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Suicide Sheds Light on Asylum Challenges

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Suren Gazaryan fled Russia in December.

The suicide of activist Alexander Dolmatov in a Dutch extradition center has highlighted the challenges for Russian opposition members to get political asylum in Europe, but his tragic case does not mean that obtaining asylum has become impossible, experts said Tuesday.

Dolmatov was found dead last Thursday in his holding cell at the extradition center, located at Rotterdam Airport. According to his lawyer, Marq Wijngaarden, he had hanged himself, Geert Ates, an activist with United for Intercultural Action, a European pressure group, said in an e-mail.

Dolmatov, an activist with the Other Russia movement, was among a growing number of opposition figures who have fled the country or ponder fleeing because of the ongoing crackdown against them after a rally against President Vladimir Putin's inauguration last year.

Investigators have so far accused 21 activists of participating in the violence at the May 6 rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad, according to the 6may.org website. In a clear signal that authorities won't treat them with restraint, one of them, Maxim Luzyanin, was given a 4 1/2-year prison sentence in November for injuring a police officer.

Dolmatov, who took part in the rally, fled to the Netherlands last summer after police searched his home. His application for political asylum was denied in December, and activists have said he would have had a good chance to succeed with an appeal. However, Dolmatov did not show up for meetings with his lawyer to discuss the appeal and failed to answer phone calls and text messages.

His lawyer proceeded with the appeal anyway and filed it on Jan. 11. However, for reasons that remain unclear, Dolmatov was brought to the extradition center and put in a cell designated for people with psychological problems. "We cannot understand how he could have hanged himself in this special cell," which is designed for preventing suicide, Ates said.

Dolmatov left a handwritten note to his mother, in which he explained that he did "not want to return as a traitor" and that he had "betrayed an honest person" and his country's security.

This triggered speculation that he had been pressured to cooperate with Western intelligence services. Dolmatov had worked as a production manager in a missile factory in Korolyov, outside Moscow. His lawyer has denied this version of events.

Many questions remain open in this case, but the initial denial is by no means unusual and should not scare others, said Oksana Chelysheva, a human rights activist with the Finnish-Russian Civic Forum who has lived in Finland since 2008.

Chelysheva explained that asylum officers in Western Europe often base their initial decision on incomplete information. "Clearly, they know very little about the real situation in Russia," she said in a telephone interview.

According to Ates, Dutch immigration authorities argued in Dolmatov's case that he would have merely faced a 500 ruble ($16.50) fine.

The activist said that "a lot" of Russian opposition activists were currently arriving in Western Europe out of fear for their safety at home. Not all of them seek publicity.

Denis Solopov, an environmental activist from Khimki outside Moscow who got asylum in the Netherlands in 2011, told The Moscow Times that he knew of three other Russian refugees whose cases were currently pending with Dutch authorities. Solopov fled after being sought in connection with a 2010 attack on Khimki's administration building. Another participant in that attack, Pyotr Silayev, got asylum in Finland last year.

Others have turned to Estonia, which recently granted asylum to two Russian bloggers: Savva Terentyev and Maxim Yefimov.

Environmental activist Suren Gazaryan fled to Estonia from his native Krasnodar region in December after being hit with criminal charges due to a minor conflict with a security guard at a mysterious Black Sea resort thought to belong to President Putin.

Gazaryan told The Moscow Times that he applied for asylum in December and was confident that he would be successful. "You need to look at each case differently," he said by telephone.

However, overall, the numbers of recent Russian asylum seekers who succeeded in Europe are minimal.

Bart Staes, a member of the European Parliament for the Belgian Green Party, said that hurdles for Russians getting asylum in Europe had become higher and higher recently. "Most asylum agencies even consider the situation in the North Caucasus as more or less OK, which of course is complete nonsense," Staes told The Moscow Times.

Jan Marinus Wiersma, a former European Parliament deputy for the Dutch Labor party, said that Dutch officials had argued that Russians should not be eligible for asylum because their country is a member of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe.

"Their argument is that [Russians] can get justice via the European Court of Human Rights," he said. The Strasbourg-based court enforces the European Human Rights Convention, which Moscow ratified in 1998.

Chelysheva said that EU countries should prepare for more cases in the future.

She pointed to the precarious situation of activists that fled to Ukraine last year. (Many Russians do not have foreign travel passports, and Ukraine allows Russians to enter with only their internal passports.) One of them, Left Front activist Leonid Razvozzhayev, has said that he was abducted and driven to Russia by security service officers after getting counseling at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in Kiev.

Razvozzhayev is currently in a Siberian detention center, and investigators have opened numerous cases against him, including for inciting violent unrest.

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