

Police Charge Ura.ru Editor With Extortion

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The editor-in-chief of the independent Yekaterinburg news agency Ura.ru was charged with blackmail Wednesday, police said, in what critics say is part of a campaign by the authorities to pressure the popular local website.

A Sverdlovsk region police spokesman told Interfax that Ura.ru had been disseminating false information about people and organizations and then telling the subjects of these reports that the website would stop in exchange for money. The spokesman cited evidence from an alleged victim as the basis for the case.

Police said the editor, Aksana Panova, had been issued travel restrictions while facing the charges.

Local police raided the office of the news website on Sept. 27 in connection with a separate embezzlement case, in which an accountant for Ura.ru was detained on suspicion of stealing

more than 10 million rubles (\$318,200) of website funds.

Amid the investigations, a conflict among the website's owners has surfaced. Last week, police said they received a complaint from a representative of Austrian company BF TEN, which owns 51 percent of Ura.ru, demanding that Panova be charged with fraud.

The company alleges that Panova stole \$5 million by purposely presenting false information to BF TEN before it bought its stake last year.

Ura.ru employees say they consider the extortion case against Panova to be a form of "psychological pressure" on the news agency, Interfax reported. Panova has linked the cases to articles critical of Sverdlovsk Governor Yevgeny Kuivashev and other high-ranking regional officials.

Sverdlovsk police have accused Ura.ru of publishing false information about law enforcement activities.

The news website has gained support from billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who wrote on his LiveJournal blog that his new Civil Platform party considered the cases to be a form of political pressure.

He grouped the investigations against Ura.ru with those targeting his ally Yevgeny Roizman's City Without Drugs fund, saying the authorities were attempting to intimidate their political enemies.

"We consider the pressure of law enforcement bodies on Y. Roizman ... and the persecution of Ura.ru editor-in-chief A. Panova to be strictly an attempt by local authorities to eliminate strong political competitors ahead of elections for Yekaterinburg mayor and the city legislature in 2013," Prokhorov wrote over the weekend.

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