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Russian Judge Orders to Hold Navalny 'Extremist' Trial Behind Closed Doors

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Team Navalny

Jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's trial on a new string of "extremism" charges was abruptly ordered to be held behind closed doors at its first hearing, the independent Mediazona news website reported.

Navalny, 47, faces up to 30 more years on the latest charges, which he and his allies have slammed as a politically motivated effort to lock up President Vladimir Putin's loudest domestic critic for life.

"The court has decided to make the Navalny trial closed," Moscow City Court spokesman Vadim Polezhayev told reporters at Navalny's penal colony in the Vladimir region where the trial is taking place. "The press is asked to leave the room."

Polezhayev said that Judge Andrei Suvorov had made the final decision to hold the trial behind closed doors, Mediazona reported.

Journalists had been barred from attending the court session in person and were watching the hearing in a separate room via a video feed.

Court officials did not explain why it decided to hold the trial behind closed doors.

Navalny's father, who had traveled to the penal colony to attend the hearing in person, slammed the court's decision.

"Shameless — no conscience, or honor," Anatoly Navalny told AFP journalists at the maximum security IK-6 penal colony in Melekhovo, 250 kilometers east of Moscow.

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Navalny faces multiple new criminal charges, including calling for "extremism," creating an "extremist community," and rehabilitating Nazism.

He faces a maximum of 30 more years in prison in addition to the nine-year sentence he is currently serving.

At Monday's hearing, Navalny demanded that his trial take place in a regular courtroom setting open to the public.

"There hasn't been a day when I haven't been reminded that I am just as condemned as everyone else. If I'm just like everyone else, judge me like everyone else," Navalny said.

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Prosecutor Nadezhda Tikhonova said access to the courtroom had been restricted out of safety concerns.

Navalny's allies argue that Russian authorities are attempting to conceal the trial due to a lack of evidence against him.

"The only way for them not to embarrass themselves (as they think) is to close it completely," his spokesperson Kira Yarmysh wrote on Twitter.

Navalny, who has complained of health problems since being jailed and experienced major weight loss, said that prosecutors had provided him with 3,828 pages describing all the crimes he is alleged to have committed while in prison.

"Although it's clear from the size of the tomes that I am a sophisticated and persistent criminal, it's impossible to find out what exactly I am accused of," Navalny quipped.

Navalny was imprisoned upon his January 2021 return to Russia after recovering from a near-fatal poisoning with what Western scientists determined was the banned military-grade nerve agent Novichok.

Russian officials outlawed Navalny's political and activist groups as "extremist" organizations later that year, prompting nearly all of his close aides to leave the country.

AFP contributed reporting.

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