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Rights Defenders Fear for Life of Arrested Activist

By Alexander Winning

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Sergei Krivov, 51, has refused food for 40 days in protest at a court decision to prolong his arrest over the infamous May 6 rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

Rights defenders said Tuesday that they fear for the life of an opposition activist on hunger strike since a Moscow court extended his arrest over violence at an anti-Kremlin protest.

Sergei Krivov, 51, has refused food for 40 days in protest of the Basmanny District Court's decision to prolong his arrest over the infamous May 6 rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad, at which more than 400 protesters were detained for clashing with police.

On Jan. 14, the Moscow City Court turned down an appeal against Krivov's arrest, ruling that he should remain in pretrial detention until March 6.

After visiting Krivov, who describes the case against him as unlawful, rights activists from the Public Monitoring Commission, an officially sanctioned prison watchdog, sent a report to the

Presidential Human Rights Council saying the middle-aged activist had lost almost 18 kilograms during his time in detention.

Krivov is suffering from severe vertigo and has trouble climbing stairs, according to a copy of the report on the council's website. Doctors in the Matrosskaya Tishina prison were monitoring him daily but were not taking his temperature or pulse, it added.

Matrosskaya Tishina is the jail where anti-corruption lawyer Sergei Magnitsky died of heart failure in 2009 after reportedly being beaten by prison officials.

Federal investigators say they have "irrefutable evidence" that Krivov, a graduate of Moscow's National Nuclear Research University and member of the liberal "Republican Party Party of People's Freedom," snatched a rubber nightstick from a row of riot police officers at the May 6 protest and dealt them a series of blows.

Krivov, who was detained on Oct. 18, says that he was the one struck over the head with the nightstick and that he hurt no one.

"I'm completely convinced that I didn't harm any member of the police force," Krivov said in a statement posted on Bolotnoedelo.info, a website dedicated to those facing charges over the anti-government rally.

"I grabbed the nightstick because that man was using it to beat people, but I didn't strike anyone with it," he said.

On Tuesday, Valery Borshchyov, a veteran rights activist with the Moscow Helsinki Group who has visited Krivov in Matrosskaya Tishina, told The Moscow Times that the charges against the activist were thought-up.

"There are no grounds for his arrest. There are no facts corroborating investigators' statements, only evidence given by policemen, and that isn't enough to prove Krivov's guilt," Borshchyov said.

Borshchyov said the case against Krivov is especially tenuous since the OMON riot police officer that Krivov is meant to have struck earlier testified that he didn't see who hit him. The riot police officer later retracted his testimony and pointed to Krivov as the definite culprit.

"What's more, Krivov is an intelligent, educated man who is completely unlike anyone who could lash out at police officers. That's obvious," Borshchyov said.

Krivov is the 18th opposition activist to face prosecution in the case, which opposition circles are calling the Bolotnoye Delo. In total, 11 activists remain in pretrial detention, and one, fitness club manager Maxim Luzyanin, has been sentenced to 4 1/2 years in prison.

If convicted, Krivov faces up to eight years behind bars on charges of taking part in riots and inflicting physical harm on law enforcement officials. Opposition protesters have blamed riot police for provoking the May 6 violence.

According to the monitoring commission's report, Krivov is the father of two young children

and has a disabled mother. His wife is currently supporting the family on a part-time salary of just 6,000 rubles ($200) a month.

The Rosuznik group, which defends the rights of jailed activists, said last week that Krivov's lawyer, Vyacheslav Makarov, had been barred from the case and appealed the decision with the Prosecutor General's Office.

Repeated calls to Makarov's office went unanswered Tuesday. Makarov had defended Krivov since last year and met with him several times in pretrial detention.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, co-founder of the "Republican Party — Party of People's Freedom," echoed Borshchyov's claims that investigators have no objective evidence with which to prosecute Krivov.

Ryzhkov, who writes a weekly column in The Moscow Times, said by phone that his party had tried to convince Krivov to suspend his hunger strike by stressing the dangers to his health.

"There is a real danger that he could die before the case gets to court," he said, adding that the European Court of Human Rights had turned down his party's request to urgently review Krivov's arrest.

Party activists now plan to hand over a petition highlighting Krivov's case to the presidential administration on Saturday. The petition had roughly 1,400 signatures as of Tuesday evening.

But Borshchyov of the Moscow Helsinki Group said that such a petition was unlikely to help matters.

"Investigators will get Krivov's case to court, whatever happens," he said. "This is just one link in a chain of falsified cases."

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