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Khimki Battle Stirs Press Freedom Fears

By Alexander Bratersky

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An ongoing tussle over the Khimki forest is raising fears that media freedoms are in jeopardy, with the police pressuring journalists into collaborating or revealing their sources of information, media freedom activists said Monday.

In the most recent incident, investigators on Monday removed Alexander Litoi, a reporter for the liberal Novaya Gazeta daily, from a train in the Moscow region to question him about a July 28 attack on the Khimki City Hall building.

The City Hall building was pelted with stones and smoke grenades by 90 to 300 attackers who protested what they called unlawful destruction of the Khimki forest, slated for a partial demolition to make way for an $8 billion highway despite protests from environmentalists.

Litoi said the police wanted him to disclose information about members of an anti-fascist movement that took responsibility for the City Hall attack, Ekho Moskvy radio reported. He said he was not present during the attack.

Last week, police officers visited the offices of several newspapers, including Kommersant, asking staff for information about the attack.

The requests amount to an attempt to disclose journalists' sources, which can only be revealed on court orders — something that investigators did not obtain, said Andrei Rikhter, a media professor at Moscow State University's school of journalism.

Police investigators have also visited the headquarters of the Svobodnya Pressa online daily, asking for photos of the City Hall attackers.

Several reporters from Komsomolskaya Pravda and Moskovsky Komsomolets have been summoned for questioning, and police officers have also visited the home of the Gazeta.ru reporter Grigory Tumanov.

“These are attempts to discredit reporters,” Rikhter said, adding that the law does not offer the media sufficient protection from police abuse.

“The media law doesn't ban [police] from conducting searches in offices of media outlets and summoning reporters for questioning,” he said.

Moscow and Moscow region police spokespeople provided no comment on the media freedom allegations Monday. A Khimki police officer who spoke on condition of anonymity told The Moscow Times that police were only acting on request of civil authorities in the case. He did not elaborate.

The relatively independent print media has become a source of irritation for the authorities after television, the No. 1 source of news for most of the population, was placed under firm state control in the early 2000s, said Boris Timoshenko, a researcher at the Glasnost Defense Foundation.

He said the Khimki attack has served as a source of embarrassment for the police because the police had failed to react fast enough to make any arrests.

“They are looking for scapegoats,” he said.

Two suspects have been charged in connection with the attack and face up to seven years in prison. The two deny involvement and claim that they were targeted for being prominent figures in the anti-fascist movement.

Some media experts said the police have grown more bold in going after journalists after State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, who chairs the ruling United Russia party, attacked two newspapers for critical articles following the March 29 suicide bombings in the Moscow metro that killed 40 people.

Gryzlov claimed that articles in Vedomosti and Moskovsky Komsomolets about Chechen warlord Doku Umarov, who claimed responsibility for the bombings, showed that the newspapers “might have been connected with terrorist activity.”

Both newspapers filed defamation suits against Gryzlov, but lost.

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