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Russian Terror Suspects Detained Under Guise of 'Coronavirus Test'

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The three men reportedly planned attacks "to establish a state system based on the principles of one nationality's exclusivity and superiority over the others." **Yuri Mashkov / TASS**

Authorities have detained a group of shooting-sport enthusiasts in Far East Russia on charges of terrorism under the guise of testing its alleged leader for coronavirus, Russian media reported Monday.

The Federal Security Service (FSB) raided the three suspects' homes in the Sakhalin region over the weekend and a court placed them in pre-trial detention Monday, the Sakhalin.info website reported. The men, whose relatives told the outlet that they have no criminal history, face up to life in prison on charges of organizing a terrorist organization.

Investigators allege that Alexander Kozin, 38, invited two accomplices to join him in mid-2018 to "violently seize power and change Russia's constitutional order," the independent Dozhd television channel cited his lawyer as saying.

Kozin, along with Arseniy Lesnoy, 26, and Oleg Safonov, whose age is unknown, reportedly

planned attacks “to establish a state system based on the principles of one nationality’s exclusivity and superiority over the others.”

The suspects’ enthusiasm for a plastic-pellet shooting sport known as airsoft has drawn comparisons to the high-profile case of young anti-fascists convicted this year on what their supporters call fabricated terrorism charges.

Kozin was detained Sunday after one man in civilian clothes and a face mask and a second man in a white protective suit told him he needed to test for coronavirus, his wife Tatyana recounted to Dozhd. Authorities then entered their home and seized electronic equipment, grenades and a suspicious object resembling an explosive that the Kozins accused the FSB agents of planting inside Tatyana’s chest of drawers.

Kozin is reported to be the creator of the Sakhalin region’s volunteer search-and-rescue organization.

“The absurdity of the charges is that he’s a public figure and has a registered search-and-rescue team. They say he doesn’t like foreigners, but the team’s Instagram page posts information about missing persons including non-Slavs,” Kozin’s attorney Yevgeny Balabas told Dozhd.

“This doesn’t fit the profile of a terrorist,” he was quoted as saying.

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