissent under draconian wartime censorship laws passed after Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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