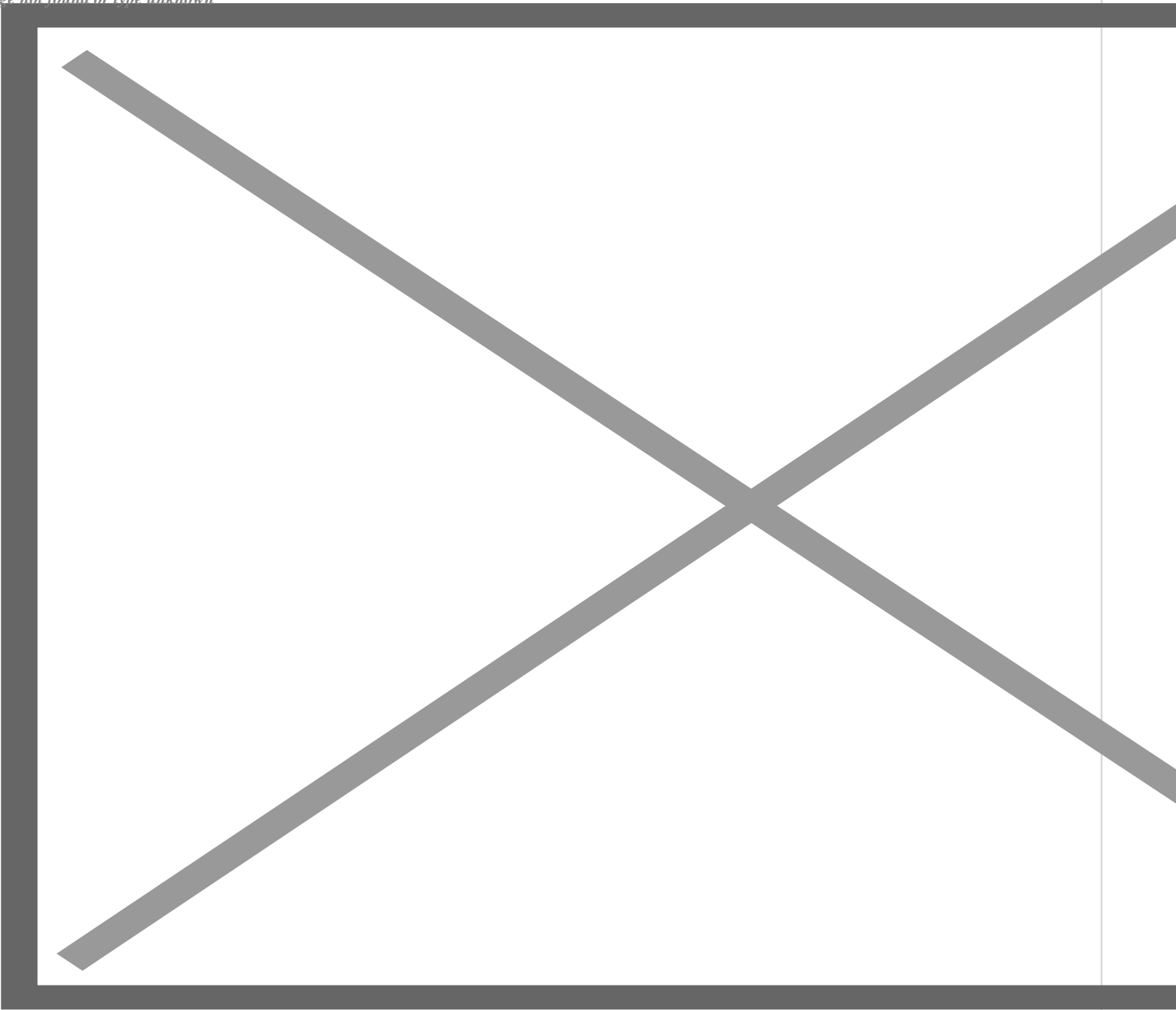


Julian Assange to be made honorary citizen of Rome

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A supporter holds a poster depicting Julian Assange during a protest against the extradition of WikiLeaks' founder from Britain to the U.S., in Athens, Greece. REUTERS/Alkis Konstantinidis/File Photo

Rome, October 19 (RHC)-- WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange will become an honorary citizen of Rome by early next year following a vote this week by its local assembly, the city's former mayor Virginia Raggi said on Thursday.

Julian Assange has been in London's high-security Belmarsh prison since 2019 and is wanted in the United States over the release of confidential U.S. military records and diplomatic cables in 2010. His supporters see his prosecution as a politically motivated assault on journalism and free speech.

The motion to make him a citizen of the Eternal City was spearheaded by Raggi, from the left-leaning Five Star Movement, and won cross-party support. "Assange is a symbol of free speech which is essential for any genuine democracy," Raggi, who ran Rome's city hall between 2016 and 2021, told Reuters.

"He has been deprived of his own liberty for years, in awful conditions, for doing his job as a journalist," she said.

The motion was approved on Tuesday, kick-starting a process that Raggi said she hoped could be completed by Christmas but may take slightly longer. Other Italian cities have taken similar steps. The northern city of Reggio Emilia granted Assange citizenship last month, while Naples is set to follow shortly.

If extradited to the United States, Julian Assange risks a sentence of up to 175 years in a maximum-security prison.

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