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Ura.ru Ex-Chief Faces Further Questioning

By The Moscow Times

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Investigators in western Siberia are keeping up the pressure on the former chief editor of the critical Ura.ru news site by summoning her for questioning three days in a row.

Aksana Panova said after a questioning session Thursday in Yekaterinburg that she had been called again for Friday and Saturday. "A smiling investigator said that because of me they would even work on Dec. 31," she wrote on Facebook.

Sverdlovsk region investigators have opened five criminal cases against Panova for embezzlement, fraud, extortion and money laundering. She has denied wrongdoing and called the accusations absurd.

Thursday's questioning centered around accusations that she embezzled 10 million rubles ($330,000) from Ura.ru. Panova said the money was fully used to pay newsroom staff, though she admitted to not paying taxes on it. She added that she was ready to pay the taxes in full.

The investigation, which critics say is punishment for Ura.ru's critical reporting, prompted Panova's departure from the site in late November. She subsequently founded the Znak.com news site.

Panova has also been barred from leaving town in connection with a money laundering accusation leveled by a local state television executive.

Supporters said earlier this month that Panova miscarried her 6-month-old daughter because of the stress caused by the investigation.

Ura.ru has been taken over by new management. As of Thursday, the site had not reported on the case against Panova since Nov. 16.

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