Widely Seen as Warning Shot, Russia Court Sentences Young Activists for Extremism

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 A Moscow court convicted 7 young Russians on extremism charges Thursday — sentencing several of the group to lengthy prison sentences in a closely watched case that seemed to encapsulate the limits of political youth activism in today’s Russia.

Prosecutors argued that the defendants — most in their teens and 20’s — had organized an illegal online extremist chat group called “The New Greatness” with the intent of overthrowing the government in 2018.

The accused all denied the charges and said evidence was fabricated.

Indeed, to critics, the case was the latest example of the government’s abuse of Russia’s vague anti-extremism laws — and subservient court system — to crush perceived political rivals through any means necessary.

The state’s case was marred by credible accusations of torture and entrapment by Russia’s Federal Security Services, or FSB.

The government’s key witness was an undercover FSB agent named “Ruslan D” who prosecutors say infiltrated the group to learn of their plans. Throughout the trial, the accused countered that the agent himself concocted “The New Greatness” label and pushed a radical political agenda to the other participants in an otherwise largely apolitical group chat.

Supporting government evidence came from an additional suspect in the case — Pavel Rebrovsky, who later cut a plea deal with investigators and was given a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence in April 2019.  Rebrovsky has since rescinded his testimony — saying it was given under pressure from state investigators.

The judge cited Rebrovsky’s initial confession as proof of the group’s guilt, nonetheless.

Authorities also promoted the group’s guilt by releasing a video confession from another defendant, Ruslan Kostylenkov.

Kostylenkov, 27, later [retracted the statement](https://t.me/kremlinprachka/2376) explaining he had been coerced through torture and rape while in custody.

He was given the harshest sentence — a 7-year prison term.  Two others were given 6.5- and 6-year prison terms. The remaining accused were handed suspended sentences, including Anna Pavlikova, who was a 17-year old high school student when the case began.

Lawyers for all said they would appeal the ruling.

Acquittals are exceedingly rare in Russia, with conviction rates hovering at over 99% in criminal trials.

FSB Unbound

Outside the courthouse, several hundred supporters — most of them younger Russians — gathered and shouted chants of “Not guilty!” and “Let them go!”  While inside the courtroom, the defendants were forced to stand for 4 hours as the judge read his verdict in a hushed whisper.

The case was widely seen as the latest legal warning shot against youth dabbling in politics — particularly as the Kremlin has increasingly struggled to gain support among a generation that has essentially known one leader, Vladimir Putin, for their entire lives.

In February, a court sentenced a group of young leftist activists to lengthy prison terms for running an “anarchist terrorist” cell called “The Network.” The case was similarly tainted by allegations of fabricated evidence and torture at the hands of the federal security services. 

A military court in the western city of Penza gives seven members of a left-wing group prison terms of up to 18 years on terrorism charges human rights groups call fabricated

And, like in The New Greatness trial, the group’s goal was allegedly ending President Vladimir Putin’s rule.

The initial arrests in The New Greatness occurred in March 2018, just days before Putin was elected to a new 6-year term.

“It was a gift to the president from the FSB,” said Alina Danilina, whose boyfriend, 22-year old law student Vyachaslav Kryukov, was sentenced to six years.

“It’s a catastrophe,” she added about Thursday’s ruling. “The worst happened.”

“There is no evidence, no objective reason for my involvement in this case,” wrote Kryukov in a statement provided to VOA ahead of the verdict.

“It feels extremely strange that they accused me of things I’ve always opposed. Extremism stands for hatred and violence — I’ve never been like that.”

Indeed, the case seemed to point to a security apparatus untethered — with many voicing suspicion agents were inventing threats simply to justify their continued existence and generous state funding.

“These people have to do something to prove their effectiveness. So they forge these fake cases to show there is extremism and they are doing an important job,” said Alexey Minyaylo, 35, a political activist who himself was arrested and faced charges of “inciting riots” against the government during a charged election season in 2019.

“They know how to beat out a confession,” he tells VOA in an interview. “What they don’t know is how to gather evidence. And this is especially true when there is nothing to find.”

“It’s a security service out of control,” said Nikolai Svanidze, a veteran journalist who sits on Russia’s Presidential Human Rights Council, in an interview outside the courthouse.

“It means any provocateur can give false testimony and make an honest person guilty,” added Svanidze, while noting similarities to the worst of Russia’s Soviet-era repressions.

"The scale is different, but the principles are the same.”

Torture Allegations

The grim nature of the torture allegations were front and center throughout the trial — even if judge refused to acknowledge them or investigate the charges.

In October of last year, Kostylenkov and Kryukov slit their wrists during a courtroom hearing — the two of them yelling “This is an unfair trial" and "Freedom for political prisoners" before being rushed to hospital.

“Their nerves couldn’t handle it anymore,” said Kostylenkov’s lawyer, Svetlana Sidorkina at the time. “All the evidence proves that they didn’t commit a crime.”

Kostylenkov later detailed horror at the hands of FSB agents. In a letter written to a friend last March but only released to the media during the final phase of the trial, [he said he had been beaten and sexually assaulted](https://meduza.io/feature/2020/07/24/v-tualete-ya-obnaruzhil-chto-u-menya-vse-nogi-v-krovi) with a kitchen mallet to gain his confession.

ndeed, the violence hovering over the case was captured in a stunt before the day’s final verdict: Activists dressed as police slit the throat of a mannequin dressed as Christ — spraying red paint on supporters before being detained by security officers.

Meanwhile, Kira Yegorova, an actress, showed up to give a more low-key performance — she was holding a teddy bear.

“The state is destroying our children,” she tells VOA.

And yet — for some — the trial has meant there was also fast growing up to do.

Kryukov’s girlfriend, Alina Danilina 23, announced the verdict meant that she and Vyachaslav Kryukov were getting married. “It’s the only way I can visit him in prison,” she tells VOA.

“We’ve lost for now,” she added. “But I will fight until the end.”