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“Regimes like the Russian one will have no shame in exploiting the INTERPOL network ... We need to develop better controls of the system, to prevent situations like mine”



PETR SILAEV

Summary

Petr Silaev, 28, is a well-known Russian anti-fascist activist and writer. In July 2010, he participated in a demonstration in Moscow in support of the Khimki forest ecological campaign. Following the demonstration, a widespread crackdown by the police led to the arrest of activists across the city. Fearing that he would be arrested, Petr fled Moscow and was recognised as a political refugee in Finland.

Months later, on a trip to Spain, Petr was suddenly arrested further to a request circulated by Moscow prosecutors via INTERPOL's channels. He was held for eight days in a high-security prison and spent six months unable to leave Spain while the courts considered an extradition request from Russia, which was eventually rejected on the basis that it was politically-motivated. Fair Trials International is now seeking to have Petr's name deleted from INTERPOL's databases, while Petr seeks to move on with his life.

Background

A well-known activist

Petr Silaev, a 28 year-old Russian national, is a well-known activist from Moscow. The son of a professor and scientist, in his teenage years he joined Antifa, a group of young anti-fascist activists opposed to the many nationalist groups prevalent in Russia. He frequently took part in musical events organised for the benefit of the victims of neo-nazi violence, and became a recognised figure within Moscow civil society, developing a media profile through his work in the publishing sector, online blogging and literary writing.

The Khimki demonstration



In July 2010, Petr participated in a demonstration in the city of Khimki, in the Moscow area. The demonstration was a show of support for the ecological movement resisting the deforestation of the Khimki forest under controversial plans for a new St Petersburg-Moscow highway. Hundreds of young anti-fascists and concerned citizens came together on the streets of Khimki to denounce the local authorities' corrupt handling of the project and their perceived recourse to unlawful harassment and violence to suppress the Khimki ecological campaigners.

Petr played an active part in the demonstration, leading chants such as "It's our forest", "It's time to respond" and "Let's stop deforestation" with a megaphone. All of his actions can be seen on the internet, as the whole event was filmed on a number of hand-held devices.

Police crackdown

Following the demonstration, during which some other demonstrators had caused superficial damage to the Khimki City administration building, Moscow police began widespread arrests of recognised anti-fascist activists across the Moscow region. Petr feared that he, too, would be targeted and was forced to flee.

Escape & asylum

Petr made his way to Minsk, in Belarus, from where he managed to make his way to the European Union. In April 2012, he was granted asylum in Finland, the Government recognising that he was a 'politically-profiled activist' who risked serious harm at the hands of the authorities if he were returned to Russia.

Having been granted political asylum, Petr believed that he was beyond the reach of the Moscow authorities, and began to get on with his life, continuing to blog on Russian affairs and travelling within Europe to attend conferences, speak at events and assist other activists escaping Russia.

Arrest and detention further to an INTERPOL request

In August 2012, Petr travelled to Grenada, Spain, where he checked in to a cheap youth hostel. At 5am, he was awoken by the shouts of anti-terrorist police bursting into the room which he was sharing with other students and travellers. He was arrested and told that he was wanted for criminal offences in Russia. Petr immediately denied any wrongdoing and told the police that he was a recognised refugee. Despite providing this information, however, he was handcuffed and taken to police car.

Once at the police station, Petr was presented with a document from a Spanish court ordering his arrest based on a request which Moscow prosecutors had circulated through INTERPOL's channels. The request stated that, through his involvement in the demonstration in Khimki in 2010, Petr had committed the offence of 'hooliganism'.

Petr spent several hours at the police station before being placed in a police van, still handcuffed, and taken to the competent extradition court in Madrid. Although he presented documents showing that he was a refugee and a known activist, the court ordered his detention. He was subsequently held in a large high-security prison outside Madrid for eight days, during which he was denied permission to contact his family.

Six months in limbo

After the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees intervened on his behalf, Petr was released from detention. He was ordered to present himself at his local court once a week, and was then left out on the highway in the Spanish desert to fend for himself.

Confined to Spain for the foreseeable future, Petr was forced to put his life on hold indefinitely, and was unable to meet cultural commitments such as the launch of the Finnish translation of his book, *Exodus*, at a book fair in Helsinki which had been scheduled for months. Mindful that this had all begun with an INTERPOL request, Petr contacted Fair Trials International for help.

Extradition refused

In February 2013, the *Audiencia Nacional*, Spain's main extradition court, refused the extradition request from Russia on the basis that the prosecution against Petr was politically-motivated, and that there was nothing in the papers submitted by the Russian police authorities to suggest that Petr had done anything more than simply exercise his fundamental rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

CCF application

As Petr carries on his efforts to seek compensation for the ordeal he suffered in Spain, Fair Trials International has made an application to the Commission for the Control of INTERPOL's Files (CCF), a data protection panel tasked with overseeing INTERPOL's information-processing, to have any information concerning Petr removed from Interpol's databases.

FTI's concerns

- **Politically-motivated abuse of INTERPOL's systems:** INTERPOL exists to help national police forces cooperate to fight serious cross-border crime, but in Petr's case, the Russian authorities have used INTERPOL's networks to persecute a political activist beyond their frontiers.
- **Need for better safeguards within INTERPOL:** The diffusion which led to Petr's arrest was based on a vaguely worded allegation of 'hooliganism' – a broadly defined offence which was used to prosecute the feminist punk band Pussy Riot – holding Petr criminally liable for merely convening a group of demonstrators. FTI is concerned that INTERPOL's review mechanisms failed to detect this as an attempt to use INTERPOL's systems to repress political dissent.

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