

Whether One Prison Is Better than Another Is Not the Point: It Shouldn't Be There in the First Place

Solidarity Zone members discuss their work

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— **How did your initiative come about, and what is the nature of your work?**

Anya: All participants in the initiative have long been involved in supporting prisoners, including some not on human rights organizations' formal lists of political prisoners. [Note: *The Memorial Human Rights Center keeps one of those lists.*] After the start of the full-scale invasion, news sources reported on the first direct actions against the war. We started looking for the people who carried them out, because we noticed that existing human rights organizations were not covering arrests for militant activities and were not showing support for the accused. Out of this circle of comrades, the Solidarity Zone initiative emerged. We assist people who are persecuted for anti-war actions or their preparation. All of them are now in pre-trial detention. The first court hearings have started for Igor Paskar [the first person accused of terrorism by arson], but others are ongoing. From these cases, we know a few people who have already been sentenced, such as Anastasia Levashova. She threw a Molotov cocktail at police officers and was sentenced to two years. We didn't deal with this case ourselves: we started looking for Anastasia's information, but Sasha Graf, who has supported female prisoners for a long time, got in touch with her faster.

Yevgenia: Most often, it's not the prisoners who contact us, we try to find them. In many cases, they don't have the opportunity to make contact because they are taken straight to the detention center on arrest. However, we have learned how to find them even with very little information (such as the name or place of detention). We locate the pre-trial detention facilities where they are held, send lawyers there to find out case details (relevant article of the Criminal Code, help required, whether relatives are in touch), and offer our support. We pay lawyers from donations, but our assistance is not limited to that. We try to make it more comprehensive. For example, we send parcels, because pre-trial detention centers hardly provide anything, and many essential items are missing. We inform relatives and friends about where the detainees are held and tell them how they can support them.

— **Why are other organizations not involved in the cases you focus on?**

Yevgenia: There are many reasons for that. Human rights organizations have strict criteria for assistance. Agora, for example, doesn't work with those who plead guilty. OVD-info helps only those who have participated in public protest. Many people don't want to work with the authors of so-called "violent actions", even though sabotage of facilities such as military recruitment offices can hardly be called "violence" in the literal sense.

Anya: On the one hand, it's good when an organization has a defined focus. Before February 24th, direct action was hardly a mass phenomenon in Russia. So there was no need to include such protesters in the criteria for support. On the other hand, there is also the emotional factor. For example, if the case was initiated for causing slight harm to a police officer (such as the famous "tumbler") during a protest, and if the person refused to plead guilty, it would fall under the criteria. At the same time, if the person resisted and admitted to this, then the case seems suspicious.

— **What is the attitude in Russia toward those who carry out direct actions? Is there a stigma attached to such prisoners?**

Anya: The protests in Belarus significantly impacted the perception of protest in Russia. The visible part of the liberal community defined these protests as mass and purely peaceful, leaving the other part invisible: guerrillas, direct actions, and forceful resistance to state

agents. In the Facebook field, let's say, unbelievable Belarusians who give flowers to armed officers are a very persistent myth. This perception shapes the image of a "dream protest" in Russia, in which one can come to the street nonviolently and declare disagreement with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But these issues are not resolved this way. Not that this myth emerged in 2020, but it gained significant popularity then.

"We noticed that the existing human rights organizations were not covering arrests for militant actions and were not showing their support for the accused"

Yevgenia: A lot has changed because of the war. People who engage in direct action no longer seem strange, underground radicals. Many people have started to realize that the person who set fire to the military enlistment office might be a neighbor who couldn't stand the horror of what was happening. Although none of those we help are recognized as political prisoners, their names appear at letter-writing evenings, exhibitions, and in the media. Of course, there are still those who say, "Oh, this is too radical; can we please not include it in the program!" but far fewer than before. I also haven't heard anyone saying these people don't need any support. But they are not recognized as political prisoners, temporarily or even permanently. We recently had a conversation with Sergey Davidis from the Memorial. He noticed that for most people, it has become clear that prisoners must be supported regardless of their status. However, the Memorial can only consider the cases we work with after sentences So we haven't met this problem yet.

— What portion of direct actions are planned and executed by experienced activists, aware of safety measures, and what portion are desperate acts of inexperienced individuals?

Yevgenia: Those who are ill prepared get arrested more often. News outlets rarely report successful actions, for example, railroad sabotages. This summer, the Trans-Siberian Railway was paralyzed for quite a while. Nobody was arrested. This is an example of successful and well-planned sabotage based on sound security principles because nobody got harmed. Most people we help have acted more emotionally, we don't know how well they prepared. The problem is that safety protocols available on the internet cannot be fully trusted. For example, they say you need a separate cellphone with an anonymous sim card, but fail to mention that these phones must be kept in the same space as your personal device. Usually, people keep them in the same apartment. It seems a minor detail, but it can quickly get you arrested. Overall, it is hard to find reliable information.

— Had you had any experience of Russian "justice" and the Russian prison system before the Solidarity Zone? How did it affect you, and does it help you now?

Yevgenia: We all had similar experiences where our loved ones fell into the hands of that system. I had my own experience of incarceration. I spent only a few months in detention, but I learned what it is like. Friends were put in jail because of active political involvement. This is how my human rights work started. When a close person is kidnapped on the street, and you find out about a criminal case, you have to do something, and those skills add up.

Anya: My story as a human rights activist started with friends and loved ones. It often turns out that the experience can be applied in other situations. We invented many things

while supporting people in the Network case. That's when the idea of exhibitions in support of prisoners was born. The format continues in use: quite often there are exhibitions of the prisoners' and solidarizing artists' graphic works. This is great, because it attracts an audience that is less involved in supporting prisoners.

— **All the cases you work with are qualified as “terrorist.” What are the peculiarities of Russian law enforcement in this respect?**

Yevgenia: There are a lot of nuances in Russia! If we talk about the cases we are dealing with now, a lot depends on the region, the department that initiates the case, the number of cases it needs to open according to the monthly plan, and so on. Some people are charged with property damage, others with terrorism, for the same actions.

“A lot has changed because of the war. People who engage in direct action no longer seem like some strange, underground radicals”

Anya: We had an interesting story. We were knocking ourselves out, trying to find a person. It seemed obvious that we needed look for him in the detention center. But he was nowhere. A month later, we found out that he had been fined 500 rubles and freed. But that was an exception. Usually, they make a case for property damage, and then, following orders from above, they turn such cases into “Terrorist Acts” under Article 205 of the Criminal Code.

Yevgenia: Law enforcement and the defense work procedurally. I went to public defense school a couple of years ago. At one of the lectures, I heard the idea that laws and rights hardly work, so if you are a defender, you have to look for loopholes in the criminal procedure code, use them, and establish a relationship with the judge. Litigation looks more like gambling than something that works by the rules, where you can act according to a specific plan. In some cases, if an officer or prosecutor makes a mistake or forgets something, it can be used to the advantage of the defense. And the laws don't work. For example, there is inadmissible evidence in court, which, in theory, can be removed from the case file. I can't remember the last time this happened with evidence for the prosecution. But defense evidence is often excluded.

— **How does the Russian penitentiary system work, and how do detention facilities differ from those in other countries?**

Yevgenia: In Russia, the cost of incarcerating an individual is lower than in any other country. The suicide rate in our prisons is one of the highest in the world. These things are essential, but apart from that, I and other Solidarity Zone participants believe that the penitentiary system generally does not work and does not help people improve. Whether one prison is better than another is not the point: it shouldn't be there in the first place. It is difficult to talk about what kind of people are in Russian prisons and why because there is no reliable data. In all the Federal Penitentiary Service's statistics, only the first article in the sentence is taken into account. If a person is charged with several crimes (like Anton Zhuchkov, with the preparation of a terrorist attack, and involvement in the drug trade), the statistics will show only one offense.

Anya: From conversations with prisoners, I conclude that use of Article 228 [Illegal acquisition, storage, transportation, manufacture, processing of drugs], which is typical in Russia,

should be classified as political. Then people commonly referred to as “political prisoners” don’t sit in a vacuum. They have cellmates about whom they tell us. I’ve only heard stories about ordinary users, who are going to be in jail for a huge part of their lives. I had never heard about people who have made fantastic profits from the drug trade.

“When a person close to you is kidnapped on the street, and you find out about a criminal case, you just have to do something, and those skills add up”

Yevgenia: The sale of drugs is considered the most severe offense under Article 228 of the Criminal Code. But an oral statement is enough to “prove” the deal: “He shared it with me/gave me some drugs”. Regardless of the amount, even if it’s minuscule, the user can go to prison for 15 years. Because the stigma in our society is so strong, there is rarely any public attention, even to cases where drugs were obviously planted. There is virtually no public support, and when people hear about drugs, they say, “Well, that’s a murky story!” All this affects both users, who should not be in jail, and people who have nothing to do with drugs.

— Does it make sense to separate political prisoners from ordinary prisoners, especially in a repressive state? How does this division affect the prisoners?

Yevgenia: The list of political prisoners has rather strict criteria, which are needed to make formal requests to the state. However, I do not see any sense in this division. My understanding of who shouldn’t be incarcerated is much broader. Sometimes this division affects the perception of those who, in one way or another, think of supporting prisoners: they believe political prisoners are good people, and others are under suspicion. In fact, people have to decide for themselves who they want to support. There is more support for the people who have burnt military recruitment offices now, and the attitude toward the term “political prisoner” seems to be changing, too. This status is no longer so necessary.

Anya: Whether a person is recognized as a political prisoner or a prisoner of conscience does not change the harshness of detention. It might indirectly impact the conditions if the status helped gain publicity for the case. Media rarely cover deaths in custody. Those people whose names are recorded in the media are much more protected than ordinary prisoners. If a person has no relatives or support, their disappearance will not be investigated. Health problems connected with detention conditions (damp, cold, parasites, exacerbation of chronic diseases, or harsh working conditions) or from violence by the administration or by “activists” under its control will not be addressed and can lead to fatal consequences. This is unlikely to happen if the public follows a prisoner’s fate because the institution’s administration is not interested in interacting with the defense and the media to justify itself. So it is always very upsetting when those to whom we offer support refuse to go public. It often happens under pressure from relatives or a lawyer chosen by relatives if they believe it is better to keep quiet “just in case something happens.” But it doesn’t make much sense because the articles we’re talking about can lead to up to 20 years in prison. What is there to be careful about?

Eugenia: The fact that publicity hurts is probably the most popular myth, shared not only among those arrested but also among lawyers. It gets in the way of our work.

— **What’s the point of the penitentiary system anyway? How do you feel about the “abolitionist” movement?**

Anya: In the description of our initiative, one of the first sentences says that the whole collective is against prisons, states, and militarism. I don’t know of any cases where prison has had any therapeutic effect on a person, even from the standpoint of the state that wants the individual to reconsider their actions. I don’t think the fear of returning to prison is a positive result of incarceration. If a person, for example, has served time under Article 228 [Illegal acquisition, storage, transportation, manufacture, processing of drugs], it seems to add nothing but anxiety to their life. If they continue to use drugs, the risks and anxiety increase. Why is it necessary to take so many years of a person’s life then?

“The fact that publicity hurts is probably the most popular myth, shared not only among those arrested but also among lawyers”

Eugenia: Prison was originally created for cheap labor. The history of prison shows that this institution does not work. Crimes or actions considered crimes are often repeated when people get out of jail. But when one says that prisons are unnecessary, people ask the logical question: So what? Just let all murderers, serial killers, and other scary people out? However, the statistics are illuminating: most violent crimes are not solved at all. Whether we want “criminals” out of prison or not, most people who commit violent acts are out there. So prison doesn’t protect anyone! The state won’t let us remake this institution because prison is profitable, cheap, and provides free labor. To explore alternative methods of combating crime or working with violent individuals, the state or society needs to invest money and tear down existing institutions. And no one wants that except for human rights activists and abolitionists.

— **How does the prison system impact the possibility of recruitment by the Wagner Group?**

Anya: There is a lack of information and constant brainwashing in prison. Only state radio and television channels are broadcasted there. Naturally, as we see, all the promises that motivate the inmates to apply as “volunteers” do not come true. We already know cases when people were brought back to prison with injuries. When people without motivation or combat experience find themselves on the front line, they cannot defect or survive.

Eugenia: There is almost no reliable data on whether all this recruitment is really voluntary. There are many cases when prisoners explicitly told their relatives that recruitment was going on but that they didn’t want to go anywhere. And then these people disappeared. As a rule, these were prisoners who had almost served their sentences. And no one knows exactly what happened. The relatives don’t receive these allegedly signed contracts. Since this recruitment has no legal status, just some dude comes and says something; there are no guarantees. A presidential decree is necessary to pardon a convicted person, not only Prigozhin’s empty promises [Note: *Russian oligarch and close associate of Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin owns the notorious Wagner private military company*]. The story with the Wagner Group helps to finally see the falsity of the phrase: “They won’t lock everyone up.” They will. Prison is a repressive apparatus and will remain so. Either new prisons will be built, or the existing ones will be emptied in horrible ways.

Anya: Conversely, this recruitment strategy seems less compelling with time. The prisoners realize that people leave and then disappear. They are realistic and can make observations, especially if there is a connection to the outside world. Thanks to the people we correspond with, we learn that the second wave of recruitment through the colonies brings much less successful results.

“Either new prisons will be built, or the existing ones will be emptied in horrible ways”

Yevgeniya: Prisoners are used as disposable material, not only to send them to the flashpoint area without preparation but also to help propaganda intimidate people who are against the war and mobilization. As with Yevgeny Nuzhin, who the Wagner Group publicly executed. After that, many people started saying that you can't defect if you've been mobilized. Now, it is possible that many of the mobilized, sent to the war against their will, will be afraid to resist and leave.

— How can one help prisoners in Russia now?

Yevgeniya: You can start by writing letters. Online services (ZonaTelecom and FSIN-letter) allow you to do it from anywhere in the world through the Internet. There is also a volunteer-run service called RosUzник; it's free, but they need donations. Through it, you can send letters to places of detention that are not connected to official services. At the same time, it allows you to anonymize yourself. The FSIN letter also does not require real personal data, but giving your information to community members is still more pleasant.

— Do you keep in touch with any prisoners? What is this process usually like?

Eugenia: I have several correspondences now. All these people were strangers to me before prison. One pen pal became a friend. It is Pavel Krisevich. For over a year now, we have been communicating very well. I keep up correspondence with some of the inmates we help. The FSIN letter lets us know what the person needs at the moment. In addition to regular conversations, the person can tell us what they are missing and if they are not receiving medical care. Usually, censorship allows this kind of information, so it's essential to correspond with those you're helping. And communicating with prisoners, political or not, whom you sympathize with is just an emotionally enriching experience. I met some people while they were in prison. And now I'm friends with them after the sentence.

I have a whole blog dedicated to that question. I told there about how I write letters to people I don't know. I introduce myself, tell them how I found out about them, and tell them a little bit about myself and what I do. As long as you don't speak about any illegal activities, it's okay. In general, no one plans to use this information against you. The censor doesn't give ordinary letters to the investigator. I write these letters in the notes on my cellphone. I try to remember funny stories, how I visited some exciting place, had a walk, how my cat got into a cardboard box. News is a must because everything that happens outside is interesting for a person in prison — even other people's hobbies. When you can't choose people to communicate with and only have cellmates, letters are precious. So you can say whatever you want. You have to be careful about discussing the war and the circumstances of this particular criminal case.

“Don’t know of any cases where prison has had any therapeutic effect on a person, even from the standpoint of the state”

Anya: Remember that prisoners are also people just like anybody else; sometimes, you have to use different ways to communicate with them. But often, there is an internet connection in prisons so that correspondence can occur in a familiar messenger. You can tell and learn a lot, even in censored messages. Since you’re geographically in different locations and have different daily lives, it seems mutually interesting, like any conversation. It’s not another planet that has special rules.

— What other ways are there to help?

Anya: You can send parcels to pre-trial detention facilities without restrictions. To children’s and women’s prisons, too. Contact a support group if you want to send a package to the male settlement. It would be best if you didn’t take the initiative because there is a limit. Some basic things are always relevant: coffee, socks... If there are no restrictions, you can send books. The prison library is usually unsatisfactory. It is better, of course, to find out about the literature the recipient wants to read.

Eugenia: Pavel Krisevich grew trees from avocado seeds in the cell and gave them names. I managed to send him a mushroom for kombucha in a parcel, although it’s kind of forbidden. He used different things like lollipops when they had a sugar shortage after the invasion started. In his letters, he told me how he was making it and how he and his cellmates tried the different kinds he produced.

— You work with horrible cases. What helps you? What aspects can be seen as positive?

Yevgeniya: This work helps me live through what is happening around me: the war and everything else. We don’t have any illusions. We don’t hope for acquittals or suspended sentences...I just want to contribute to the culture of supporting prisoners. After the sentence and imprisonment, people’s stories don’t end! They still need support. They need lawyers, communication with the outside world, letters, parcels, and everything else. And that support is vital throughout one’s imprisonment, even if it is very long!

Even the most high-profile cases are forgotten after a while. When nothing happens, people say: “Well, he/she is in jail, so what can we do?!” And support can sometimes save a life and support an inmate’s mental health. The story of Anton Zhuchkov and Vladimir Sergeev, who are accused of preparing for a terrorist attack, is an example. I realized from Anton’s letters that he was very depressed. I found out how he could speak to a psychologist and who of those working in the pre-trial detention center was the best fit. For his birthday, I posted on Instagram: “Tell me if you’re going to write to the prison or organize a letter writing evening for political prisoners.” So many people answered. I told them: “Here’s this person you should congratulate on his birthday. He’s in jail for a suicide attempt and feels bad.” He received many letters and cards from different countries, and his mood changed dramatically.

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