The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

New Russian Law May Mean 5 Years in Jail for Opposition Activist

By Anna Dolgov

January 21, 2015



Mark Galperin holds a 'Je suis Charlie' sign during a march for the victims in Moscow.

An opposition activist faces up to five years in prison for attending an unsanctioned rally, making him one of the first to feel the impact of controversial new amendments under which repeat violations of Russia's protest law constitute a criminal offense.

The latest charge has been brought against Mark Galperin, who landed in hot water for attending an unsanctioned rally in support of anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny on Jan. 15, Ekho Moskvy reported Tuesday.

In early July, amendments to Russia's law on public rallies significantly tightened the authorities' already firm grip over protests, making repeat violations a criminal offense punishable by up to five years in prison. Previously, such violations had been classified as mere administrative violations.

The amendments also vested the authorities with the power to hold violators of the law for up to 30 days in jail on the charge, an offense that previously warranted 15 days in jail.

Galperin, who is already serving a combined 38-day jail term for participating in two separate rallies, now faces up to five years behind bars on charges of "repeat violations of the established order of organizing or carrying out gatherings, meetings, demonstrations, marches or picketing," police monitoring news portal OVD-Info reported.

The case against Galperin follows a similar charge brought Friday against Vladimir Ionov, a 79-year-old pensioner and member of the pro-democracy group Solidarity, who has been detained four times for participating in unsanctioned protests since September, news reports said.

Russia's Constitution gives citizens the right to peacefully protest, but a law against unsanctioned protests prohibits citizens from holding rallies attended by more than one person without prior permission.

That restriction seems to be what brought about the initial charge against Galperin, who was sentenced to eight days in prison for a two-person demonstration in support of the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, an editor of which and other employees were gunned down by Islamic terrorists this month.

A Moscow court then added another 30 days in custody to Galperin's sentence for his participation in the Jan. 15 rally in Moscow for political opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Russian media reports said.

Ionov, the first defendant charged under the same law, is also accused of picketing with a "Je Suis Charlie" sign, also in support of the Charlie Hebdo victims, and for attending the Navalny rally.

Both men now face five years in prison.

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