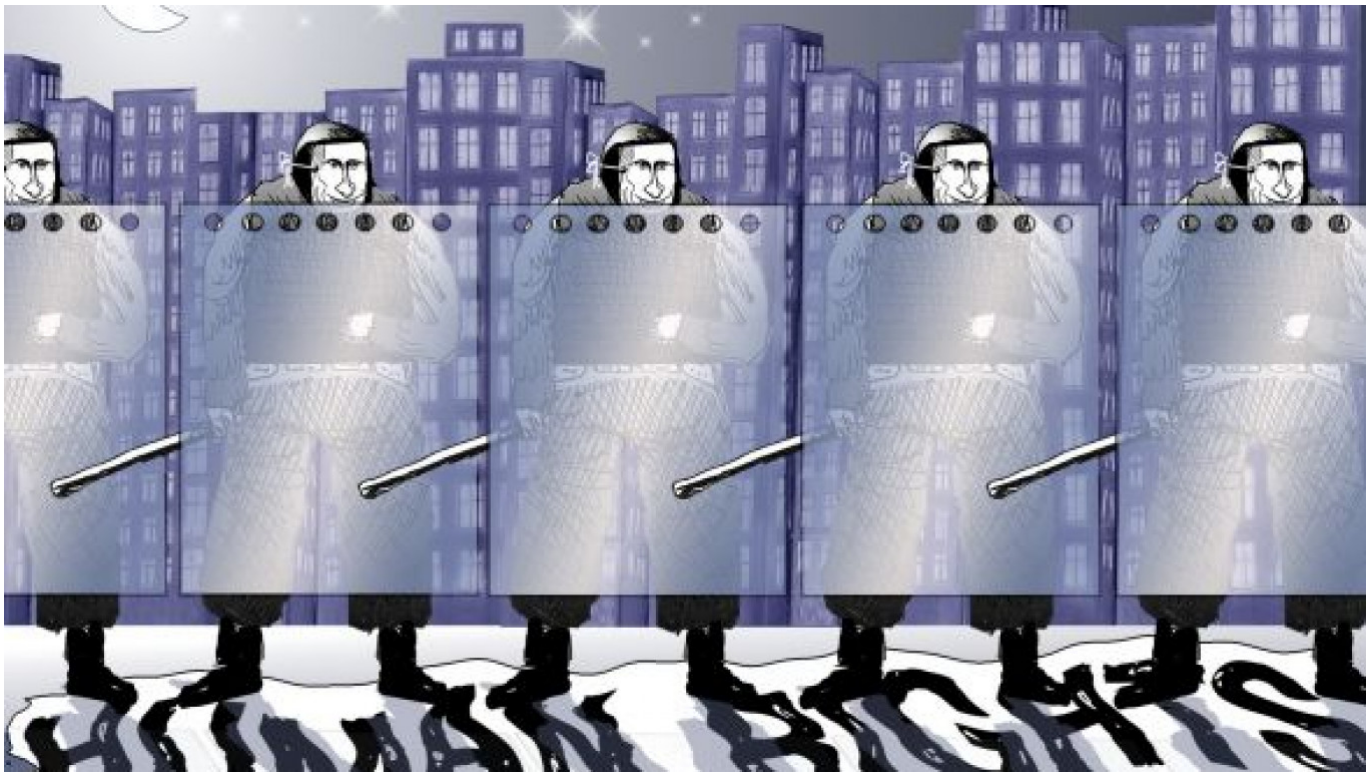
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Kremlin's New Attack on Human Rights

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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On the night of June 22 in Moscow, a busload of riot police along with private security guards and officials of the mayor's office used brute force to haul Lev Ponomaryov, one of Russia's most senior human rights activists, and his colleagues at For Human Rights, the nongovernmental organization he heads, out of their offices. The police kicked the 72-year-old Ponomaryov in the kidneys as they dragged him along the floor and down the stairs. While one group of officers threw Ponomaryov on the asphalt, another group hung a new lock on the doors. From that moment on, the human rights activists, who had rented that office since 1999, found themselves out on the street. This ugly incident took place late at night as Vladimir Lukin, the government's human rights ombudsman, looked on, powerless to stop the injustice.

The raid on Ponomaryov and the For Human Rights organization has become the latest example of the continuing assault on civil society by President Vladimir Putin's siloviki-dominated dictatorship.

The night raid

on Lev Ponomaryov and his human rights organization has become the latest example of the assault on civil society by Putin's siloviki-driven dictatorship, writes columnist Vladimir Ryzhkov.

Several nongovernmental organizations gave temporary office space to Ponomaryov's organization, and billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov offered to pay one year's rent for new premises. But Ponomaryov is in no hurry to occupy new offices. He intends to prove that the eviction was illegal and will turn for help to the presidential council on human rights, which called an emergency meeting in response to this incident. The council also issued a report that detailed the authorities' violations of the law and other abuses of power.

Since Ponomaryov's organization paid the rent on May 29, the police eviction was a flagrant violation of the law.

The Moscow city Property Department notified Ponomaryov on Feb. 15 of its intention to terminate the lease and instructed his organization to find new premises within three months. But both sides held talks and reached a verbal agreement to resolve the situation. Right up until the moment of the raid, Ponomaryov had believed that the rental contract would eventually be prolonged. What's more, Mayor Sergei Sobyanin promised the same thing to ombudsman Alexander Muzykantsky during a meeting in March. Thus, the police raid came as a shock not only to the human rights workers, but also to Muzykantsky.

By law, a court decision is required for one side to terminate a rental agreement, and only a bailiff has the authority to evict someone by court order. But no court was involved in this case. The warning the organization received from the Moscow Property Department cannot serve as a basis for eviction unless it is accompanied by a court order.

The attack against Ponomaryov and his human rights organization was staged publicly, with excessive brutality by riot police with the obvious goal of humiliating and intimidating the organization for its many years of opposing human rights violations in Russia and for openly claiming that both the first and second verdicts against former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky were politically motivated.

According to a report compiled by the presidential council on human rights issued on June 24, Sobyanin personally gave the order to evict the organization. The riot police and other officers

also enlisted assistance from Alexei Mayorov, head of security for City Hall. One more sign that the raid was intended to cripple the organization's work and reputation was the fact that NTV television reporters entered the organization's offices along with the police and private security guards. They were quick to post footage of the incident on the Internet the same night.

The attackers locked the door to the bathroom, mocked employees by telling them to go to the toilet on the street and announcing that the door "only worked when leaving." Two young female employees were subjected to threats and interrogation.

After that, an illegal search of the offices was conducted and documents were seized.
The entire operation was overseen by two men in civilian clothes who refused to give their names when asked by Lukin, Muzykantsky and others. And then, in further violation of the law, Lukin was not even admitted into the premises and had no choice but to leave one hour later without so much as an explanation for what had happened.

The attack on the For Human Rights organization gave us a vivid portrait of Putin's Russia: Police raided the offices of peaceful human rights workers at 2:30 a.m. as if it had been the al-Qaida headquarters. They stood on the tables, crushing computers and other electronics under their boots, threw people on the floor and twisted their arms. Then, private security guards hauled them out onto the dirty asphalt. Seven people sought medical treatment and doctors recorded numerous injuries and contusions.

In the end, Sobyanin initiated his snap mayoral election campaign with all the trappings of Putin's Russia — by publicly abusing human right activists and making a mockery of the law.

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