

Memorial considers Crimean farmer Vladimir Balukh a political prisoner

Vladimir Balukh, a farmer and pro-Ukrainian activist who remained a citizen of Ukraine after 2014 and refused to become a citizen of Russia, has been charged with committing crimes under Article 222, Section 1 (illegal possession and transportation of firearms and ammunition), of the Russian Criminal Code. Since 8 December 2016 Balukh has been in pre-trial detention, and his period of detention has on two occasions been extended, on the latest occasion until 4 March 2017.

On 8 December 2016, in the home of Vladimir Balukh's common-law wife in the village of Serbryanka in Razdolnensky district of Crimea, FSB officers conducted a formal 'search of the premises'. During this search, they allegedly found in the attic of the house 89 'military' [as described in the court ruling remanding Balukh in custody] 5,45×39mm cartridges, professionally made, of which 19 cartridges were ready for firing.

There is a high degree of probability that the immediate reason for fabricating the criminal case against the activist was the fact that, on 29 November 2016, he had put up a sign on his house that read, 'Street of the Heavenly Hundred Heroes, 18' [*Вулиця Героїв Небесної сотні 18*]. After this, he was visited by the chair of the village council along with his assistants who threatened him that his independent stance would bring unpleasant consequences, including the 'discovery' in his home of weapons or drugs. The chair of the village council demanded that Balukh remove the sign.

It would seem to be highly unlikely that an activist well-known at the regional level, who is an object of continuous harassment by law enforcement agencies and leading local officials, and whose house was twice subjected to searches in 2015, would store ammunition. It is also important to note that the investigators have no evidence that the ammunition found in the attic of the house of Balukh's common-law wife in fact belongs to him; his fingerprints are not even on them. The discovery of the ammunition took place in the presence of witnesses brought in by the police and in the absence of the accused.

We note that the permission to conduct the formal 'search of the premises' in the house of Balukh's common-law wife was issued by the deputy chair of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Crimea, Viktor Sklyarov, more than a month before the search was conducted.

The decision to remand Balukh in custody is disproportionate to the public danger represented by the alleged crime. It is shocking that the accused has been remanded in custody on charges of a crime that is not serious and without any apparent grounds.

Memorial Human Rights Centre demands the immediate release of Vladimir Balukh and the end of his prosecution.

Recognition of an individual as a political prisoner, or of a prosecution as politically motivated, does not mean that Memorial Human Rights Centre shares or approves of the individual's views, statements or actions.

For more information about the case, see [here](#).

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