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The Dangerous Job of Protecting the Environment in Russia

Environmental rights groups in the country are facing severe harassment by the authorities.

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Andrei Rudomakha **EWNC**

Shortly before 6 a.m. on Nov. 18, a large group of heavily armed masked men buzzed the door of a house in Krasnodar in southwestern Russia.

The house serves as an informal office for Environmental Watch for Northern Caucasus (EWNC), a prominent independent environmental group.

For years the group had monitored environmental issues in that region, including sensitive topics such as the impact of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games and other questionable construction and infrastructure projects.

Andrey Rudomakha, EWNC's head, called to the men outside that he was coming to open the door. But they broke down the door and grabbed Rudomakha and put him and another activist there face down on the floor.

The intruders turned out to be a special police unit who took away computers, hard drives, flashcards from cameras and the environmentalists' personal phones.

The search lasted five hours. Rudomakha managed to call his lawyer, but the police refused to allow the lawyer to enter the office. When Rudomakha was taken away by police for questioning, his lawyer was not allowed to accompany him.

What happened to EWNC is a prime example of the pressure facing environmental rights groups in Russia today, as they come under severe harassment from authorities and their staff and supporters are targeted. The problems seem to be particularly acute in the Krasnodar region.

Rudomakha was informed that he is a witness in a criminal case against a local activist, Leonid Malyavin, a pensioner accused of participating in the activities of the civic movement Open Russia, which the government has labelled an "undesirable organization."

The Investigative Committee, Russia's main criminal investigation service, opened a criminal case against Malyavin in early November for reposting on his social media account an August 2019 article about a scientific breakthrough from the Open Media online outlet. In July 2020, a local magistrate ruled that Open Russia conducts its activities in Russia under 11 different names, including Open Media.

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Rudomakha was told he was a witness because he and Malyavin were friends on Facebook, even though Rudomakha has nearly 4,300 — and Malyavin just under 2,000 — friends, and they hadn't seen each other for over 18 months.

This, the police deemed a sufficiently urgent threat to the public or national security to justify the early morning raid. But this is not the first one that EWNC and Rudomakha have experienced.

According to Rudomakha, the organization has been raided seven times since 2016 and the last four used the same methods — very early in the morning, armed masked men, breaking doors, excessive violence, confiscating all electronics. Three of them were in 2019.

Two were related to criminal cases against local activists who were also allegedly connected with Open Russia. Interestingly, in both cases, the raids of the suspects' and other witnesses' houses were conducted in a low-key manner and without armed masked men. It seems the raids involving full force have only been used on the EWNC premises.

All this raises the question of whether the raids on EWNC were in genuine pursuit of a criminal investigation or simply an opportunity to target and harass environmental activists. The computers and other electronics confiscated during previous raids are released months later, effectively undermining and paralyzing the work of the organization.

Rudomakha told me that perhaps the goal is to strangle his organization.

EWNC is trying to fight back, contesting the legality of the previous raids. Only one legal challenge yielded success, but the organization intends to challenge the most recent November raid as well.

Local authorities have attempted to label EWNC "foreign agents" under the abusive law that makes it much harder for groups to operate, but in a rare win EWNC succeeded in getting those decisions quashed in higher courts.

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The authorities also went after EWNC and Rudomakha with "undesirables" charges because of an interview he gave to MBKh Media which, according to the local magistrate, is one of Open Russia's "avatars." Their lawyer successfully defended the organization against those charges, but Rudomakha was fined.

Moreover, while law enforcement and prosecutors are so involved in supposed "crimes" of the EWNC and Rudomakha, actual crimes against them are not effectively investigated.

The investigation into a 2017 violent attack on Rudomakha that landed him in the hospital has still not yielded any results, even though the attackers were caught on a CCTV camera. The attackers also made mobile calls that should have been traceable, and forensic experts found a fingerprint and other evidence. Still, the police claim to be unable to identify the suspects.

Likewise, an investigation into a 2016 attack on a joint EWNC and Greenpeace Russia environmental camp in Krasnodar was closed in late 2018 without anyone being held responsible.

Environmental activists in the Krasnodar region and in particular EWNC are certainly among the most targeted and harassed environmental groups in the country, but they are not alone. During the declared "Year of Ecology" in Russia in 2017, at least 14 environmental nongovernmental organizations were either shut down or suspended all work as a result of the "foreign agent" law.

Last year, a prominent Russian environmental activist had to flee the country as criminal cases were opened against her in connection with the same law. The Russian Social Ecological Union continues to document how environmental activists are harassed, persecuted and attacked in the country.

Russian federal and local Krasnodar authorities need to revise their priorities and focus on protecting and assisting the important work of civic society activists instead of continuing to harass and intimidate them and cover up for those who attack them.

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