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Journalist Questioned in Mass Disorder Case

By Alec Luhn

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Investigators have questioned a Novaya Gazeta journalist over a February blog post that they say incited mass riots.

The Moscow branch of the Investigative Committee on Friday questioned Arkady Babchenko as a witness in a criminal case brought over a Feb. 27 post on LiveJournal, Babchenko wrote on his blog Monday.

The post in question discussed strategy for a March 5 demonstration organized by the opposition group For Fair Elections, saying that if City Hall did not approve a rally on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad, protestors should go there anyway and, if necessary, break through police cordons.

The extremism division of the Investigative Committee originally opened the case on March 2 after Public Chamber member Boris Yakemenko said in a letter to the prosecutor's office that

Babchenko had violated articles in the Criminal Code on forcibly seizing of power and publicly calling for extremist activity.

The case was opened under a different law on mass riots.

Yakemenko is the brother of Vasily Yakemenko, who headed the influential Federal Youth Agency until June.

Babchenko was briefly detained while covering the March 5 demonstration near the Lubyanka metro station, during which opposition leaders were also detained.

During the questioning Friday, Babchenko confirmed that the LiveJournal blog was his own and that he had written the post, he wrote Monday. He argued that his words were taken out of context, however.

"As a whole, the text doesn't contain any calls [for mass riots], but exactly the other way around — it seeks the opposite goal: to avoid clashes," Babchenko said.

At the same time, Babchenko noted that he was read his rights, including the right to refuse to give testimony, and called his investigator a "reasonable, well-mannered and smart person."

The Investigative Committee later opened separate criminal cases against protesters at a May 6 demonstration on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on charges including inciting mass riots and beating up police officers after the rally ended with clashes between protesters and police.

One of the charged protesters, fitness club manager Maxim Luzyanin, was sentenced to 4 1/2 years in jail after pleading guilty.

Babchenko came to prominence in the West after writing a memoir on his experiences as a Russian soldier in Chechnya.

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