

Memorial considers activist from the movement “For the Defence of Khoper” Igor Zhitenev a political prisoner

Zhitenev Igor Anatolievich, former ataman of the National Cultural Autonomy of Cossacks of Novokhopersky District of Voronezh Oblast, activist in the movement “For the Defence of Khoper”, has been in custody since November 26, 2013. He is charged with committing a crime envisaged under point “b” of part 3, article 163 of the Russian Criminal Code (“Extortion committed with the aim of obtaining property on a particularly large scale”).

The case of Igor Zhitenev is part of a campaign of prolonged conflict between the residents of Prikhoper and the UMMC (Urals Metal Mining Company), which was preparing to develop copper-cobalt-nickel deposits in the Novokhoper District of Voronezh Oblast.

The arrest of Zhitenev, we believe, was provocative in nature from the outset. The receiving of money by him was staged, which was confirmed by the other person charged in the case, Mikhail Bezmensky, who admitted that he got into this under physical and psychological pressure from Interior Ministry operative employees. At the same time, the factual circumstances of the case do not indicate not only any signs of extortion on the part of Igor Zhitenev, but nor even his agreement to receive financial resources from the UMMC. After summoning him to an urgent meeting at a deserted location, without giving a reason why this meeting was necessary, the already arrested Bezmensky gave him a closed bag full of money, after which Zhitenev was arrested before he had a chance to see its contents. The law-enforcement measures in relation to Zhitenev were carried out under the direct command of generals Denis Sugrobov (at the time head of the Main Directorate for Economic Security and Combating Corruption of the Interior Ministry) and Boris Kolesnikov (his deputy), who were subsequently charged in criminal cases on exceeding their authorities and inciting bribes with a consequent fabrication of criminal cases, and taken into custody.

The investigations claim lacks evidence, being based on the testimony of interested parties from the UMMC company about the fact that Zhitenev supposedly threatened them with demands for a large sum of money, which posed a danger to the public. From the very beginning the investigation started making the claim that environmental activists were speaking in the guise of leaders of public movements and so if they did not receive a large sum of money from the company they were supposedly threatening to hold mass riots, in which local activists were supposed to participate. But Bezmensky and Zhitenev, as participants in the anti-nickel movement, were not its leaders, which the representatives of the UMMC company had to have known.

The absence of serious evidence on the part of the prosecution of the presence of guilt is supported by the two-time change in the qualification of the crime with no changes to the evidence in the case (from extortion to embezzlement and back).

Zhitenev admits that he actively participated in the environmental movement, but he claims that he never called for anything illegal, and completely denies the charges of extortion that have been made against him.

The Memorial human rights centre considers it necessary to immediately release Igor Zhitenev from custody and re-examine his criminal case.

Recognising a person as a political prisoner does not mean that the Memorial human rights centre agrees with the views or statements of the person recognised as a political prisoner, nor that it approves of their statements or actions.

More detail on the case of Igor Zhitenev:

<http://memohrc.org/special-projects/delo-zhiteneva>