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Activist Strip-Searched at St. Petersburg Airport

By Jonathan Earle

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A prominent opposition-linked activist and two others were detained, threatened and strip-searched at Pulkovo Airport in St. Petersburg late Thursday after they refused police demands to stop videotaping an interview inside the arrivals hall.

“The police didn't beat us, but they threatened, teased and cursed us. One of them said something like, 'Oh, wouldn't it be easier if we had three corpses [instead of three people]?'” activist Mitya Aleshkovsky said by telephone on Friday afternoon.

The three were also stripped “completely” nude and searched for “illegal possessions,” he said.

Police said that the men, all Moscow residents, violated federal transportation safety regulations and a Transportation Ministry rule by filming inside the airport, RIA-Novosti reported.

Airport security has come under heightened scrutiny since a suicide bombing killed 37 people inside the arrivals hall at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport in 2011.

Aleshkovsky, a photographer and author of the popular blog "White trash beautiful," is well-known for his charity work, including a flood relief mission to the southern city of Krymsk last summer.

He was in St. Petersburg meeting with gay and lesbian activists, and at the time of the initial confrontation with police, Aleshkovsky was giving an interview to a gay-oriented media outlet.

St. Petersburg has become a battleground for Russia's small gay-rights movement after city lawmakers last year made it the fourth Russian city to ban the "promotion of homosexuality" among children.

Aleshkovsky denied that his detention had any connection to the subject of the interview or his other activism work. "It's exclusively linked to the fact that officers in this police unit have a poor grasp of the law and don't know how to behave," he said.

The three have been charged with disobeying police orders, which carries a maximum penalty of 15 days in prison.

On Friday, a St. Petersburg judge ordered that Aleshkovsky's case be moved to Moscow. The date of the first court hearing has yet to be announced, he said.

Aleshkovsky's lawyer, Svetlana Ratnikova, was already filing a complain with the St. Petersburg human rights ombudsman about the incident as of Saturday, he wrote on Facebook.

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