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Crimean Film Director Stands Trial in Russia on Terrorism Charges

By Jennifer Monaghan

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Oleg Sentsov

A Ukrainian film director went on trial in southern Russia on Tuesday accused of terrorism in a case that he and his supporters say is political revenge for his opposition of Crimea's annexation from Ukraine last year.

Oleg Sentsov, 39, pleaded not guilty in court in the city of Rostov-on-Don to several charges of terrorism. He stands accused of collaborating with Ukraine's nationalist Right Sector group to carry out two terror attacks in Crimea shortly after its annexation by Russia last March, the MediaZona news site that focuses on legal cases and human rights issues reported Tuesday.

The director, whose most acclaimed film "Gamer" debuted in 2012 at the Rotterdam Film Festival, also faces charges of establishing a terrorist organization, plotting to commit two further terrorist attacks and two counts of illegal arms and weapons trafficking, the report

said.

Sentsov says the charges were fabricated to punish him for his activities during Russia's takeover of Crimea, when he worked as an organizer for the For a United Ukraine movement, providing supplies to Ukrainian troops on the peninsula so they remained loyal to Kiev even as unmarked Russian troops fanned out across Crimea, news reports said. He also took part in the Maidan political protests in Kiev that led to the eventual ousting of Ukraine's pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovych shortly before Crimea's annexation.

“I have already said that I am not guilty. I repeat that I consider the case against me to have been politically fabricated,” Sentsov was quoted as telling the court Tuesday by MediaZona, which produced a live blog of the proceedings from the courtroom.

Sentsov has argued that he should be tried by a Ukrainian court, and insists he never applied for the Russian citizenship he was granted while in custody and that forms the legal basis for his trial in Russia.

Prominent cultural figures from both Russia and Ukraine have spoken out in defense of the filmmaker since his arrest last May. Last summer, pro-Kremlin film director Nikita Mikhalkov appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin to assist in the release of Sentsov, backing a similar call by Sergei Trymbach, head of the Ukrainian filmmakers union.

"I hope that Trymbach [has been] heard, and I hope that I am also heard," Mikhalkov was quoted as saying by U.S. film publication The Hollywood Reporter. "I join [Trymbach] and ask for [the] release [of] Oleg Sentsov.”

The Charges

State prosecutor Oleg Tkachenko said Tuesday that Sentsov had established a terrorist cell in Crimea after being contacted by members of Right Sector, MediaZona reported.

Acting on instructions from Right Sector, Sentsov convinced three other men — Alexei Chirny, Gennady Afanasyev and Enver Asanov — to join the organization, Tkachenko was quoted as saying. Two other men, Nikita Borkin and Alexander Kolchenko, later joined ranks with the group, he added.

Chirny and Afanasyev have admitted to their involvement in two incidents last spring, the first of which saw a fire bomb launched at the office of the Russian Community of Crimea, the pro-Russian organization headed by Sergei Aksyonov, the peninsula's prime minister since its takeover by Russian troops last February. The second incident saw Afanasyev and Chirny — along with Borkin, Kolchenko and a fifth man, Ilya Zuikov — try to set fire to the Simferopol branch of Russia's ruling United Russia party, MediaZona reported.

Tkachenko told the court that Sentsov had instructed the group to carry out both attacks, while also making plans for them to blow up a local statue of Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin and a local eternal flame monument, MediaZona reported.

Sentsov's lawyer Dmitry Dinze has said the case against his client is based primarily on the testimony of Chirny and Afanasyev, who are now serving jail terms, and that investigators

have no concrete evidence linking him to the attacks, MediaZona reported Tuesday.

A Done Deal

Sentsov told a pretrial court hearing earlier this year that he had been found guilty before the trial had even started.

“The federal service of lawlessness is really good at sewing up cases with large white stitches. I will definitely be jailed for 20 years, because this sentence was already handed down to me on the first day, before my formal detention — it's a done deal,” he was quoted as saying by MediaZona.

Sentsov also says he was tortured by Russian investigators in an attempt to extract a confession from him.

“He was covered with a plastic bag, which was used to strangle him until he fell unconscious. He was threatened with rape and murder," Dinze was quoted as saying by MediaZona on Tuesday.

Investigators refused to open a case into the alleged torture, saying that Sentsov had likely sustained injuries during BDSM sexual activity shortly before his arrest — an explanation there were no grounds to support, his lawyer added.

Savchenko Parallels

Another Ukrainian charged in Russia over the conflict — pilot Nadezhda Savchenko — is also preparing to stand trial after more than a year in Russian detention.

Until recently Savchenko, 34, was facing charges of complicity in the deaths of Igor Kornelyuk and Anton Voloshin, employees of state-owned television channel Rossia who were killed in eastern Ukraine during a mortar attack last June. Investigators said Savchenko, a pilot in the Ukrainian army, had provided the coordinates for the attack.

But reading out a final list of charges against Savchenko earlier this month, Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said prosecutors were now pursuing her on grounds of direct involvement in the killings, Interfax reported at the time. She denies all the charges and says she was kidnapped in Ukraine and brought across the Russian border against her will to stand trial.

The Prosecutor General's Office approved the indictment against her last Monday, paving the way for a trial, which will take place at the Donetsk district court in the Rostov region.

Natalya Taubina, director of the Public Verdict Foundation, a nongovernmental organization that offers legal assistance to victims of human rights abuses at the hands of Russian law enforcement officers, said that both Sentsov and Savchenko's cases were in all likelihood trumped-up.

“In my understanding, they are completely politically motivated cases that have nothing to do with the law, the rule of law or the Criminal Code. But like any political process it is a demonstration of power and a sending of a certain signal to society,” Taubina told The

Moscow Times.

Sentsov's trial is due to continue on Monday.

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