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Russian Comedian Beaten During Arrest in Belarus, Human Rights Official Says

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Artemyi Ostanin. **t.me/moscowcourts**

Police officers beat Russian stand-up comedian Artemyi Ostanin in Belarus during his arrest this week over a viral joke about a disabled man, a member of Russia's presidential human rights council said Thursday.

Russian authorities pressed criminal charges against Ostanin for inciting hatred after pro-war bloggers took offense at one of his shows in February. During the stand-up routine, he joked about being run over by a homeless man who had "hit a mine" and had been "skateboarding without legs for 20 years" in the Moscow metro.

Ostanin's lawyer, Veronika Polyakova, said Belarusian law enforcement officers beat him with batons and used stun guns on him in a forest before handing him over to Russian authorities, according to human rights council member Eva Merkacheva.

A photo shared by Merkacheva on Telegram showed Ostanin's back covered in bruises and welts from apparent baton strikes.

Doctors diagnosed him with a fractured spine, respiratory and lung issues, as well as multiple bruises and abrasions, Merkacheva said. He was also found to have difficulty breathing due to an abnormal collection of air between his lung and chest wall.

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Despite his injuries, a Moscow court on Tuesday ordered Ostanin to remain in pre-trial detention until May 15. If convicted, he faces up to six years in prison.

Ostanin has insisted his joke in February was misinterpreted and was not directed at a Ukraine war veteran, as pro-war bloggers had claimed.

Russian investigators initially said Ostanin had offended a Ukraine war veteran but later removed any reference to military service in their announcement of his arrest.

Merkacheva said Ostanin requested an official investigation into the treatment he endured during his arrest but stated that Russian authorities did not use physical force against him.

“He’s a Russian citizen, and we must protect his rights that were violated in another state,” Merkacheva said.

Ostanin is one of just 10 people to face criminal prosecution exclusively on charges of inciting hatred since 2022, when Russia intensified its crackdown on dissent following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, according to the exiled news outlet Agentstvo.

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