

20 December 2019

Russian Federation: Searches in the office and home of staff member of the human rights organisation Siberia without Torture

On 12 December 2019, the Ministry of Interior and the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation searched the office of the human rights organisation **Siberia without Torture**. Following this, on 17 December 2019, a search was conducted in the apartment of the organisation's psychologist, Natalia Varshnei.

[Siberia without Torture](#), established in 2014, monitors cases of torture and inhumane treatment allegedly perpetrated by the state bodies in the Irkutsk region. Since its inception, the organisation has reviewed more than 500 complaints of torture and inhumane treatment, successfully opened 11 criminal cases and held seven law enforcement officers accountable for their actions. Between 2018 and 2019, the organisation operated thanks to the support of a grant received from the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture. The head of the organisation, Sviatoslav Hromenkov, has been a regional partner of the national group Public Verdict Foundation since 2010, and is a board member of the European Prison Litigation Network.

On 12 December 2019, officers of the Ministry of Interior and the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation searched the premises of Siberia without Torture, which is also the residence of the organisation's leader Sviatoslav Hromenkov. Sviatoslav Hromenkov was abroad at the time of the search, but his mother, Natalia Hromenkova, and a lawyer were present. Natalia Hromenkova is a woman human right defender and a lawyer for the Siberia without Torture. During the search the officers confiscated cash flow statements for the period from September to December 2019, as well as equipment belonging to the organisation, including three computer systems, three staff notebooks, equipment for live-streaming, external hard drives, flash drives and memory cards. Natalia Hromenkova's phone as well as 184 000 roubles (approx. 2660 EUR) went missing after the search, and there is no official record for the confiscation of equipment. The investigating officer dismissed a request to film the search. According to the lawyer present with Natalia Hromenkova, the officers planted some falsified documents on the site, which appeared to have flow charts, names of different legal entities, financial information, as well as the name of Hromenkov. The search lasted a total of 12 hours.

On 17 December 2019, the Ministry of Interior and the Investigative Committee searched the apartment of the organisation's psychologist Natalia Varshnei, who is also the wife of Sviatoslav Hromenkov. The authorities did not allow their lawyer access to the premises.

The searches were carried out as part of a criminal investigation opened on 10 December 2019 against a person called D.V. Noskov, who is alleged to have committed fraud. According to the report of the regional office of the Federal Security Service, the authorities allege that Sviatoslav Hromenkov was involved in the crime. The investigators who conducted the searches on 12 and 17 December 2019 transported their own witnesses to the sites, and refused to invite impartial witnesses chosen at random from the street, which is the customary practice in the region.

Siberia without Torture believes that the increased pressure on the organisation is the result their work to hold law enforcement officers accountable for torture and inhumane treatment. The human rights defenders point out that the search of 12 December 2019 was conducted by the same officer who was investigating a case of torture brought by Siberia without Torture, an investigation that was eventually closed reportedly due to 'superior orders'.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the search of the office of Siberia without Torture and the apartment of its employee as it appears to be an attempt to intimidate the organisation on account of its peaceful human rights activities.

Front Line Defenders calls Russian authorities to:

1. Immediately cease the investigation into Sviatoslav Hromenkov and the intimidation of Siberia without Torture members as Front Line Defenders;
2. Return the equipment, documents and all other confiscated items during the raid, as they are manifestly not linked to any criminal activity;
3. Cease harassment of all human rights defenders in the Russian Federation and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.