

Russian Scientist Hounded by Officials After Buying Banned Substance

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Young Russian scientist Dmitry Lopatin demonstrates an element of his innovative solar panel technology.

When young Russian scientist Dmitry Lopatin ordered a can of solvent from an online store in China last year for work on his design for a new kind of solar panel, little did he suspect that the purchase could land him behind bars for 11 years.

The gamma-Butyrolactone that Lopatin ordered is included on the psychotropic substances list of the Federal Drugs Control Service (FSKN), and when Lopatin, 26, went to the post office in the southern city of Krasnodar where he lives and works to pick up the parcel, narcotics officers were waiting for him. He was handcuffed and taken to the FSKN's offices.

There Lopatin wrote a statement saying that he needed the solvent for his work on innovative solar panels that he says will be cheaper than foreign rival products and will be able to accumulate energy even in cloudy or foggy conditions, the scientist told The Moscow Times in

a phone interview this week.

“All we wanted to do is find the best way to make our product better,” said Lopatin.

“The substance was openly sold in an online store and there was no information that it was dangerous,” he said, adding that other solvents on the market were too carcinogenic.

But if the scientist thought that was the end of it, he was wrong.

Reaching Targets

In what analysts say is a typical case of the Russian law enforcement system striving to meet targets and tick boxes — regardless of the existence or otherwise of criminal intent — Lopatin was charged with the illegal acquisition and exportation of psychotropic substances on a large scale. Last month, a Krasnodar court found him guilty of buying drugs, though not of intending to sell them, and gave the scientist a three-year suspended sentence.

Lopatin's lawyer appealed the ruling, but he was not the only one. The prosecutors were not satisfied with the decision either, and also lodged an appeal, insisting that Lopatin should be declared a drug dealer and calling for him to be given 11 years in prison.

“We believe that his actions qualify as the exportation of psychotropic substances. We have of course taken into account that the accused is a young scientist whose inventions are of interest to investors,” a spokesman for the regional prosecutor told Rossiiskaya Gazeta government newspaper on Wednesday.

According to Lopatin's lawyer Nikolai Ostroukh, the reason prosecutors are so keen to put his client behind bars is because otherwise their superiors will see it as a sign of shoddy work.

“When the court found no proof that he was exporting drugs, it meant that the prosecutors had made a mistake. They don't want this on their record,” Ostroukh said in a phone interview.

Analysts agreed, saying law enforcement officers seek long court sentences in cases they have worked on to vindicate themselves and make them eligible for honors and other career-advancing forms of recognition.

Sudden Turnaround

On Friday, amid intense media scrutiny, prosecutors appeared to backtrack and said they would withdraw their appeal of the suspended sentence, Interfax reported.

"Bearing in mind Lopatin's personality, the circumstances of his crime and the fact that the psychotropic substance was confiscated, it has been decided to agree with the punishment handed down," a spokesman for Krasnodar's Prosecutor General told Interfax.

Ostroukh told The Moscow Times on Friday that the two sides had reached a compromise: Lopatin has withdrawn his appeal against the three-year suspended sentence, and the prosecutors have agreed not to pursue their goal of 11 years in jail for the scientist.

"I think that the intense media attention forced prosecutors to look at this case objectively," Ostroukh said.

"For now this was the best scenario for us — Lopatin does not want to spend more time on endless court hearings and wants to concentrate on his work," he said.

Rising Star

Lopatin's solar panel project was selected by several government agencies as a signature effort to diversify the Russian economy from its dependence on oil and gas exports. His work has been supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research, as well as by Skolkovo, Russia's flagship science foundation and a pet project of former president and current prime minister Dmitry Medvedev.

Lopatin, a graduate of the Kuban State University, was the only Russian innovator at the Hello Tomorrow conference in France in June, where his solar panel project was listed in the world's top 100 innovative projects.

But Lopatin's scientific credentials and his apparently innocent explanation of what he needed the solvent for were not enough to prevent drugs officials from prosecuting him.

Analysts say Lopatin's case reveals the desperate need for investigators and prosecutors to demonstrate that they have busted a dangerous criminal, or better still an organized gang.

The regional branches of the FSKN are pressured by Moscow to produce good statistics on the number of drug dealers caught, said Lev Levinson, head of the New Drug Policy program at the Human Rights Institute NGO.

"Nobody cares about individual people, this is all done for the sake of good numbers and statistics that open doors to various favors for officials," said Levinson in a phone interview.

Collateral Damage

Such cases reflect broad failures in Russia's fight against the proliferation of drugs, said Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russia's security services. Despite seemingly draconian cases such as this one, Russia is still the world's largest per capita consumer of heroin, he pointed out.

"I think this reflects the FSKN's very hard-nosed approach to the drugs problem in Russia," Galeotti said in written comments.

"This is an approach that lets [FSKN head] Viktor Ivanov look tough, but simply does not work, and leads to all kinds of extreme cases, from the Crimean addicts who were on methadone heroin substitution programs losing their treatment, to chemists and pharmacists being treated like drug dealers because of the substances they are using for innocent purposes," he said.

Growing Trend

In recent years, Russia has seen a spate of trials in which producers and exporters of chemical and natural materials have been accused of selling drugs.

In one of the most notorious cases, four members of a family of Russian bakers were sentenced to upward of eight years in prison each for having allegedly sold poppy-seed buns laced with opium out of their cafe.

In another case, Olga Zelenina, a specialist in poppy seed selection and a chemist at an agricultural institute in Penza, was accused of abuse of power after she submitted an expert testimony to a similar court case involving the sale of poppy seeds in which she said that producing drugs from them was unrealistic.

Despite the apparent rise of such cases, and undeterred by having stared down the barrel of spending 11 years of his life behind bars, Lopatin is resolved to continue his scientific work in Russia.

“I plan to continue working in Russia and also abroad,” he told The Moscow Times. “I could have left before the court's sentence, but I didn't.”

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