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Guard Who Killed Prisoner in Altai Walks Free

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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A top guard at a prison in Altai was given a three-year suspended sentence Wednesday after the court found him guilty of beating a prisoner to death in what a human rights activist called "typical practice" in Russian prisons.

Alexei Filatov, the former head of security at prison colony № 3 in the Altai region, struck a prisoner several times with a truncheon on Dec. 27, 2011, and the prisoner later died from his wounds in the hospital, the Prosecutor General's Office said in a statement Wednesday. While the court admitted that the prisoner died as a direct result of Filatov's actions, the guard was charged only with abuse of authority and not murder.

An expert on
prisons says
light sentences

are common
for law
enforcement
officials, who
tend to protect
one another.

"This is a typical charge for law enforcement officials — it's rare that a court acknowledges that they committed murder," said Zoya Svetova, a member of the Public Monitoring Commission, an officially sanctioned prison watchdog.

In addition to the suspended sentence, the court also banned Filatov from holding posts in law enforcement for three years and ordered him to pay 300,000 rubles ($10,000) to the mother of the dead prisoner as moral compensation.

The Prosecutor General's Office statement did not provide the prisoner's name or what he was serving time for. It said the man was being held in an isolation cell when the beating took place.

According to official statistics, more than 4,000 people died last year in Russian prisons, but there are no official figures on how many of them died due to abuse by law enforcement officials.

"What can we say about cases in the Altai region, when a Moscow court recently passed a not-guilty verdict on a prison doctor who was accused in Sergei Magnitsky's death and no one else was charged at all?" Svetova said.

The death of Magnitsky, a lawyer for Hermitage Capital who died in prison in 2009, a year after being charged with tax evasion, is the most high-profile case of alleged prisoner abuse.

A Kremlin human rights council investigation found that Magnitsky was severely beaten before he died, but the Investigative Committee closed a criminal case into his death last month, saying there was no evidence of a crime.

Magnitsky's supporters say the real reason he was put in prison was that he accused police and other officials of stealing $230 million in state funds. A Moscow court is currently trying Magnitsky on the tax evasion charges posthumously.

"Law enforcement authorities protect their colleagues by any means possible," Svetova said. "Prison guards and prison doctors are never acknowledged as being responsible for deaths in prisons, although often it's their direct fault that people die there."

In a prominent case in 2011 in the Chelyabinsk region, 14 prison guards, including the head of the regional division of the Federal Prison Service, were found guilty of intentional infliction of bodily harm that led to the deaths of four prisoners.

Svetova said the Chelyabinsk case was perhaps the only one in which law enforcement officers were sentenced to major prison terms, with some of them receiving up to 12 years behind bars.

Kremlin human rights ombudsman Vladimir Lukin said in his annual report published last week that abuse of authority by law enforcement officials and unfair court judgments were the main complaints his agency received last year. He said the Federal Prison Service was a major target of the complaints.

On Tuesday, Lukin also said that conditions at Russian prisons were too poor to keep prisoners in them, making their punishment unbearable.

"The problem with giving such light sentences to law enforcement officers is that it shows that whatever an officer did, his actions will remain unpunished, and next time, another officer won't think twice before taking a truncheon and beating a prisoner," Svetova said.

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