

Russian pro-NATO oppositionist Vladimir Kara-Murza sentenced to 25 years in prison

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On Monday, a Russian court sentenced the leading pro-NATO oppositionist Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison for his public criticism of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The 41-year-old Kara-Murza has longstanding ties to the American ruling class and was a principal figure behind the campaign to impose the Magnitsky Act by the US Congress, as a result of which key figures aligned with the Putin regime were sanctioned. Since February 27, 2022, he has been a member of the “Russian Anti-war Committee.” The committee includes pro-NATO figures like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, one of the leading oligarchs of the 1990s, Garry Kasparov, a long-time leader of the pro-US opposition in Russia, as well as the businessman Boris Zimin, who has also funded the activities of the US-backed Putin critic Alexei Navalny, who has also been imprisoned.

Far from being “anti-war,” the committee speaks for a section of the Russian oligarchy and state apparatus that advocates a reorientation of Russian foreign policy toward close collaboration with NATO, and supports the US regime-change operation in Russia.

The sentencing of Kara-Murza was based on public appearances he made in the US and other countries in 2021–2022. On March 15, 2022, Kara-Murza spoke before lawmakers in Arizona, denouncing the invasion of Ukraine which, in Russia, can only be referred to as a “special military operation.” The appearance was the basis for his being charged with “public dissemination of false information about the use of the armed forces,” or the defamation of the armed forces, which carries a maximum 15-year prison sentence. He was arrested shortly thereafter. In the summer of 2022, another charge was added, based on Kara-Murza’s activities for the “Open Russia” foundation that had been founded by ex-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Then, in October, the charge of “state treason” which carries a maximum

sentence of 20 years in prison was added, based on public appearances at NATO assemblies and the US Congress.

Much of the trial proceeded behind closed doors and Kara-Murza’s lawyers repeatedly asked that the judge Sergei Podoprigrorov be replaced, since he had personally been placed on the US Magnitsky sanctions list that had been worked out with the assistance of Kara-Murza. When the sentence was announced, diplomats from 24 countries, including all NATO members states, and the US ambassador to Russia were present.

The ruling was the first time that a now extended interpretation of the charge of state treason was applied in a criminal court in Russia. Kara-Murza’s sentencing was also markedly more severe than that for any other opposition figure, including the much more prominent Alexei Navalny.

Workers must draw two conclusions from the sentencing of Kara-Murza:

First, it is an indication that, over one year into the NATO-Russia conflict in Ukraine, the infighting within the Russian oligarchy and state apparatus is becoming increasingly bitter. While Kara-Murza was less known to the public—in both Russia and the West—he is one of the best connected Russian opposition figures, both in the Russian elites and internationally. Kara-Murza comes from a well-known family of political journalists. His father, Vladimir Kara-Murza Sr., was a prominent backer of the “shock therapy” under Boris Yeltsin with which the restoration of capitalism was completed in Russia after the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991, and later also became a member of the pro-US “liberal” opposition to the Putin regime.

Kara-Murza Jr. himself was good friends with the late Republican senator and war hawk John McCain, and was also an invited columnist for the *Washington Post*, an outlet owned by Amazon’s Jeff Bezos and closely aligned with the US secret services and state apparatus. By so

publicly and severely going after Kara-Murza, the Kremlin no doubt seeks to send a “warning message” to other dissenting oligarchs and current or former state officials who either openly advocate or cautiously eye the replacement of Putin to establish a regime that is directly aligned with the imperialist powers.

While Putin is the dominant figure in the Kremlin regime, the regime itself is far from homogenous and stable. For the past year, even while finding itself in a war with NATO in Ukraine, the Kremlin has constantly vacillated between threats of escalation, including the deployment of nuclear weapons, and appeals to the imperialist powers to find a compromise. The invasion itself had been based on the disastrous miscalculation that the war could strengthen Russia’s position at the bargaining table with the imperialist powers. Even today, the fundamental orientation of the regime is toward finding a negotiated settlement with imperialism, without relinquishing too many of the Russian oligarchs’ own claims to the direct exploitation of the natural resources and the working class of the country.

However, the relentless push by the imperialist powers to escalate and broaden the war is fueling immense conflicts within the Russian ruling class. Kara-Murza’s sentencing was no doubt a component of the bitter factional infighting and an expression of the growing instability of the Putin regime.

Secondly, workers must see the sentencing of Kara-Murza as a warning that the Kremlin is escalating domestic repression. While this trial was part of the factional infighting within the ruling oligarchy, the charges that were used to imprison Kara-Murza—including the defamation of or spreading of disinformation about the armed forces—could be used just as well to go after any left-wing critic of the Putin regime’s war.

There are indications that a broader wave of repression is already ongoing. In the wake of the explosion at a St. Petersburg café early this month, which killed one of the most prominent pro-Kremlin war bloggers, Russia’s domestic secret service FSB has announced that the Ukrainian regime was actively recruiting “terrorists” among Russian youth.

Last week, the FSB claimed to have preempted 118 crimes “of a terrorist character” by teenagers and young people, who were supposedly acting on behalf of Ukrainian intelligence. The press service of the FSB declared that it was fighting against “an aggressive ideological and recruitment campaign” by Ukrainian and Western secret services that was “targeting our citizens,

above all the young generation, with the aim of involving them in terrorist and extremist activities.” Criminal charges against “crimes of a terrorist character” can be invoked solely on the basis of social media posts.

There is no question that the Ukrainian state, with the full assistance from NATO and especially the US, is funding and arming an insurgency in Russian-claimed territories in Ukraine as well as increasingly within the Russian Federation. However, the Kremlin is using this development primarily as a pretext to escalate domestic repression under conditions where among young people, in particular, left-wing opposition not only to the war but the entire capitalist system is growing rapidly.

Having emerged out of the nationalist reaction against the socialist October Revolution and the decades-long political oppression of the working class by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which culminated in the 1991 destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism, the Putin regime is highly sensitive to the growing anti-war sentiments in the working class and the resurgence of the class struggle internationally.

As bitter as the infighting within the ruling class and the conflict with NATO may be, the biggest fear of the Putin regime is not the coming to power of the pro-NATO faction of the oligarchy or an open confrontation with the imperialist powers, but a movement by the working class, in Russia and throughout the world, against the war and the capitalist system.



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