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Trial of Russian Performance Artist Pavlensky Begins in Moscow

By The Moscow Times

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Artist Pyotr Pavlensky holds a petrol can during a protest action titled "Threat" in front of the Federal Security Service (FSB) headquarters in central Moscow, Nov. 9, 2015.

The trial of notorious Russian performance artist Pyotr Pavlensky began today in a Moscow court. He remains in detention as two criminal cases against him continue.

He is accused of damaging historical heritage by setting the door of the Moscow headquarters of the Federal Security Service (FSB) on fire in November 2015, a protest he called "A Threat."

Initially, he was charged for this stunt on the grounds of "vandalism motivated by ideological hatred," but this was later changed.

Pavlensky is also facing vandalism charges for setting car tires on fire on a St. Petersburg bridge in February 2014, a protest action in support of Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution which he named "Svoboda" ("Freedom").

The court hearings were initially held in St. Petersburg but were moved to Moscow following the artist's detention.

Pavlensky demands that his performances be classed as an act of terrorism. “I demand to be suspected of terrorism. I think it follows the logic of your system. Unless the demands are met, I refuse to fulfill your rituals,” he said.

His demands were ignored, so the artist has vowed to sit through the court hearings in silence without answering questions from the judges.

During the trial, one prosecutor explained that the FSB building has historical and cultural value as cultural figures were held there in the 1930s. One witness — an FSB employee — told the court he heard Pavlensky during the protest shouting “the FSB is holding the whole of Russia in fear.”

As his defense witnesses, Pavlensky invited three sex workers to court, whom he paid.

“Whether you like it or not, there is no difference between prostitutes, judges, prosecutors, teachers, directors or bureaucrats,” he explained.

Pavlensky was held in Moscow's Butyrka prison before being moved to the “Medved” detention centre. The day before the trial, it became known that the artist was beaten in the Moscow City Court. “I have broken a knee, fractured a rib and internal bruising,” he wrote in a note from his detention cell.

Pavlensky refused to stand up in court. His verdict is expected on May 19.

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