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Russia Jails Prominent Bashkir Activist 4 Years

By Leyla Latypova

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Fayil Alsynov. **t.me/prufy_top**

A court in Russia's republic of Bashkortostan sentenced prominent local activist Fayil Alsynov to four years in a penal colony on charges of "inciting interethnic hatred," the regional news outlet Idel.Realii reported Wednesday.

The case against the activist has mobilized many in the Ural Mountains republic who say that Alsynov is being unfairly targeted over his popularity and achievements defending the rights of Bashkortostan's indigenous Bashkir peoples, their land rights, sacred sites and culture.

As the verdict was handed down, thousands gathered outside the Baymaksky District Court in support of Alsynov, the Govorit NeMoskva news outlet reported, defying an official warning from regional police and temperatures of minus 21 degrees Celsius.

Riot police allegedly used smoke grenades, tear gas and batons to disperse the crowd, injuring

at least 22 people, according to Idel.Realii.

Multiple Telegram channels covering Alsynov's case and the events in Baymak appeared to have been blocked in the wake of Wednesday's protests, including independent news outlet RusNews and the Bashkir activists' channel Kushtau Online.

And multiple local news outlets reported that authorities cut access to mobile data in the vicinity of the court.

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> Видео с разгоном ОМОН протестующих в Башкортостане
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> Связь блокируется, пишет «Говорит НеМосква», видео из региона приходят с задержкой.
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> Источник: «Однажды в Башкирии» pic.twitter.com/oo4eCdaoOL
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> — Дождь (@tvrain) January 17, 2024

Authorities claim that Alsynov "negatively assessed" migrant workers from the Caucasus and Central Asia and "violated" their "human dignity" by referring to them as "black people" in a speech made at an April 2023 rally against illegal gold-mining works in the region.

Alsynov denies the accusations, saying his speech was "gravely mistranslated" from his native Bashkir language by a government-affiliated linguistic expert.

Related article: Protesters Clash With Police as Russian Court Jails Bashkir Activist

An anonymous independent linguistic assessment published by his supporters confirmed that the idiom "kara halyk" used by Alsynov is used in Bashkir and other Turkic languages to refer to "groups of people engaged in unskilled, hard labor."

"Thank you to all who came here to support me. I will never forget this," Alsynov, who was added to the Russian government's list of "extremists and terrorists" on Tuesday, told his supporters following the verdict.

"I don't admit my guilt. I always fought for justice, for my people, for my republic, so I'll see you again," he added.

Alsynov, 37, has been engaged in regional-level activist work in Bashkortostan for over 15 years, speaking up in defense of the region's sovereignty and the political and linguistic rights of its indigenous Bashkir peoples.

During his activist career, Alsynov served as a member of the World Qoroltai (Congress) of the

Bashkirs and later as a chairman of the Bashkir national organization Bashqort, which was outlawed by the Russian government in May 2020.

Outside of ethnic Bashkir circles, Alsynov's name became well known due to his active role in 2020 protests against limestone mining on Kushtau mountain in Bashkortostan's Ishimbaysky district, which saw protesters successfully defend the site deemed sacred by ethnic Bashkirs.

"Fayil Alsynov is very famous...He has been earning money through honest, hard work his entire life, spoke out about the problems of Bashkir peoples and faced repercussions for it many times," exiled Bashkir opposition activist Ruslan Gabbasov told The Moscow Times. "The trail of good deeds follows him."

Alsynov was forced to scale back his activist work as the authorities launched a sweeping crackdown on dissent in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

But in December 2022, Alsynov spoke out against the war and dubbed the Kremlin's "partial" military mobilization a "genocide of the Bashkir peoples" in a VKontakte post that landed him a 10,000-ruble ($113) fine for violating wartime censorship laws.

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And in April 2023, Alsynov joined large protests against illegal mining works in southeastern Bashkortostan's Baymak district. It was there he made the speech that would become the basis of the criminal case against him.

Many in Bashkortostan consider the case against Alsynov to be nothing short of a government-sanctioned vendetta for the success of protests at Kushtau mountain and the activist's enduring popularity.

"He was the only remaining free leader of the Bashkir national movement who threatened [the region's head Radiy] Khabirov with his ability to influence Bashkirs...This [case] was bound to happen sooner or later," said Gabbasov.

The case, opened based on a denunciation authored personally by Khabirov, sparked widespread public outrage in Alsynov's native Bashkortostan, prompting many prominent public figures, bloggers, government officials and even soldiers mobilized to fight in Ukraine to speak out in his defense.

"Despite the fact that Fayil...was added to the list of 'extremists,' the people know that he is not like that, that he always acts with best intentions in mind. I also couldn't just stand by [and watch] because he is my ally, my compatriot," said Tagir Vakhitov, an ex-anchor at Bashkortostan's flagship government-affiliated news channel who resigned from his post in a show of solidarity with the Kushtau protesters in 2020.

"The experience of the Kushtau [protests] has shown us that unity and mutual support is greatly beneficial in situations like this...And on this difficult day all of the people [in the republic] united again," Vakhitov told The Moscow Times.

Embed:

> «Мало того, что избивают дубинками, людей травят слезоточивым газом»
>
> Количество людей на протесте в Баймаке могло достигать 10 тыс. человек
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> Видео: SOTAvision pic.twitter.com/Qxj3kqmDE4
>
> — Дождь (@tvrain) January 17, 2024

On Monday, up to 5,000 of Alsynov's supporters gathered near a courthouse in Bashkortostan's southeastern town of Baymak, demanding to clear the activist of all charges. The rally was hailed by observers as one of the largest street protests to take place in Russia since the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine nearly two years ago.

Though no arrests were reported at the Monday rally, several of Alsynov's allies were detained across Bashkortostan on Tuesday in a likely attempt to quell the campaign in his support.

The Moscow Times' sources on the ground also confirmed multiple media reports of disruptions in WhatsApp messenger app access in the republic on Tuesday.

Bashkortostan's interior ministry said Wednesday that it has opened two criminal cases over the protests in Baymak.

It warned that participants could face up to 15 years in prison under the charges of "organizing and participating in mass unrest" or up to 10 years on charges of "using violence against a government official."

Unconfirmed reports suggested that repressions against Alsynov's supporters were authorized by the Kremlin.

"Mass support [for Alsynov] has turned the tide and this republic-level case changed into a federal-level one...Of course, it is all up to Moscow," said activist Gabbasov.

Alsynov on Wednesday vowed to appeal the ruling in Bashkortostan's Supreme Court, though his supporters said it was unlikely to change anything.

"I suspect...he won't get out [of jail] until the regime falls," said Gabbasov. "They will keep furthering his sentence like they are doing with [Alexei] Navalny by finding new anonymous witnesses [and fabricating] new criminal cases."

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