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Russia: Prominent political activist repeatedly jailed for covering the protest online

On 10 June, Leonid Volkov, a key aide to a prominent Russian opposition activist, Alexey Navalny, was sentenced to 15 days of “administrative arrest” for allegedly organizing a protest rally against pension reform in St. Petersburg on 9 September 2018. This is a clear violation of his rights to freedom of expression.

Under Russia’s unduly restrictive legislation, holding an “unauthorized” assembly (a rally that has not received prior permission from the authorities) is considered an administrative offence, however if the offence is committed three times within six months, it is considered a criminal offence punishable by a prison sentence.

In fact, at the time the rally in question was held, Leonid Volkov was 700 km away from St. Petersburg and even further from Moscow, in a studio in Vilnius, Lithuania, covering the peaceful protests taking place across Russia on that day, live on his YouTube channel. On 22 May he was sentenced to 20 days of “administrative arrest” for the same broadcast as a purported “organizer” of the protest in Moscow and has since served this term in full only to be immediately re-arrested and sent to serve a further 15 days in detention for the same “offence”, this time “committed” in St. Petersburg. Journalists present in the courtroom during Leonid Volkov’s trial reported that they saw a list of six more places where police think Volkov had “organized” protests by means of his YouTube broadcast. If the reports are true, he may face six more such trials and six more “administrative arrests,” and could face more than four months in detention in total.

The imprisonment of government critics, human rights defenders and other activists for peaceful street protest is a blatant violation of their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. The detention of Leonid Volkov solely for broadcasting footage of, and commenting on the rally is doubly shameful, and his repeated imprisonment for the same “offence” is a dangerous precedent. This case illustrates how the Russian authorities are prepared to exploit already unduly restrictive laws for political purposes.

The Russian authorities must stop qualifying peaceful rallies, whose organizers duly submit all necessary prior notifications in accordance with the law, as “unsanctioned” and must desist from trying to prevent them from happening on this basis. The organizers of

peaceful demonstrations should not be prosecuted, and those who post online coverage of rallies must not be prosecuted for organizing unsanctioned meetings, nor should the authorities obstruct such online and offline coverage. Furthermore, it is a blatant violation of the right to a fair trial to be prosecuted twice for the same offence.

Leonid Volkov is a prisoner of conscience, who has been repeatedly put on trial and deprived of his human rights solely for his peaceful political activism. The Russian authorities must release him immediately and unconditionally. Moreover, they should put an end to the continuing crackdown on activists and end violations of their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and liberty. These are Russia's obligations under international human rights law and its own Constitution.

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