Russia jails 2 men, blogger amid crackdown following anti-Kremlin protests

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<https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-jails-men-blogger-amid-crackdown-anti-kremlin/story?id=65356723>

A Russian court on Tuesday handed down prison sentences to two men accused of acting violently toward police during anti-Kremlin protests this summer, while separately a court jailed another man for five years over an "extremist" tweet.

The sentences came amid a crackdown by authorities on [Russia](https://abcnews.go.com/alerts/russia-nation)’s opposition after a period of [unusually large and persistent protests in Moscow](https://abcnews.go.com/International/russian-opposition-pledges-protests-1000-arrested/story?id=64767476).

They were the first rulings in the roughly dozen criminal cases that have become known collectively as the “Moscow cases” that were brought in connection to two protests [on July 27](https://abcnews.go.com/International/1000-protesters-arrested-opposition-rally-moscow/story?id=64606302) and [August 3](https://abcnews.go.com/International/russian-opposition-pledges-protests-1000-arrested/story?id=64767476) that saw police arrest hundreds.

Authorities have sought to paint those peaceful protests as violent riots and have brought charges against 14 individuals they say participated.

A Moscow district court on Tuesday sentenced Danil Beglets and Ivan Podkopaev to two and three years in penal colonies respectively for allegedly using force against police at the July 27 protest. Podkopaev, 25, was accused of spraying police officers with pepper spray, while Beglets, also 25, was alleged to have grabbed a police man's wrist, “causing him physical pain.” Both men pleaded guilty and were sentenced in expedited trials, where evidence was considered at just one hearing.

Another court on Tuesday sentenced Vladislav Sinitsa to 5 years prison for posting a tweet that prosecutors said had incited violence against the families of police officers.

Sinitsa, a blogger from a town outside Moscow who tweets under the pseudonym Max\_Steklov, on July 31 wrote a tweet suggesting protesters could find and kidnap the children of police officers through social media.

“They’ll look at the nice happy family photos, study the geo-location, and next the child of a gallant police officer one day simply won’t come back from school. Instead of the child a compact disc with a snuff video will come in the mail,” he wrote in the tweet.

Investigators said with the tweet Sinitsa had sought to arouse “enmity and hatred towards all law enforcement officers and their families.”

Sinitsa’s case was rushed through, with evidence considered only in a single hearing. His lawyer, Denis Tikhonov told AFP that the sentence was “without precedent in its severity.” His client accepted he had written the tweet, Tikhonov said, but denied it was a call to violence, saying Sinitsa had written it in an exchange with a pro-Kremlin blogger. He said Sinitsa will appeal the verdict.

The charges fall under Russia’s extremely harsh anti-extremism legislation, which has been used previously to jail people for writing or sharing posts on social media deemed critical of the government.

Tanya Lokshina, an associate director at Human Rights Watch, told ABC News that while the tweet’s sentiment was unacceptable, the sentence was “clearly disproportionate” and questioning how it could be considered a direct call to violence.

The trials have been part of an attempt by authorities to portray the demonstrations as violent riots. The protests broke out after opposition candidates were barred in mid-July from taking part in Moscow’s city elections this fall. Since then thousands of people have demonstrated peacefully in Moscow most Saturdays.

Many of those charged in the trials have featured in heavily-edited state news reports, cut to make it look like they were acting aggressively.

In reality, the demonstrations were markedly peaceful—many protesters didn’t even chant slogans, instead often simply walking or standing in public places.

Police, though, moved aggressively to disperse the demonstrators, [clubbing some on the ground](https://abcnews.go.com/International/russian-opposition-pledges-protests-1000-arrested/story?id=64767476) and detaining people often seemingly at random.

“We have the grounds to say that the protests were peaceful, peaceful. And if someone was disturbing public order, if someone was carrying out acts of violence, that was the police. Not the protesters,” Lokshina said.

Many of the criminal cases have rested on allegations that do not appear to amount to real violence, such as lifting a police officer’s visor or throwing plastic bottles at officers. On Tuesday authorities dropped five of the protest cases, after Russia’s Investigative Committee said they had found no evidence of criminal actions. Among those released was Sergey Abanichev, who was accused of throwing a paper cup at police.

Those releases marked a reversal in what has been seen as the intensifying crackdown on the protest that have become some of the largest opposition demonstrations in a decade, fuelled in part by the police violence. An authorized protest on August 10 attracted 60,000 people.

At the most recent unauthorized protest last Saturday police also took a more hand's off approach, largely allowing around two thousand people to march unhindered.

Authorities appear, however, to be keeping up the pressure on the protest leaders, arresting two organizers on Monday night. Lyubov Sobol, a top lieutenant of Russia’s most prominent opposition leader Alexey Navalny, and Ilya Azar, a prominent journalist, were both detained and charged with repeat violations of laws on public gatherings.

The city council elections that sparked the protests are due to take place Sept. 8.