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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Detentions, Searches Suggest Crackdown Accelerating

By Jonathan Earle

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The door investigators allegedly broke through to enter Yashin's old apartment.

Authorities signaled Thursday that they are ready to follow through on increasingly forceful threats against the protest movement, with an opposition leader saying he expected to be arrested and Siberian activists likely to face the first charges under new, harsher laws against illegal protests.

Opposition leader Ilya Yashin said Thursday that his apartment had been searched by police and warned that he could become the first leader arrested in connection with a May 6 rally, which turned into a bloody brawl between protesters and riot police.

"I've been summoned for questioning at 11 a.m." he wrote on Twitter. "A reliable journalist called: He cited a source in the investigation and said they might arrest me."

Opposition leaders and activists have been under increasing pressure since Saturday, when

Putin signed a law raising the maximum fines on participating in illegal rallies 150-fold, from 2,000 rubles ($60) to 300,000 rubles ($9,200).

The average Russian salary was less than 24,000 rubles ($740) in 2011, according to official statistics, and the average pension was slightly above 8,000 rubles ($250).

The law sparked predictions of a crackdown on Tuesday's protest march, which drew tens of thousands to downtown Moscow. But to the surprise of many, the demonstration went off without violence or detentions.

The day before Tuesday's protest, investigators searched the apartments of several opposition leaders, including anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny, Sergei Udaltsov, Ksenia Sobchak and, evidently, Yashin.

“My worst fears were confirmed. The iron door was busted, the apartment was turned upside down and many things were missing,” Yashin wrote on his LiveJournal blog Thursday after he returned to his apartment after several days away.

Investigators said in a statement on Thursday that they were examining items, including electronics and documents, seized in the opposition leaders' homes as part of a criminal investigation into the violence at the May rally, which came on the eve of President Vladimir Putin's inauguration and seemed to reignite the street protest movement that had been on hiatus since early March.

Earlier, investigators said they seized documents, computer databases and, at Sobchak's apartment, $1.7 million in cash in the Monday morning raids.

On Thursday, authorities in the Siberian city of Kemerovo were ready to pioneer enforcement of the law after police detained three people for walking around the city with white balloons and ribbons, a symbol of the pro-democracy movement.

The activists now face fines of up to 30,000 rubles ($920) or 50 hours of community service for organizing what police said was an unsanctioned demonstration. Under the old law, the maximum fine was 2,000 rubles. The law does not specify how many people constitute a “mass gathering.”

Police in St. Petersburg detained about 10 combatants in a mass pillow fight in a downtown park Sunday on suspicion of violating the new law, RIA-Novosti reported.

A Moscow court has sanctioned the arrest of 12 in connection with the May rally, which led to over 400 detentions. A 13th suspect, Alexandra Dukhanina, 18, is currently under house arrest. Yashin would be the first protest leader arrested in connection with the brawl.

Opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov announced that the next “March of Millions” protest would take place on September 15, not October 7, President Vladimir Putin's 60th birthday, as Udaltsov had originally proposed.

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