

Member of Kremlin Human Rights Council Attacked in Voronezh

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Andrei Yurov, a member of the presidential human rights advisory panel.

A member of the Kremlin's human rights council suffered first-degree burns after attackers in Voronezh threw antiseptic in his face — the latest in a spate of attacks against rights groups in the city, local activists said.

Andrei Yurov, a member of the presidential human rights advisory panel who has voiced dissent against Russia's policies in Ukraine, told Interfax that two masked men threw the green-colored antiseptic into his face Tuesday night, while beating him and shouting "take that."

The House of Human Rights, a local coalition of human rights groups, said on its website that Yurov was attacked outside the organization's building and noted that the ambush appeared to be part of a wider offensive against rights advocates in Voronezh.

The coalition said that a day after it had held a series of events in the city last week, vandals removed or damaged signs promoting member organizations that had been displayed at the entrance to the House of Human Rights.

Opponents also placed a large banner in the center of Voronezh displaying photos of rights activists and reading: "The fifth column in Voronezh. These are traitors, scum and simply freaks. Know their faces."

Some of the supposed "freaks" were activists of charity organizations that helped children with disabilities, low-income families and members of student organizations, the rights coalition said in its online statement.

Witnesses identified the man who put up the banner as activist Alexander Kaminsky, a leader of the local group that backs Russian President Vladimir Putin, the statement said.

Another pro-government activist group in Voronezh has opened a VKontakte account, saying its goal is to "demonstrate the anti-Russian activities of human rights organizations," the House of Human Rights said. The coalition added that those activists were suspected of posting copies of critical reports online about rights groups around the city.

A spokesperson for the Presidential Human Rights Council said Yurov had suffered a burn to one of his eyes during the attack on Tuesday, Interfax reported.

Police in Voronezh are investigating the matter, a regional Interior Ministry branch spokesperson told Interfax.

Ahead of Russia's annexation of Crimea in March, Yurov cast doubts on the Kremlin's claims — and its justification for taking over the peninsula — that the rights of Russian speakers in Crimea were being violated.

Yurov, who has frequently traveled to Ukraine in recent years, told Dozhd television that he had not heard a single complaint from any Russian speaker in Crimea about their supposed persecution, and that local residents had told him the peninsula had about 600 schools that taught in Russian and only three that taught in Ukrainian — an "unthinkable ratio for a country where Ukrainian is after all the official language."

He also criticized Ukraine's previous, Moscow-backed administration for barring him from entering the country during opposition protests in February to meet with Ukrainian human rights advocates, Interfax reported at the time.

"I have never engaged in politics," Interfax quoted him as saying. "I have always worked on something that has no borders — the problem of human rights."

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