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Russian Entrepreneur Kidnapped, Beaten and Released After Bashing Chechens Online

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Areg Shchepikhin. **Social media**

39-year-old tech entrepreneur Areg Shchepikhin, who posted critical comments about ethnic Chechens and Islam on social media, was abducted in broad daylight from a central Moscow railway station on Tuesday.

Videos shared on social media showed several bearded men in suits carrying Shchepikhin out of the Yaroslavsky station concourse and into the trunk of an SUV before driving off as witnesses and security personnel watched on.

The Moscow police said its transportation unit had launched an investigation into the videos showing "unlawful acts against the person."

In Monday's expletive-laden Instagram post, Shchepikhin railed against Chechens and Islam, saying: "I f*cked your Allah, your Quran and everything you hold sacred."

The Telegram channel Baza, which has purported links to Russia's security services, claimed Shchepikhin was abducted "minutes after" posting one of his latest videos, which it said may have allowed the alleged kidnappers to identify his location.

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Another Telegram channel, Shot, reported that authorities stopped the SUV in which Shchepikhin was placed later that night, but that he was no longer in the vehicle.

According to Shot, three of the alleged kidnappers identified themselves to police officers as "active members of the National Guard who were carrying out an operative procedure."

The men were seen exiting a police station on Wednesday morning, one of whom uttered the Chechen rallying cry "Akhmat Sila" ("Akhmat Power" or "Akhmat Rules") as they boarded the SUV, according to video shared by Shot.

Akhmed Dudayev, Chechnya's information and national policy minister, on Wednesday said that Shchepikhin was "not abducted, but detained by law enforcement officers who cooperate with authorities in Moscow." He claimed Shchepikhin's Instagram posts could qualify as several criminal offenses, including offending the feelings of religious believers and the justification of Nazism.

Dudayev accused media outlets of deliberately misidentifying Shchepikhin as a victim and defended his kidnapping by invoking Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

"In a country that's conducting a special military operation against Nazism, justifying and defending Nazism is a double crime," Dudayev wrote on Telegram.

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Shchepikhin had published photographs of himself with several Russian political figures and celebrities, including Russia's chief negotiator at peace talks with Ukraine in Turkey, Vladimir Medinsky.

The kidnapping is consistent with the abduction and disappearance of critics of the Chechen authorities, said lawyer and head of the human rights group Crew Against Torture, Sergei Babinets.

Later on Wednesday, Baza reported that Shchepikhin was released around midnight and spent the night at a local hostel. The Moscow Times was unable to immediately verify that report.

Images of Shchepikhin released Wenesday show him with a bruised face and walking with a limp.

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