The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Then They Came for Svetova

An unexpected law enforcement raid at the home of long-time journalist and rights activist Zoya Svetova raises fears of repression

By Oliver Carroll

March 01, 2017



Zoya Svetova has criticized the Russian penal system and campaigned for political prisoners' rights.
Pavel Golovkin/AP

For much of the day on Tuesday, Feb. 28, the image of a central Moscow stairwell occupied the national news. There, a gaggle of journalists, artists and writers stood waiting, photographing and filming outside the apartment of journalist and activist Zoya Svetova.

On the other side of the door, a dozen law enforcement operatives were conducting a search of Svetova's family home. According to an official statement published on the Investigative Committee's website, the raid was part of a criminal investigation into YUKOS, the oil company once owned by exiled oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Svetova is perhaps the most prominent contributor to "Open Russia," a media platform founded and funded by Khodorkovsky. As a journalist, she has grown famous for aggressive investigations on subjects like corruption, activism, and torture. As an activist, she made her mark as a critic of the penal system and a defender of political prisoners' rights.

But her name is equally synonymous with the dissident movement in general. She is the daughter of persecuted Soviet writer Felix Svetov and has a wide circle of friends in Moscow's liberal intelligentsia.

Speaking at the end of the ten-hour ordeal, Svetova told journalists it was not the first time authorities had searched her family home. The previous occasion, she said, was in early 1985, when the Soviet police state was at its peak. They arrested her father that day.

"Just imagine: Thirty years pass, and once again you get the knock on your door," Svetova said. "When they were looking through the apartment, they even found the original search protocol and recognized the colleagues who had signed it — I'd thought they were long dead."

Writing on Facebook, Svetova's lawyer, Anna Stavitskaya, said investigators were using a 14-year-old criminal case as the formal pretext of the raid. Svetova is, in fact, a formal witness to this case, and had offered to give a statement to prosecutors. Investigators say they are looking to see if they can establish any criminal money flows through NGOs or individuals.

According to the journalist, however, the raid group tricked her into opening the door by pretending they were delivering a court summons. She said that the group removed a number of working documents, notebooks, several flash drives, a tablet computer, her children's old computers and her husband's phone.

Svetova was dismissive of suggestions she has any unlawful links with Khodorkovsky, who she says she has never met. "I've always been open about my work with Open Russia. I'm a journalist, I receive a salary and I pay my taxes to the state as I'm supposed to," she said. "This is an act of intimidation."

It is not entirely clear who the final intended target of the raid was. On the one hand, last year, prosecutors reopened criminal cases against YUKOS — an attempt, presumably, to increase pressure on the exiled Khodorkovsky. Other Open Russia employees have also been targeted in raids.

At the same time, Svetova says investigators seemed more interested in her role in a penal reform NGO and as a member of a civilian prison oversight committee than they were in her links to Khodorkovsky.

The full scope of the investigation — its aims and objectives — will probably remain unclear for many weeks. But Svetova has hinted at the worst possible scenarios.

"They seemed to be fishing around to pull a case together," the journalist said. "I thought they were going to take me to prison there and then."

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/03/01/then-they-came-for-svetova-a57306