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Kidnapped Moscow Entrepreneur Faces Charges of Insulting Religious Feelings

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Areg Shchepikhin. **Baza**

A tech entrepreneur whose widely filmed broad-daylight kidnapping from a central Moscow railway station has stirred controversy will face criminal charges alongside his kidnappers, Russian investigators announced Thursday.

Chechen authorities said Areg Shchepikhin, 39, was "not abducted, but detained by law enforcement officers" in front of witnesses and security personnel at the Yaroslavsky station on Tuesday. Shchepikhin, who is said to be a dual Russian-Armenian citizen, was beaten and released on the city's outskirts later that night.

Russia's Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said six people were charged with kidnapping and abuse of office in connection with the incident.

Moscow's Zamoskvoretsky District Court is expected to determine whether to place them in pre-trial detention later on Thursday.

Additionally, the Investigative Committee said its psycholinguistic examination of Shchepikhin's social media videos ahead of his kidnapping revealed "signs of incitement to commit violence against and humiliate people based on their national/ethnic traits."

Shchepikhin's abduction by bearded men in suits who are suspected of being ethnic Chechens came one day after he published an Instagram video railing against Chechens and Islam.

"I f*cked your Allah, your Quran and everything you hold sacred," Shchepikhin said in one of the videos Monday.

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Russia's Investigative Committee said it had launched criminal cases into offending religious feelings and public calls for extremist activity, and was carrying out "investigative actions" with Shchepikhin.

"He will be charged, and a form of restraint will be determined," the law enforcement agency said.

Shchepikhin could face up to six years in prison if convicted.

The Telegram channel Baza, which has purported links to Russia's security services, claimed the alleged kidnappers told investigators they were instructed to detain Shchepikhin by "higher management," whom they refused to identify. Three of the men were said to be active members of Russia's National Guard.

"They waited for instructions, but did not receive them and were eventually detained," Baza reported Thursday.

The Moscow Times could not independently verify those claims.

"I wasn't tortured that much," Shchepikhin, his face bruised, told Baza after his release.

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