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Police Began Violence At Protest, Panel Says

By Alexander Winning

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Protesters staring down OMON riot police at Bolotnaya Ploshchad on May 6. **Igor Tabakov**

Members of the Kremlin's human rights council believe that police, not activists, instigated violence at a May opposition protest, a council member said Friday.

"The qualification of the Bolotnaya Ploshchad protest as a mass riot was artificially thought up by the Investigative Committee. It does not reflect the reality of what happened," council member Pavel Chikov said.

He said "most" of the members believed that law enforcement officers provoked the violence at the May 6 protest, at which police and demonstrators clashed on the eve of Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency.

Members of the council, an advisory body for the Kremlin, are preparing to issue a statement criticizing authorities' investigation of the protest, which has drawn intense scrutiny on the

part of federal investigators.

In total, 11 opposition activists remain in pretrial detention for taking part in the violence, while six have had travel restrictions imposed on them, one fled the country and one was sentenced to 4 1/2 years in prison after pleading guilty.

If convicted, the accused face up to eight years in prison. Three other activists from the Left Front movement — Konstantin Lebedev, Leonid Razvozzhayev and opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov — could be jailed for 10 years for plotting to incite the alleged riot. Their cases are expected to be heard in the spring.

The Investigative Committee said in a statement late Friday that it had proof that police did not initiate the violence, including hours of video footage, witness reports and other materials. The committee said it had no intention of reviewing the charges against the accused.

It also said it had not found any instances in which police attacked protesters and noted that 50 police officers were injured in the clashes.

Chikov, who also heads the Agora rights organization, said the majority of the council's members had signed the statement criticizing investigators' handling of the case. In particular, the statement casts doubts on investigators' claims that the violence was preplanned and financed from abroad.

It also says police should be held liable for the violence and calls on officials to free those in detention, he said, stressing that it does not address whether individual demonstrators attacked riot police officers.

The so-called Bolotnoye case has polarized public opinion, with the accused being painted as martyrs on opposition-minded websites and as foreign-funded villains in the pro-Kremlin media.

Human rights groups have described the case as being part of a general crackdown on the opposition by the authorities over the last year that has included tightened restrictions on public demonstrations.

But Putin has said the government is committed to strengthening people's freedoms and constitutional rights. At an expanded Cabinet meeting Thursday, he said it was a priority "to develop democratic institutions in the country and support and strengthen civil society."

Multiple groups supporting the activists implicated in the May 6 violence have organized their own investigations into what happened at the protest.

Rosuznik, a group that defends the rights of jailed activists, is calling on people who attended the May 6 rally to come forward and give evidence in support of those set to stand trial.

Rosuznik coordinator Sergei Vlasov said 62 witnesses had told the group's lawyers that police were to blame for the May 6 clashes and that the violence was confined to a few isolated episodes.

The witnesses are willing to stand up in court and defend their statements, Vlasov said, adding that more than 40 others were still waiting to give testimony.

As part of a separate investigation, activists from the May 6 Committee and the liberal Republican Party – Party of People's Freedom say they have gathered more than 200 questionnaires and hundreds of photographs and video clips related to the protest, which some observers said was attended by about 50,000 people.

Investigators, who have agreed to review the evidence before the case goes to court, say they have questioned more than 1,500 witnesses.

Chikov said Agora, which has arranged lawyers for three of the defendants, was working closely with Rosuznik, which has found lawyers for more than half of the accused.

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