



Vladimir Zhilkin / Photo: OVD-Info

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ARTICLES

“Thrown down on the floor and hit in the head.” What’s it like to monitor elections in Russia

On August 17, law enforcement officers searched the Moscow apartment of Vladimir Zhilkin, a member of the «Golos» («Voice») movement in defense of voters’ rights. On that day, searches took place at the homes of several coordinators of the movement. Later it became known that a criminal case had been initiated against the co-chairman of «Golos» («Voice») Grigory Melkonyants for organising the work of an «undesirable» organisation. Zhilkin is a witness in this case. We recorded his story.

ОБ ЭТОМ НИКТО НЕ УЗНАЕТ

Если об этом никто не напишет. Подпишитесь на регулярные пожертвования ОВД-Инфо, чтобы плохие дела не оставались в тишине.

ПОДПИСАТЬСЯ

Текст на русском

My wife and I woke up to a doorbell ringing non-stop. It was about 6 in the morning, and the doorbell rang both for us and for the neighbours. So at first we did not realise who the police were coming to see.

We already had a similar situation in the fall [of 2022]. The police did not come to us then. This time they also went to the neighbours' apartment first. We waited for developments, but just in case, we messaged the OVD-Info bot.

As it turned out later, both in the fall [of 2022] and now, the police made a mistake when preparing the documents. They had the wrong apartment number. That is, they were looking for us, but they were always breaking into the neighbours' apartment.

In the end, only after breaking down neighbours' doors did they realise they had come to the wrong place. They started ringing our doorbell. Realising that the officers were in the mood to fight and seeing them break down the neighbors' door, I understood that if I did not open our door, they would break it, and I would be forced to let them into our apartment either way.

Certainly more than 10 people came in. I can't say exactly how many policemen there were, but two vans filled with people in uniforms and one Ford drove up to our house.

I was immediately thrown down on the floor and hit, I think with a fist to the head. Then they walked on my back for some reason.

The search started. At first I was not even allowed to read the search warrant — policemen showed it only from their hands. Then they allowed me to familiarise myself with the document, but I was not given a copy. The document stated that the search was being conducted in connection with an emergency situation. The ruling was not issued by the court, but by an investigator. The apartment number was handwritten.

I asked them why they had come in such a large group. The policemen explained that this decision was made by their superiors according to the calculations of analysts. They thought I was a serious threat. I guess I'm supposed to have a superiority complex now, since I'm Jackie Chan or Jean-Claude Van Damme (renowned martial artist) according to the police.



Vladimir Zhilkin / Photo: OVD-Info

When I asked them why they threw me face down on the floor, the policemen replied that they were trying to ensure their safety. They were allegedly instructed to do so. They were told that people who might be in the apartment would threaten their safety.

They demanded that I provide access to my phone. I replied that I could not remember my password after I was hit on the head. I explained to the policemen that their actions were not very helpful for my mind and memory to work well, they responded with a threat that they could «fuck me up».

During the search, they seized the hard drive, my and my wife's phones, flash drives and several business cards. One of the cards was from a member of the Kriger family who provides real estate services. Artem Kriger's relatives gave me the business card when I defended him in court for reporting on anti-mobilisation protests in Moscow. I think the police were triggered by seeing the surname made famous by the media (another Kriger was sentenced to 7 years for anti-war activism, we covered this [extensively](#) — OVD-Info).

The other business card is very old — from the Soros Foundation. I can't even remember which name was on this card. The point is that in the 2000s my wife's uncle and aunt were in the book publishing business. At that time, it was quite common that the major part of the industry was sponsored by Soros. I have had this business card since those times. However, it sparked the keen interest of the police for some reason. Clearly, they were excited to find the card. Listening to the explanations given by my wife about the history of this business card, the head of the group said: «You see, it was found just in time».

The police themselves said they were searching for any proof of my connection with «undesirable» organisations, in particular ENEMO.

In general, the search was conducted relatively smoothly. Fortunately, there was no big mess as it usually happens. The police didn't fanatically search all the cabinets. They were not interested in books. However, they examined all our vases.

The whole time the police searched the flat, I was in the kitchen with the investigator. They didn't let me out. My wife was kept in another room. She wasn't asked any significant questions. They only asked to hand over «all enemies of the people». They asked about trips abroad, and were interested in how often we travel to Georgia and Armenia. In theory, this information can be easily obtained from the customs services. It was not necessary to come to our house at 6 in the morning for this.



Vladimir and Natalya Zhilkin in the apartment that was searched / Photo: OVD-Info

I was worried that policemen could plant something during this search. I went through all the physical evidence thoroughly later and nothing was unfamiliar to me. However, I understand that policemen were in the rooms by themselves and could have left bugs behind, for example.

I'm sure that the whole purpose of this search was to have a psychological impact on me and my wife. Everything was conducted with an air of hypocritical moralism. Few policemen were teaching me and my wife how we should live our lives. They were constantly threatening us, pressing us to confess to something or to start cooperating. After the search, I was put in a black van without licence plates and taken to the emergency room. Afterwards, I was sent to the city hospital in an ambulance, accompanied by security officers. They diagnosed me with soft tissue bruising on my head and back.

Then we went to the Investigative Committee. The whole drive, the policemen tried to convince my wife and I that

we should disappear, hide under a rock and behave in a way that no one hears anything about us. They repeated this idea several times.

Between these conversations, a «brave» policeman wearing a mask showed us a baton, asked if I was ever beaten up and if I knew what it was. Overall it was not a very pleasant experience.

I suppose they wanted to intimidate me this way. Without a doubt, the catalyst was the upcoming presidential election. The police decided to put a good deal of pressure on the «Golos» («Voice») leadership and community just before the election. They went after the most media-known and media-active activists, from their point of view.

This is just my guess. In my conversations with the policemen, on the one hand, they would say that independent observation of democratic elections is useful. However, on the other hand, the fact that «Golos» («Voice») collaborates with «undesirable» organisations — the so-called «enemies of the Motherland» — is bad and unacceptable.

— Can you imagine that Russia would have been involved in the American or any other country's elections?

It was very difficult to keep a straight face listening to all these speculations. Why was the regime so worried and frightened, even when all the institutions for monitoring elections in the country have actually been destroyed, the community has dispersed, and 'verified' people are sitting at the polling stations? This gives rise to the idea that the authorities are not confident in the outcome of the presidential elections. They have reason to worry that the revealed violations could become the trigger that will lead to the collapse of the regime.



Vladimir Zhilkin / Photo: OVD-Info

The only conclusion that can be drawn from this story is that those who remain in Russia and feel that they have resources (speaking about internal resources and energy to fight) and are not frightened can now study the [«Law about basic guarantees»](#) and the law [«On Elections of the President of the Russian Federation»](#) to find ways to observe the presidential elections.

Only the Investigative Committee explained to me the reasons for the search. They said that they considered [«Golos»](#) ([«Voice»](#)) to be part of the [«undesirable»](#) organisation ENEMO, which means that [«Golos»](#) ([«Voice»](#)) participants are automatically members of the [«undesirable»](#) organisation.

It was obvious that the investigators didn't know what to do with me. Of course, this was a political order, and the Investigative Committee only carried out the decision from above.

During the interrogation, on the advice of the lawyer Anna Polozova [provided by OVD-Info], I used Article 51 of the Constitution (this article allows you not to give statements against yourself or your relatives). The investigators claimed that I was a witness in the case, but normally police don't break into witnesses' houses and search them at 6 in the morning. Their attitude towards me as the witness was the same as towards a particularly dangerous terrorist.

I signed the obligation to appear at the hearing after the interrogation. I was released after that.

I'm still struggling to understand how I feel psychologically. The raid itself is not a very pleasant event. On top of that, it's very unpleasant when people in your apartment not only behave in a rude way and act like they own the place, but also assault you. Instead of making Moscow a safe place for the citizens, the police are sending a huge police squad to my home. They are putting on a show, wearing bulletproof vests to enter our apartment. On the one hand, you experience terrible stress. On the other hand, it all looks ridiculous and comical.

We have not yet seen the neighbour whose door was mistakenly broken down by the police. No one complained to us. She (the neighbour) pretends nothing is going on. So what can I say? These are indeed the faults and characteristics of the system in which we live. My wife asked the police what they would do with the neighbours' broken door. They replied they would sort it out. Lawyer Anna Polozova also asked this question at the Investigative Committee, the investigator answered: «Well, it happens, nothing critical». Apparently, this is completely common for them. Like that quote from [Soviet sci-fi writers] the Strugatsky brothers, «... why a noble man shouldn't get a few sound whacks, too, in the name of His Magnificence!»

Recorded by Karina Merkuryeva

ЧТО Я МОГУ С ЭТИМ СДЕЛАТЬ?

Прочитать, рассказать, поддержать. Подпишитесь на регулярные пожертвования ОВД-Инфо, чтобы как можно больше людей узнали о политических репрессиях в России сегодня.

ПОДДЕРЖАТЬ

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