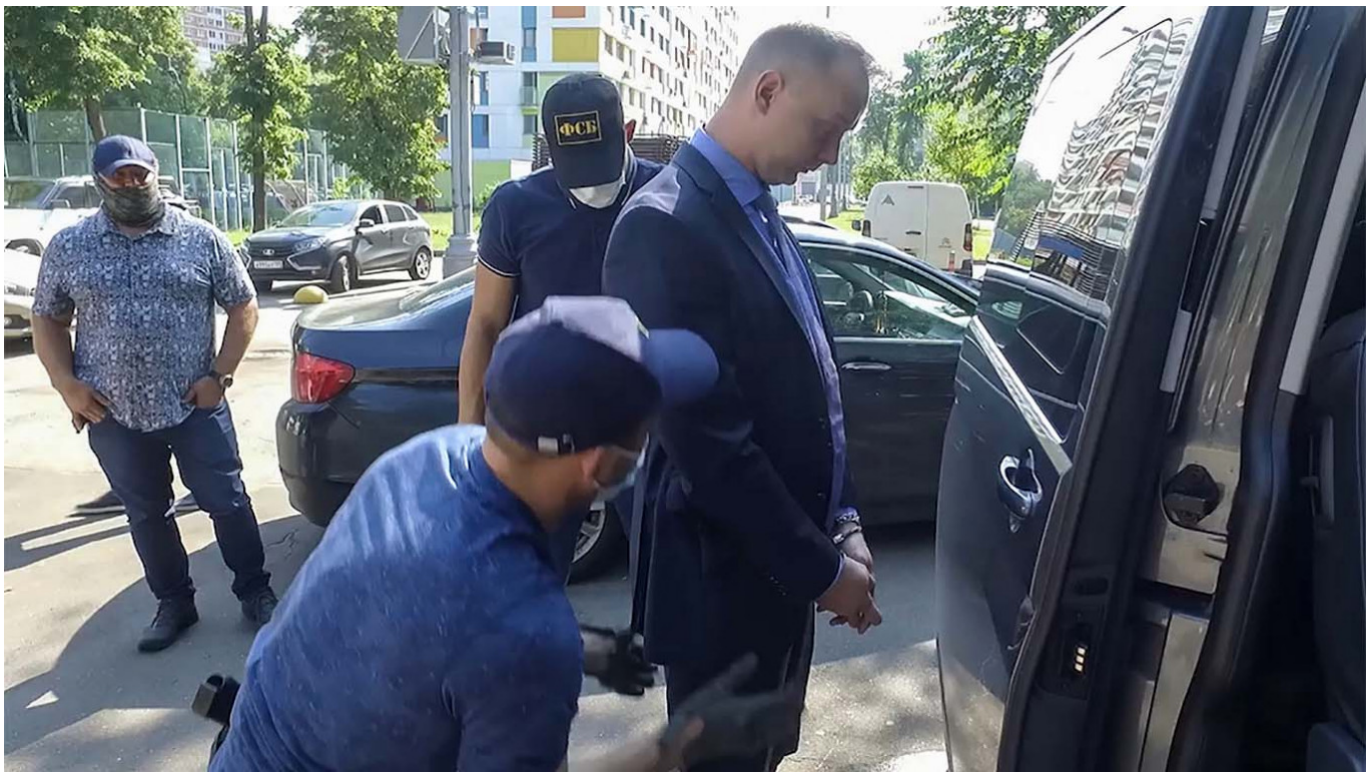
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Colleagues Rally Behind Russian Former Journalist Detained for Treason

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Safronov was arrested outside his apartment. **Public Relations Centre of Federal Security Service / TASS**

Allegations that former journalist Ivan Safronov passed state secrets to foreign intelligence strain credulity, his colleagues told The Moscow Times after he was detained on suspicion of state treason.

Special agents detained Safronov outside his apartment earlier Tuesday, only two months after he left his decade-long journalism career to become an adviser to Russia's space chief Dmitry Rogozin. Safronov was a defense correspondent at the Kommersant business daily for 10 years, and for Vedomosti between 2019 and May this year.

"I'll never believe that Vanya could give or sell state secrets or any information that could harm Russia's interests to foreigners," said Safronov's former colleague, deputy head of Kommersant's foreign desk Yelena Chernenko, who was later detained by police when she joined solo picketers outside Federal Security Services (FSB) headquarters in central Moscow.

“I think it’s a complete stitch-up,” Chernenko told The Moscow Times by phone, linking the treason case to her colleague’s journalism despite the Kremlin’s denial of such suggestions.

“He wrote things that clearly displeased the authorities,” she said.

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Alexander Gabuev, chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center’s Asia-Pacific program, also cast doubt on the Federal Security Service’s (FSB) claims that Safronov had shared classified information with an unnamed NATO country’s intelligence service.

“I've known Ivan personally for around 10 years and don’t really believe the charges,” Gabuev said.

“I’d like as objective and transparent an investigation as possible, which is difficult considering the alleged offense,” he told The Moscow Times.

Anonymous sources told Russian news agencies that Safronov’s trial, which could send him to jail for 20 years, will be held behind closed doors.

Other experts questioned the timing of Safronov’s arrest shortly after he changed his career path and warned that journalists writing on topics of military affairs risk a similar fate.

“Rogozin is such a high-level official that all his advisers are thoroughly checked,” Vladimir Zherebenkov, a lawyer who represents the U.S. Marine Paul Whelan, who was sentenced to 16 years in a Russian prison on espionage charges last month, told Russia’s The Insider news website.

“Nobody would have appointed [Safronov] if work was being done on him at the time,” Zherebenkov said. “That means that the criminal case could have been given the go-ahead just recently.”

Rogozin himself said earlier Tuesday that Safronov had no access to classified information in his two months of work as media adviser.

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