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Moscow Judge Sentences Veteran Activist Lev Ponomaryov to 5.5 Years in Prison in Absentia

By Mack Tubridy

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Lev Ponomaryov. **duma.gov.ru**

A Moscow judge on Thursday sentenced exiled human rights veteran Lev Ponomaryov to five and a half years in prison in absentia after finding him guilty of violating Russia's laws on "foreign agents" and "undesirable" organizations.

In 2021, Ponomaryov was the first person ever to face charges in Russia for violating the "foreign agent" law after the Justice Ministry designated him as a "foreign agent" a year earlier. He has since been repeatedly fined for failing to comply with the strict labeling requirements placed on "foreign agents."

Ponomaryov fled to France in 2022 after being detained for protesting Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since then, Russian authorities have designated two organizations he

established in exile as "undesirable."

A judge at Moscow's Khoroshevsky District Court convicted Ponomaryov of both evading his "foreign agent" obligations and participating in an "undesirable" organization.

He was ordered to serve the 5.5-year sentence at a penal colony upon extradition or reentry to Russia. He was also banned from running websites for nine years.

Prosecutors had asked for a sentence of six years and six months and a 10-year website ban for Ponomaryov, according to the exiled outlet Mediazona.

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Prosecutors reportedly accused Ponomaryov's non-profit organization, Peace. Progress. Human Rights, of distributing materials "aimed at fostering protest sentiment" and "discrediting" the Russian government, including a Change.org petition calling for the 2024 election results, in which Vladimir Putin was re-elected president, not to be recognized.

Ponomaryov's court-appointed defense attorney told the judge that he was not aware of his client's stance on the charges against him, Mediazona reported.

In comments to The Moscow Times, Ponomaryov said he believes the attorney's comment represents "a standard excuse when the defense lacks the defendant's actual position."

"The court-appointed lawyer never contacted me," he said. "As for my position on the case: today, criminal law is effectively being used to bar Russian citizens who are undesirable to the regime from entering the country."

"Through my work, I am fighting to preserve Russia, whose interests are currently being contradicted by the actions of the Russian authorities. Therefore, I do not recognize the court either," Ponomaryov added.

He said he did not expect the verdict to impact the work that he does abroad, but was aware that Russian authorities might turn to Interpol to seek his arrest.

"The people who share our goals and values aren't going anywhere," Ponomaryov told The Moscow Times.

Hundreds of cultural figures, journalists, businesspeople, as well as news outlets and organizations, have been branded "foreign agents" since Russia introduced the label in 2012.

Russia applies the designation to individuals it views as enemies of the state. Those branded as "foreign agents" are required to include a lengthy disclaimer in all of their public appearances and statements, including posts on social media.

Ponomaryov, a former member of the State Duma, has been a leading figure in Russian human rights activism since the late Soviet period. In 1988, he helped found Memorial, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning organization that was dissolved by Russian authorities just before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

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