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Ex-Rebel Leader Girkin Sentenced to 4 Years for Extremism After Criticizing War

By Moscow Times Reporter

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Igor Strelkov (Girkin). **Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency**

MOSCOW — A Moscow court has sentenced Igor Girkin, the former commander of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine and an ex-security officer, to four years in prison on extremism charges linked to his criticism of Russia's war strategy in Ukraine.

The criminal case against Girkin, a convicted war criminal in the West, is one of the most prominent examples of how Moscow's intolerance for criticism of its invasion has spread to even the war's most hawkish supporters.

The Moscow City Court found Girkin, 53, guilty of "public incitement of extremist activity" and sentenced him to four years in a medium-security penal colony, the state-run RIA Novosti news agency reported from the courtroom.

The charges are punishable by a maximum of five years.

Dozens of Girkin's army comrades and supporters awaited his sentencing outside the court as they were not allowed to enter the building, according to a Moscow Times reporter at the scene.

"A true Russian patriot must be here today," one of Girkin's supporters, who declined to provide his name, told The Moscow Times.

"I respect Strelkov, despite the fact that he has different views, but I respect his position and that he dedicated his entire life to Russia," said Yekaterina, a woman standing outside of the court.

Following the verdict, one of Girkin's supporters shouted "Ukraine has won!"

"We consider him a political prisoner... he's a patriot of his country," Girkin's wife Miroslava Reginskaya told reporters outside the court.

In a Telegram post, Girkin's ally and former Russian intelligence colonel Vladimir Kvachkov called the verdict "a gift" to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Ivan Otrakovsky, a former officer and head of the Army of Defenders of the Fatherland, a group of Russian nationalists and veterans, called the extremism accusations against Girkin "absolutely far-fetched."

"Igor Strelkov is a person who knows the kitchen of this war from the inside and therefore he has the right to speak out. The authorities, instead of listening to his opinion, are trying to shut his mouth as well as [trying to shut up] other social and political figures who are patriots of the country and closely monitor the progress of hostilities," Otrakovsky told The Moscow Times near the court building.

"This is not just about Strelkov, but is also a warning to other patriots who are going to continue to raise their voices in defense of the army."

Police have detained at least three supporters following the sentencing, the independent SOTA news outlet reported.

Widely known under his nom de guerre Igor Strelkov, Girkin was a key leader of pro-Russian separatist militias in the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic in 2014, admitting that he was "the one who pulled the trigger" of the conflict between separatists and Kyiv.

The hardline nationalist has voiced strong criticism of Russia's military leadership during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine as it faced repeated setbacks and strategic blunders, blasting its strategy as ineffective and "stupid."

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Girkin's arrest in July 2023 came after he made a series of social media posts bashing

President Vladimir Putin.

“The country will not survive another six years of this cowardly mediocrity in power,” Girkin wrote on his blog on the Telegram messaging app days before his arrest.

At the time of his arrest, officials told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity that the Kremlin “got f***ing annoyed” with Girkin.

The nationalist’s supporters claimed his case was politically motivated.

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Jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny has also said Girkin should be recognized as a political prisoner despite his views.

In August, while still in pre-trial detention, Girkin announced his intent to run for president in Russia's March 2024 election, though his supporters admit he has no chance of making it onto the ballot.

"I consider myself more competent in military affairs than the incumbent president and certainly more competent than the defense minister," Girkin said in a social media post announcing his presidential bid, adding that Putin “had been led by the nose" by the West.

Girkin also faces a prison term abroad.

In November 2022, a Dutch court sentenced Girkin in absentia to life in prison over the 2014 downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in eastern Ukraine, which killed all 298 people on board.

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