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Russia Jails Indigenous Buryat Activist 20 Years in Absentia

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Marina Khankhalaeva. **Courtesy photo**

A military court in Russia's Zabaikalsky region sentenced Indigenous Buryat activist Marina Khankhalaeva to 20 years in prison in absentia for organizing an extremist group and participating in a terrorist organization, Buryatia's Interior Ministry announced Friday.

Khankhalaeva, 53, is a U.S.-based opera singer and the founder of Tusgaar Buryad-Mongolia, an exiled movement advocating for the Siberian republic of Buryatia's independence from Russia.

Russian authorities claimed Khankhalaeva was guilty of "engaging in active anti-state activities" aimed at Buryatia's secession, as well as inciting "social and ethnic discord."

Buryatia is a resource-rich region of around 970,000 people that shares a border of over 1,000 kilometers with Mongolia. Nearly one in three of its residents identify as Buryat, a Mongolic ethnic group indigenous to the region.

Although the Chita military court sentenced Khankhalaeva in August, the ruling had not been made public until now.

Khankhalaeva said she also found out about her sentencing from the news.

"I am on Russia's list of extremists and terrorists, so I have been trying to find out if there is a case against me, but this information seems to be classified," she told The Moscow Times.

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Khankhalaeva called the case against her "high praise" for her and her movement's work, adding that it "means that everything we are saying is the truth."

"Of course, this [sentencing] won't affect my activist work. On the contrary, to me it is proof that we are doing the right thing," said Khankhalaeva.

The activist noted that she had "expected some kind of a reaction" from Russian authorities" after the movement held its second Congress of Supporters of Buryatia's Independence in the U.S. last month.

"By the fifth year of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there are more and more supporters of the independence of Buryatia," she added.

Tusgaar Buryad-Mongolia was among the 172 ethnic, Indigenous rights and decolonial groups and media outlets designated as "terrorist" organizations by Russia in 2024.

Earlier that year, the pro-independence movement was also added to Russia's growing list of "extremist" organizations over its ties with the non-existent "Anti-Russian Separatist Movement."

Khankhalaeva has denied the accusations against her, stressing that Tusgaar Buryad-Mongolia "never called for violence" and "advocates for achieving our goals strictly with non-violent means."

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