

St. Pete Activists Questioned in Bolotnoye Case

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March 06, 2013

The  Moscow Times

Investigators questioned two prominent opposition activists from St. Petersburg on Wednesday as part of a criminal investigation into violence at an anti-Kremlin demonstration on Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploshchad last year.

Police raided the homes of Andrei Pivovarov, head of the liberal Republican Party – Party of People's Freedom's local branch, and Natasha Gryaznevich, an activist with the Civil Responsibility movement, at about 7 a.m. before summoning them to the Interior Ministry's extremism center in the northern capital, local media reported.

The searches represent the first time that investigators have targeted activists from St. Petersburg in their inquiry into violent clashes between riot police and demonstrators on May 6.

Opposition activists claim that police provoked the clashes, a version supported by the

majority of the Kremlin's human rights council, while investigators blame protesters and have classified the protest as a “mass riot.” Twenty-one activists are currently facing criminal prosecution in the so-called Bolotnoye case, which has provoked outrage in opposition circles.

In comments on Twitter, Pivovarov said he was questioned as a witness, rather than a suspect, in the case and told Ekho Peterburga radio that investigators failed to find anything linked to the now-infamous protest in his flat. It was not immediately clear whether Gryaznevich was also being treated as a witness.

By midday Wednesday, opposition activists gathered outside the police's extremism center to express support for their colleagues by holding one-man pickets, a form of public gathering that doesn't require permission from authorities.

Addressing St. Petersburg's Legislative Assembly, local lawmaker Maxim Reznik, former head of Yabloko's St. Petersburg branch and now loosely affiliated with Mikhail Prokhorov's Civil Platform party, said the investigation into Pivovarov and Gryaznevich should be monitored by the assembly.

Pivovarov, who sits on the opposition's Coordination Council, a body tasked with formulating opposition tactics, wrote on Twitter that the search at his home was conducted by Major Timofei Grachyov, a senior Investigative Committee official known for overseeing prior investigations into anti-Kremlin protesters.

In October, Grachyov caused a stir by reportedly threatening “anti-fascist” activist Filipp Galtsov into giving testimony against Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov and his associate, Leonid Razvozzhayev, both of whom are accused of plotting the protest violence as part of a wider plan to sow discord in Russia.

Razvozzhayev later claimed that he was tortured after being taken to a pretrial detention center by Grachyov.

Pivovarov and Gryaznevich both attended the “March of Millions” demonstration on Bolotnaya Ploshchad and organized transportation to the event for like-minded St. Petersburg residents. But Pivovarov denied that they had broken the law during the rally, at which more than 400 protesters were detained.

According to St. Petersburg-based news portal Fontanka.ru, the pair also took part in a seminar near Vilnius, Lithuania, that featured in a documentary-style film broadcast on state-controlled channel NTV that accused opposition activists of plotting riots on Russian soil with financing from Georgian politician Givi Targamadze.

After leaving the extremism center early Wednesday afternoon, Pivovarov told journalists that he had signed a non-disclosure agreement, which prevented him from revealing any specifics about investigators' line of questioning.

Gryaznevich was not immediately available for comment.

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