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Why Did the Police Search My Apartment?

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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Correction appended

I was awakened during a trip to Berlin on Wednesday by a call from my wife. "Our apartment is being searched," she said. Only 15 minutes later, journalists began calling to ask if I planned to apply for political asylum in Germany. The avalanche of phone calls almost made me miss my plane back to Russia. Fortunately, I caught the flight and was able to give a talk to a leftist group commemorating the Nov. 7 anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Instead of reporting about what items the Investigative Committee seized from my apartment, I would have much preferred that the media write about more important issues affecting the country, such as the serious problems in the pension, education and health care sectors.

The obvious reason for the Investigative Committee's interest in me was the testimony

by Leonid Razvozzhayev, a member of the Left Front who was seized in Kiev and brought back to Moscow to face charges that he was planning to incite a riot.

Investigators themselves realized that there was no way to take Razvozzhayev's testimony seriously. They questioned me even before I left for Berlin. I used the occasion to have them record my testimony regarding the behavior of the police during their confrontation with protesters on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on May 6. My complaint was that the police cordon created a bottleneck that provoked a skirmish with protesters. The police behaved more like angry soccer fans who had come to square off against supporters of the rival team. Several police officers charged at the protesters, sparking the standoff.

The work of the Investigative Committee has not created an impression of outstanding professionalism either. Who conducts a search only one full week after obtaining testimony from a witness? What's more, if they needed my computer, didn't they realize that I would have taken my laptop with me to Germany? I told them clearly during questioning that I would be out of town during the first week of November. But the group within the Investigative Committee responsible for searches clearly did not coordinate its actions with colleagues within the same agency who are responsible for interrogations.

I can't help but compare the way the authorities searched my home last week with their predecessors during the Soviet period. Investigators may be more polite, but they are clearly less competent. Police conduct investigations in the same spirit that the authorities conduct "free" elections.

At the same time, however, many liberal commentators refer to the Kremlin's crackdowns on the opposition as a "repeat of 1937." This is ridiculous and an affront to the memory of millions of victims of Soviet political repression.

But the fact that today's repressive measures are neither widespread nor effective is little consolation to those who have fallen victim to the authorities' abuse. The latest victim is Maxim Luzyanin, who received a 4 1/2-year jail sentence Friday for taking part in the May 6 protest and allegedly assaulting police officers. There are 16 other defendants facing similar charges, and it is expected that they, too, will receive severe prison sentences.

The authorities' actions are senseless and counterproductive, but this doesn't make them any less ruthless.

Correction: Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this story incorrectly referred to Leonid Razvozzhayev as a "fellow member of the Left Front." Although Kagarlitsky is a co-founder of the Left Front, he is in fact not a member of the movement.

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