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Human Rights Group Evicted (Video)

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Activist Lev Ponomaryov speaking to a police officer from his office window Friday, hours before a police raid. **Evgeny Feldman**

Video: For Human Rights staff being ejected from their office on Saturday.

Private security guards and riot police have evicted For Human Rights, a human rights group, from their Moscow government-owned office, stirring new fears about a crackdown on nongovernmental organizations.

The group For Human Rights was kicked out of its office at 7 Maly Kislovsky Pereulok around 3 a.m. Saturday, nearly 12 hours after a group of men bearing documents from City Hall ordered staff to vacate the premises on the grounds that the lease had expired in February, the group said.

Earlier Friday, Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the liberal Yabloko party and a mayoral candidate, and Russia's chief human rights ombudsman, Vladimir Lukin, visited the office in an attempt to resolve the situation.

Activists say riot police violently ejected several people from the building, prompting some to pay visits to the hospital for treatment.

Mitrokhin said that he was forcefully ejected from the office and that both security guards and riot police at the scene were taking orders from a plainclothes official whom he identified was a Federal Security Agency operative.

“FSB operatives who were in charge of the raid were beating up people before my own eyes,” Mitrokhin later told Gazeta.ru. “A huge 2-meter-tall lout from the riot police threw me down the stairs. ... Now I have a big bruise on my leg and another on my elbow.”

For Human Rights leader Lev Ponomaryov was also thrown down the stairs, and he suffered a bruise under his left eyebrow, Gazeta.ru reported Saturday.

Security guards also hit For Human Rights staff in the abdomen while evicting them from the office, Pyotr Tsarkov, a member of the political opposition's Coordination Council, told the news portal.

The staff members were taken to a hospital, but the doctor who treated them refused to give them a copy of the report on the injuries when he found out who had beaten them up, Mitrokhin said.

A representative of City Hall's property department told Interfax that the group's lease had ended in February and that it had been given until late May to leave the building, which is owned by the city.

Ponomaryov said he had not received any notice on a termination of the lease in February and that one presented by City Hall was fake, according to a video posted on YouTube. He also said the eviction was illegal because it had not been authorized by a court.

Ponomaryov was unavailable for comment Sunday.

Ilya Ponomaryov, a State Duma deputy with the Just Russia party and no relation to the rights activist, wrote in his blog on Saturday that the property department had refused to renew the contract while the group was carrying out a remodeling of the office between February and May, saying the work had to be completed first.

In March, Moscow's human rights ombudsman, Alexander Muzykantsky, met with Mayor Sergei Sobyanin and asked him to renew the contract, Ilya Ponomaryov said. Sobyanin agreed, and the human rights group began negotiations on the renewal with the property department, he added.

Many opposition activists noted that the eviction coincided with the anniversary of Adolf Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941.

"It's very symbolic that this happened at the very moment when Hitler invaded our country," Mitrokhin said. "This is Putin's style: an explicit reenactment of a fascist state in a specific place at a specific time."

Meanwhile, activists organized a protest camp called OccupyFHR in front of the group's office on Friday and Saturday. They held posters reading, "Putin is an enemy of the people" and "Give us back our human rights." The camp was joined by an apparently stray cat, prompting Twitter users to quip that the Kitten Party — a popular Internet meme among the opposition — was supporting the protest.

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