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As Putin Cracks Down, 2 Opposition Activists Seek Asylum

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Rybachenko

Two opposition activists have fled the country and say they want to receive political asylum in Europe because of fear of imprisonment after being investigated for violence at a May 6 protest.

Anastasia Rybachenko of the Solidarity movement said Monday that she would file an asylum request in Germany after her visa runs out Wednesday.

"With the repressions right now, it is better not to return. But I am sure that I will be back in a year, when the political situation has changed," she said, speaking by telephone from Munich.

Rybachenko, 20, and Alexander Dolmatov of The Other Russia, who applied for asylum in the Netherlands last month, are the first government critics to seek political refuge abroad amid a crackdown on the opposition after Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency on May 7.

Rybachenko and Dolmatov were detained along with hundreds of protesters after violent clashes with police at the opposition march on the eve of Putin's inauguration.

Although they were subsequently released, both say they fear they will end up in jail again after investigators searched their homes.

Police have detained and questioned dozens of activists since raiding key opposition leaders' apartments on June 11, the day before the last large protest march in Moscow.

About a dozen participants in the May 6 march remain under arrest or have been banned from traveling on grounds that they are suspected of committing acts of violence.

Dolmatov, 35, said he fears disproportionate punishment because he worked at Tactical Missiles Corp., a major rocket producer in Korolyov, outside Moscow.

Speaking by telephone from the Netherlands, he said he left the country June 8, when he was summoned for questioning by investigators.

He first went to Kiev, but when he learned that police searched the Moscow apartment where he lived with his mother two days later, he decided to go to the Netherlands, where he applied for asylum June 13.

Dolmatov said that the missile company, where he had worked for the past eight years, fired him in May and that his past work might negatively influence the investigation against him.

"I am not of little importance," he said.

He added, however, that he was a laser engineer, not a rocket scientist, and that he had not had access to top-secret information.

"I worked as a general manager allocating other employees' work," he said.

Arms industry staff are often classified as bearers of state secrets, which imposes travel and other limits on them.

The Other Russia said in June that Dolmatov had been visited at work by officers of the Federal Security Service and the police's anti-extremism department.

They issued unspecified warnings and told him to stop his opposition activities.

Dolmatov said his political views are widely known, and as a result his employer had reduced his security status over the years. But he suggested that authorities might seek to punish him harshly to protect the defense industry.

"In this atmosphere that is so reminiscent of the Brezhnev era, a person like me is probably unwanted," he said.

He said that under Dutch law, authorities have six months to decide on his asylum request.

Unlike Dolmatov, Rybachenko, a student activist, said she had no intention of fleeing when she left the country last month.

Instead, she went to Strasbourg, France, where she took part in a protest against the presence of the State Duma's delegation at a summer session of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly in late June.

She subsequently met with Russian emigrants in the Netherlands and Germany.

In a telephone interview Friday, Rybachenko said that she changed her plans to return when she learned that police had searched her parents' apartment on Wednesday.

She said investigators officially treat her as a witness but may change their minds and regard her as a suspect.

"A police officer has signed a statement that I resisted his orders. So they could change my status very easily," she said.

Rybachenko has posted a copy of an investigator's statement on her case on her Facebook page.

Opposition activists have vowed to carry on the protests during the summer and have set up the May 6 Committee to support those detained.

On Monday, the committee's organizer, Solidarity activist Sergei Davidis, became the latest to be questioned by police in connection with the May 6 violence.

He told Interfax afterward that he was asked "ritual questions" about opposition leaders Alexei Navalny, Sergei Udaltsov and Boris Nemtsov.

Davidis also said that a planned march for June 26 would be downsized to a rally on Pushkin Square.

Human rights activists have criticized the investigation as politically motivated and have called those arrested political prisoners.

While most Russian asylum seekers in Europe have claimed persecution in the wake of the conflict in Chechnya, some opposition supporters have been granted asylum as political refugees.

Environmental activists Pyotr Silayev and Denis Solopov were given asylum in Finland and the Netherlands, respectively, after they were prosecuted for a 2010 attack on the City Hall building in the Moscow suburb of Khimki. The attack was to protest deforestation.

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