The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Remands French NGO Worker in 'Foreign Agent' Case

By AFP

June 08, 2024



Laurent Vinatier, a 47-year-old who works for a Swiss conflict mediation NGO, was charged with breaching Russia's "foreign agents" law. **Investigative Committee / Telegram**

Updates throughout.

A Moscow court on Friday ordered a French citizen accused of gathering Russian military information to be held in pre-trial detention, in the latest case of a Western citizen being detained in Russia.

Laurent Vinatier, a 47-year-old who works for a Swiss conflict mediation NGO, was arrested on Thursday and officially charged with breaching Russia's "foreign agents" law, charges which carry up to five years in jail.

Vinatier, who was held in a metal cage at the back of the courtroom, accepted the accusations against him.

"I have accepted that I am guilty," he told the court. "I present my apologies."

The court session was a hearing on selecting a measure of restraint, not a review of the case against him.

The judge ordered Vinatier sent to jail until at least Aug. 5, pending trial.

Related article: Russia Detains French Citizen for Gathering Military Information

Investigators accuse the Frenchman of gathering military information that could be used against Russia by foreign states.

Under Russian law, people who collect, report or share information related to Russia's military or security services are required to register as "foreign agents."

Vinatier is an adviser with the Geneva-based Center for Humanitarian Dialogue and a veteran researcher on Russia and other post-Soviet countries.

The Center for Humanitarian Dialogue "works to prevent and resolve armed conflicts around the world through mediation and discreet diplomacy," according to a statement on its website.

After his arrest on Thursday, it said it was working "to secure Laurent's release."

French President Emmanuel Macron on Friday demanded the immediate release of Vinatier, saying the "propaganda" against him "does not match reality."

Appearing in court on Friday in a dark shirt and jeans, Vinatier spoke Russian and French during the hearing.

"What happened is not against me, it's against the organization as a whole," he said.

The Swiss foreign ministry said the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue was an NGO that was "funded by several states."

Switzerland said it "does not finance its activities in connection with Russia."

Vinatier's lawyers had argued for him to be placed under house arrest and said he could stay at his wife's apartment in Moscow.

"I have no intention of obstructing the investigation. Yesterday I had a great conversation with the investigators, proof of my good intentions," Vinatier said when questioned in court.

He faces up to five years in prison if convicted, although Russia has previously used "foreign agent" charges as a pretext to arrest people before leveling more serious charges.

The law has typically been used to target Russian citizens and domestic critics of the Kremlin, such as activists, campaigners and independent journalists, rather than foreign citizens.

U.S.-Russian journalist Alsu Kurmasheva was arrested on a similar charge last year, before a

more serious case of spreading "false information" about the army was leveled against her.

On Thursday, Macron said Vinatier had no connections with the French government.

"It is one of our citizens working for a Swiss NGO... it was in no way someone who was working for France," Macron told French television in an interview.

In Russia, suspects can spend months in pre-trial detention, with the period in jail regularly extended by a few months in court hearings.

Russia has also arrested several Western citizens in recent years, drawing accusations that Moscow is holding them to trade in prisoner exchanges for Russians jailed abroad.

U.S. journalist Evan Gershkovich was arrested on "espionage" charges last year and former U.S. marine Paul Whelan has been in prison for more than five years, also accused of spying.

Both reject the charges and have been designated "wrongfully detained" by the White House.

U.S. basketball player Brittney Griner was freed in a prisoner exchange for convicted Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout in 2022 after she was arrested at a Moscow airport with medicinal cannabis oil.

Vinatier's arrest came days after France's domestic intelligence agency detained a 26-year-old Russian-Ukrainian man on suspicion of planning a violent act after he injured himself in an explosion.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/06/08/russia-remands-french-ngo-worker-in-foreign-agent-case-a85347