

AGAINST

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*protesters'
defiant
speeches
in Russian
courts*

Alexei Gorinov

Igor Paskar

Bohdan Ziza

Mikhail Kriger

Andrei Trofimov

Sasha Skochilenko

Aleksandr Skobov

Darya Kozyreva

Alexei Rozhkov

Ruslan Siddiqi

Kirill Butylin

Savelii Morozov

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PUTIN'S

“ To understand what is happening in Russia we have to listen to the voices of those who are brave enough to speak out. A new fascism has emerged that, for many on the left, has gone unnoticed or ignored. This collection of voices of protest is essential reading: these voices are a warning, to those who value democracy, that authoritarianism and fascism are on the rise. Complacency and appeasement are no longer an option.”

Mick Antoniw

Member of the Senedd
(Welsh parliament) and lawyer

“ This remarkable book gathers the voices of those persecuted in Russia for opposing the war in Ukraine – individuals whose acts of resistance range from writing a few words to sabotaging military equipment. Yet all their actions are bound by a common thread: conscience. They insist that even prison is preferable to a life lived in fear, and that true self-preservation lies in safeguarding one’s dignity and moral clarity – not merely the body or personal freedom.”

Alexei Yurchak

Professor at the University
of California, Berkeley

“ An extraordinary collection that sheds light on the continuing tradition of Russian political dissidents in the age of Putin. These voices speak from an unimaginable abyss, and yet they inspire hope with poetry, philosophy and profanity, proving that the spirit of defiance can never be extinguished.”

Julie Ward

former Member of the European
Parliament (Labour), UK

“ These voices of Russian political prisoners, fighters against militarism and oppression, remind us that today’s Putin bloody dictatorship is not a unique phenomenon, but belongs to our scary global present. And it means that each of these impressive speeches is directed to everyone who cares about human dignity and social justice.”

Ilya Budraitskis
activist and sociologist

“ There is only one way to oppose Stalinist fascism, Great Russian nationalism, and Putin’s mafia state: through deeds and actions. Returning to the best of internationalism, ‘the main enemy is in our own country’, some of the people whose speeches are in this book have not hesitated to call for Russia’s defeat and to act accordingly, following the example of those Belarusian partisans who sabotaged military supply trains intended for Russian troops.”

Pierre Dardot & Christian Laval
authors of *Never Ending Nightmare* (Verso)
and *Common* (Bloomsbury)

“ The words in this book are paid for in blood and pain. They come from people who are tortured, mocked, and humiliated in Russian prisons every day. And yet, new waves of resistance continue to rise – without a party, without a leader, and often without hope. What gives them this strength? What force is powerful enough to make people choose Golgotha as their only platform? This book gives them a voice.”

Greg Yudin
philosopher

“ The right of the accused to the ‘last word’ (*poslednee slovo*) in a Russian criminal trial goes back to the Great Legal Reforms, including jury trial on the English model, of Tsar Aleksandr II in 1864, and somehow survived the Soviet period. It is probably unique to Russia. It is now enshrined in Article 293 of the Criminal Procedural Code. Article 293(1) provides that no questions may be asked of the accused during the ‘last word’. Article 293(2) states that the court may not limit the ‘last word’ to a definite time. This inspiring volume shows how the accused, old and young, who were penalised for their opposition to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, and for acting on their conscience, made ample and devastating use of their right. These excellent translations into English, and Simon Pirani’s introduction and notes, bring their heroism to the Anglophone world.”

Bill Bowring

Emeritus Professor of Law,
Birkbeck College, University of London

“ In this time of upheaval and global swings towards authoritarianism, it is critical that we lift the voices of dissenters under the Putin regime, and that we stand together in solidarity for freedom, democracy, and peace. This book is an excellent example: speeches from the brave Russian people who are saying no to the war in Ukraine and no to authoritarianism.”

Tanya C. Vyhovsky

Member of the state Senate of Vermont,
USA, from the Chittenden-Central district

VOICES AGAINST PUTIN'S WAR

*protesters'
defiant speeches
in Russian courts*

RESISTANCE BOOKS

The speeches and other statements in this book appeared in Russian media outlets, and were translated and/or revised by Thomas Campbell, Nick Evans, Simon Pirani, Giuliano Vivaldi and Reuben Woolley. The photographs were all taken in court, except for the one of Bohdan Ziza (chapter 3).

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Contents

Foreword	9
Introduction	11
1. Alexei Gorinov	20
2. Igor Paskar	34
3. Bohdan Ziza	44
4. Mikhail Kriger	56
5. Andrei Trofimov	66
6. Sasha Skochilenko	78
7. Aleksandr Skobov	92
8. Darya Kozyreva	102
9. Alexei Rozhkov	112
10. Ruslan Siddiqi	120
11. Kirill Butylin	142
12. Savelii Morozov	146
13. And many more	153
14. The twenty-first-century gulag	163
15. Contact information	181
16. Notes	183

Foreword

by John McDonnell, Member of Parliament (UK)

It's a humbling experience to read the statements in this book by heroes and heroines who have been willing to risk the full force of repression under Putin, in order to protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the rise of oppressive militarism and the suppression of basic civil liberties.

Knowing that their words of protest will inevitably result in imprisonment, often for many years and in life-threatening conditions, they still spoke out.

They would not be human if they hadn't felt real fear – but they still stood up for the fundamental principles of humanity they espoused.

Bodhan Ziza explains: "I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't scared too. I was and I am. But I wanted my example to show that the time to be scared and stay quiet has passed."

Defiant courage runs like a thread through all these speeches. Their publication is an assurance that they were not made in vain.

They are an inspiration to all those across the globe who see an injustice, and who refuse to passively comply.

To the young men and women appalled at the genocide taking place in Gaza refusing the draft in Israel, to the elderly women arrested for protesting against the proscription of Palestine Action in the UK, and to the young women demonstrating for life and liberty in Iran.

These speeches and statements are evidence that the spirit of human resistance to oppression burns bright still.

They bear witness to the determination of the human spirit not to be silenced.

As Darya Kozyreva proclaims: “They will not shut me up. To keep quiet because that’s what they want – that’s beneath my dignity. Maybe the words I say won’t change anything, but at least my conscience will be clear.”

This stubborn refusal to be silenced is what brings down dictatorships, secures human rights and gives us all the hope that freedoms can be won.

For that we all owe these courageous advocates for justice a depth of gratitude.

Introduction

At the heart of this book are ten speeches made in court by people who opposed Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, and were arrested and tried for doing so. Most of them are now serving long jail sentences, for "crimes" fabricated by Vladimir Putin's repressive machine. Along with the speeches, we include: other public declarations – social media posts, letters and interviews – in which the protagonists made their case; statements by two more persecuted activists, made outside court; and a summary of 17 other anti-war speeches in court. We hope that, by publishing these translations in English, these resisters' motivations will become known to a wider audience.

Chapters 1-10 are each devoted to one protester, arranged chronologically by the date of the protester's first conviction. United in their opposition to the Kremlin's war, they divide roughly into four groups.

First is Bohdan Ziza (chapter 3), who lived not in Russia but in Ukraine – in Crimea, which has been occupied by Russian forces since 2014. In 2022 Ziza filmed himself splashing paint in the colours of the Ukrainian flag on to a municipal administration building. He was tried in a Russian military court and is serving a 15-year sentence.

Second are two young women from St Petersburg, Sasha Skochilenko (chapter 6) and Darya Kozyreva (chapter 8), prosecuted for the most peaceful imaginable protests against the

war. Skochilenko, who posted anti-war messages on labels in a supermarket, was freed after more than two years behind bars, in August 2024, as part of a prisoner swap between Russia, Belarus and several Western countries. Kozyreva is serving a two-and-a-half year sentence, essentially for quoting Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine's national poet, in public.

Third are three young men who deliberately damaged property, but not persons, to draw their fellow Russians' attention to the anti-war cause. Igor Paskar (chapter 2) firebombed an office of the Federal Security Service (FSB). Alexei Rozhkov (chapter 9) firebombed a military recruitment centre – a form of protest used dozens of times across Russia in 2022. He fled to Kyrgyzstan, was kidnapped, presumably by the Russian security forces, and returned to Russia for trial. Ruslan Siddiqi (chapter 10), a Russian and Italian citizen, derailed a train carrying munitions to the Ukrainian front. He has been sentenced to 29 years, and has said that he can be seen as a “partisan”, and “classified as a prisoner of war”, rather than a political prisoner.

The fourth group of protagonists, jailed for what they said rather than anything they did, have records of activism for social justice and democratic rights stretching back decades: Alexei Gorinov (chapter 1), a municipal councillor in Moscow who dared to refer to Russia's war as a “war” in public; Mikhail Kriger, an outspoken opponent of Russia's war on Ukraine since 2014 (chapter 4); Andrei Trofimov (chapter 5); and Aleksandr Skobov (chapter 7), who was first jailed for political dissent in 1978, in the Soviet Union, and who 47 years later in 2025 told the court: “Death to the Russian fascist invaders! Glory to Ukraine!”

Two activists prosecuted for anti-war action, who made their statements outside court, are featured in chapters 11 and

12. Kirill Butylin (chapter 11) was the first person arrested for firebombing a military recruitment office, in March 2022. No record of his court appearance is available, but his defiant message on social media is: “I will not go to kill my brothers!” Savelii Morozov (chapter 12) was fined for denouncing the war to a military recruitment commission in Stavropol, when applying to do alternative (non-military) service.

The ten anti-war speeches in court recorded in this book are by no means the only ones. Another 17 are summarised in chapter 13. These speeches, along with others by defendants who railed against the annihilation of free speech, or protested against grotesque frame-ups, have been collected and published by the “Poslednee Slovo” (“Last Word”) website.

High-profile Russian politicians jailed for standing up to the Kremlin also made anti-war speeches in court, including Ilya Yashin of the People’s Freedom Party, sentenced to eight-and-a-half years in December 2022 for denouncing the massacres of Ukrainian civilians at Bucha and Irpin, and Vladimir Kara-Murza, sentenced in April 2023 to 25 years for treason. Both of them were freed, along with Sasha Skochilenko, in the prisoner exchange of August 2024. Other prominent political figures remain in detention for opposing the war, including Boris Kagarlitsky, a sociologist and Marxist writer, sentenced in February 2024 to five years for “justifying terrorism”, and Grigory Melkonyants, co-chair of the Golos election monitoring group, sentenced in May 2025 to five years for working with an “undesirable organisation”. Dozens of journalists and bloggers are behind bars too.

These better-known, politically motivated people are only a fraction of the thousands persecuted by the Kremlin. The cases recorded by human rights organisations include thousands of

Ukrainians detained in the occupied territories. In many cases their fate, and whereabouts, is unknown: they may be dead or imprisoned. Thousands more Russians who have spoken out against the war, or been caught in the merciless dragnet by accident, are behind bars. So are “railway partisans” who sabotaged military supply trains, and others who denounced their regime’s support for Putin’s war, in Belarus. In Chapter 14, we outline the resistance to the Kremlin’s war, the repression mobilised in response to it, and the scale of the twenty-first-century gulag that has been brought into being. Notes, giving sources for all the material in the book, are at the end.

People resisting injustice have for centuries, in many countries, made use of the courts as a public platform. Irish rebels against British colonial violence began doing so at the end of the eighteenth century. In Russia, the tradition goes back at least to the 1870s, when Narodniki (Populists), speaking to judges trying them for violent protests, denounced the autocratic dictatorship. The workers’ movements that culminated in the 1917 revolutions used courtroom propaganda widely. When Stalinist repression reached its peak in the 1930s, the major purge trials were designed to eliminate it: their format was prearranged, with abject, false confessions. The practice reappeared after the post-Stalinist “thaw”, in the 1965 trial of the dissident writers Andrei Siniavsky and Yulii Daniel.

Courtroom speeches have again become a powerful weapon under Putin – and the Kremlin dictatorship is finding ways to get its revenge. It added three years to Andrei Trofimov’s sentence (chapter 5) – for the fantastical, false “offences” of disseminating false information about the army and “condoning terrorism” – based solely on what he said at his first trial. Other anti-war prisoners, including Alexei Gorinov

(chapter 1) have had years added on to their sentences, on the basis of false “evidence” provided by prison officers, or prisoners terrorised by those officers.

Why did they do it? Why did our protagonists make protests that carried the risk of many years in the hell of the Russian prison system? Why, when brought to court, did they choose to make these statements that carried further risk? They have weighed their words and spoken for themselves; no attempt will be made here to summarise. However it is noteworthy that all of them addressed their speeches to their fellow citizens, not to the government.

Andrei Trofimov told the court in his second trial that “Ukraine is my audience”, because “Russian society is dead and it is useless to try to talk to it” – but nevertheless went to extraordinary lengths to make sure that his short, sharp message from his first trial, ending “Putin is a dickhead”, was widely circulated in Russian media.

The others had greater hopes in Russian society, including the Ukrainian Bohdan Ziza, who, in the video for which he was jailed, underlined that: “I address myself, above all, to Crimeans and Russians.” In court he said his action was “a cry from the heart” to “those who were and are afraid – just as I was afraid” to speak out, but who did not want the war.

Alexei Rozhkov had no doubt that “millions of my fellow citizens, women and men, young and old, take an anti-war position”, but were deprived of any means to express it. Kirill Butylin appealed to others to make similar protests so that “Ukrainians will know, that people in Russia are fighting for them – that not everyone is scared and not everyone is indifferent”. As for the government, “let those fuckers know that their own people hate them”.

Aleksandr Skobov, now 67 and in failing health, explicitly addressed younger generations. In an open letter from jail, he recalled how as a socialist he had been a “black sheep” among Soviet-era dissidents, most of whom had now passed away. “The blows are falling on other people, most of them much younger.” While “sceptical about ‘pompous declarations about the passing-on of traditions and experience’”, nevertheless, “I want the young people who are taking the blows now to know: those few remaining Soviet dissidents stood side-by-side with them, have stayed with them and shared their journey.”

Given this unity of purpose, of seeking however unsuccessfully to connect with the population at large, we might see the protagonists as practising the “propaganda of the deed” – not in the sense that phrase was given in the early twentieth century by politicians and policemen, as acts of violence, but in its original, broader sense: as any action, violent or not, that stirred one’s fellow citizens to a just cause. For, while some of those whose words are in this book used violence against property, and some specifically justified Ukrainian military violence against Russian aggression, none used violence against people.

Here are two further observations. First: while all the anti-war resisters shared a common purpose, they started with a diverse range of world views. A profound moral sense of duty runs through some of their statements. “Do I regret what has happened?” Igor Paskar asked his judges. “Yes, perhaps I’d wanted my life to turn out differently – but I acted according to my conscience, and my conscience remains clear.” Or, as Alexei Rozhkov put it: “I have a conscience, and I preferred to hold on to it.” Andrei Trofimov, in a similar vein, said at his second trial that “writ large, it is a matter of self-preservation” – not “the preservation of the body per se, of its physical health” but

the preservation of conscience in this difficult situation, “my ability to tell black from white, and lies from truth, and, quite importantly, my ability to say out loud what I believe to be true”.

Ruslan Siddiqi voiced his motivation differently, in terms of political ideas about changing society. In letters to Mediazona, an opposition media outlet, he described his path towards anarchism. Expressing dislike for the “rigidity” of some anarchists and communists, he nevertheless envisaged a transition “from a totalitarian state to other forms of government with greater freedoms and further evolution into communities with self-government”. The invasion of Ukraine changed things: anyone who opposed it was declared a traitor by the government. “In such a situation, it is not surprising that some would prefer to leave the country, whereas others would take up explosives. Realising that the war was going to be a long one, at the end of 2022 I decided to act militarily.”

By contrast, Alexei Gorinov founded his defence on pacifist principles, and quoted Lev Tolstoy on the “madness and criminality of war”. Being tried “for my opinion that we need to seek an end to the war”, he could “only say that violence and aggression breed nothing but reciprocal violence. This is the true cause of our troubles, our suffering, our senseless sacrifices, the destruction of civilian and industrial infrastructure and our homes.” Sasha Skochilenko was still more explicit: “Yes, I am a pacifist” she told the court. Pacifists “believe life to be the highest value of all”; they “believe that every conflict can be resolved by peaceful means. I can’t kill even a spider – I am scared to imagine that it is possible to take someone’s life. [...] Wars don’t end thanks to warriors – they end thanks to pacifists. And when you imprison pacifists, you move the long-awaited day of the peace further away.”

Savelii Morozov told the military recruitment commission that he would not refuse to fight in all wars, but in this particular, unjust war. A war in defence of one's homeland could be justified, but not the "crime" being perpetrated in Ukraine.

For Darya Kozyreva, the central issue is Ukraine's right to self-determination, asserted by force of arms. The war is a "criminal intrusion on Ukraine's sovereignty", she told the court. While identifying herself in an interview as a Russian patriot – "a patriot in the real sense, not in the sense that the propagandists give that word" – Kozyreva justified Ukrainian military resistance. Ukraine does not need a "big brother"; it will fight anyone who tries to invade, she said. In Russia, even some of Putin's political opponents "do not always realise that Ukraine, having paid for its sovereignty in blood, will determine its own future". She wants to believe in "a beautiful future where Russia lets go of all imperial ambition".

Aleksandr Skobov expressed the hope that Russia will be defeated militarily in still more categorical terms. He spelled out in court three principles of his political organisation, the Free Russia Forum: the "unconditional return to Ukraine of all its internationally recognised territories occupied by Russia, including Crimea"; support for all those fighting for this goal, including Russian citizens who joined the Ukrainian armed forces; and support for "any form of war against Putin's tyranny inside Russia, including armed resistance", but excluding "disgusting" terrorist attacks on civilians.

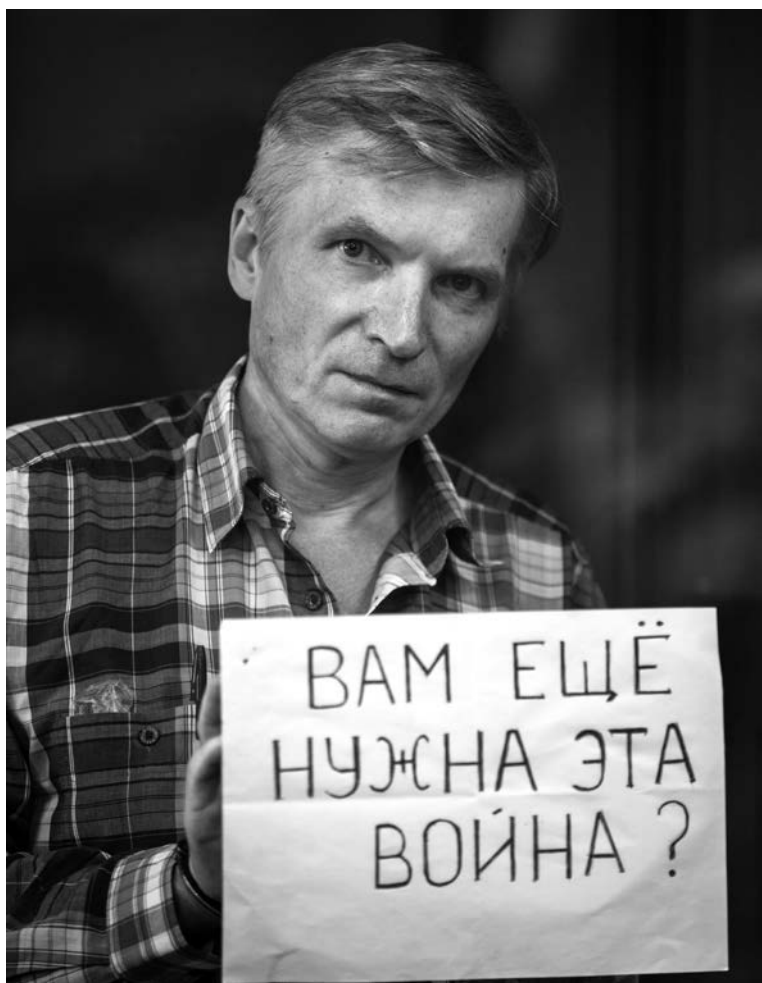
Second: these anti-war speeches have much to tell us not only about Russia and Ukraine, but about the increasingly dangerous world we live in, in which Putin's slide to authoritarianism has been succeeded by right-wing, authoritarian turns in the USA and some European countries. Russia's imperial war of

aggression has been followed by Israel's genocidal offensive in Gaza, in which multiple war crimes – mass murder of civilians, the use of starvation as a weapon, deliberate blocking of aid, and the targeting of journalists, aid workers and international agencies – have been facilitated by the same Western powers that offer lip service to Ukraine's national rights.

The two aggressor nations, Israel and Russia, aligned with different geopolitical camps, are subject to analogous driving forces. Nationalist ideology supercedes rational economic management; expansionist violence supercedes democracy; the decline of Western neo-liberal hegemony paves the way for militarist thuggery. Capital's need for social control underpins near-fascist methods of rule. Readers may recognise, in the Russian state's dystopian efforts of 2022-23 to punish its dissenting citizens as "terrorists" and "traitors", patterns that are retraced in the unhinged witch-hunts of 2024-25 in the USA and western Europe, against opponents of the Gaza slaughter.

The powers on both sides of the geopolitical divide are frightened of similar things: the defiance and resilience of the opponents of Putin's war, and the anger that has brought millions of people on to the streets of north American and European cities, in protest at the Gaza genocide. They are frightened of beliefs that are taking shape, in varying forms, that humanity can and should strive for a better, richer life than that offered by the warmongers and dictators. Some of these beliefs are expressed in the chapters of this book.

Simon Pirani



* "Do you still need this war?"

*“The real terrorists are
those who unleashed
this criminal war”*

1. Alexei Gorinov

Alexei Gorinov, a local councillor for the Krasnoselsky district of Moscow, was arrested on 26 April 2022 after making anti-war remarks at a council meeting. On 8 July 2022 he became the first person in Russia to be convicted of “publicly disseminating knowingly false information” about the war. This was his final statement to the Moscow court that sentenced him to seven years’ imprisonment.

I think, or it has always seemed to me, that our common past dictates a few major lessons for us. My father came back from the Second World War disabled. So did his brother. And they were lucky. They had been fulfilling – and had fulfilled – their sacred duty of defending the Fatherland from the enemy. I’m old enough to have seen the Moscow of the 1960s, with its veterans – armless, legless, blind. There were quite a few of them in our apartment block too. I grew up among them.

Survivors of that war were reluctant to tell stories about it. As I grew older, I understood why. Because a war, as a human activity, no matter what you call it, is the basest, vilest and filthiest thing. It is unworthy of humans, who are entrusted by the universe and evolution with the task of preserving and multiplying all life on our planet.

I am convinced of this: a war is the fastest method of dehumanisation, when the line between good and evil is erased.

War is always violence and blood, mangled bodies and severed limbs. It is always death. I do not accept it, I reject it. This is what our common past has taught me. And probably I am not the only one: the Russian Criminal Code has Articles 353 and 354, which provide for severe penalties for preparing, waging and propagandising a war of aggression. And I believe that Russia exhausted its limit on wars back in the twentieth century.

But our present is Bucha, Irpin, and Hostomel ... Do the names of those towns mean anything to you? Those of you who do not know what happened there should enquire about it. And then don't say you didn't know.

For five months, Russia has been conducting military operations on the territory of a neighbouring state, coyly calling it a "special military operation". We are promised victory and glory. Why then do so many of my fellow citizens feel shame and guilt? Why have so many of them left Russia and continue to do so? And why does our country suddenly have so many enemies?

Could it be that there is something wrong with us? Let's think about it! At least give us a chance to discuss what is going on. To exchange opinions. It is, after all, our constitutional right! In fact, that's what I did. At a municipal council meeting, I expressed my opinion, my attitude as a human being regarding the subject of the vote. I based that opinion, that attitude, on my convictions. And I was supported by a majority of those present! And now I'm on trial.

It seems like another unlearned lesson from our common past. Punishment for words, trumped-up cases, speedy trials, belated epiphanies: "How could it be, we didn't know!"

During the years of Stalinist terror, my grandfather was accused of advocating the overthrow of the Soviet system which

he himself had helped create and consolidate. My grandfather lived to be fully rehabilitated, half a century later. I hope my rehabilitation will take much less time. But for now, here I am, in the courtroom.

My criminal case is one of the first to be heard, but there are hundreds of such criminal cases in Russia, opened against my fellow citizens who think and speak out about what is happening. Whole families are being destroyed, young people's lives are being destroyed. By speaking here, I speak for all of those who are not yet on trial.

The few words I spoke, at a routine meeting of the Council of Deputies, were examined under a microscope. A team of nine investigators was formed, six of whom were "serious cases investigators". There were five experts – linguists and psychologists.

They dug through my mind, trying to understand what was really behind the opinions I expressed to my fellow deputies concerning one of the items on the agenda. Was there a secret meaning or a hidden message? What was the true meaning of my phrases? Two 120-page expert reports were produced. ...

Meanwhile, Article 29 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation guarantees everyone freedom of thought and expression, as long as it does not imply propaganda of hatred, hostility or superiority. Everyone has the right freely to seek, receive, transmit, produce and disseminate information by any lawful means. Freedom of mass information is guaranteed. Censorship is prohibited.

During the August 1991 coup, I was also a deputy. Together with other defenders I was outside the building of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic – the "White House". We were defending our future. Our right to live freely, which meant

freedom to speak, to express our thoughts, to gather and share information. *[In August 1991, leading Communist Party and security services figures took control in Moscow and sought to unseat the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and stop democratic reforms. The attempt collapsed after a few days.]*

If they had told me then that, 30 years later, I would be tried by a criminal court for my words, for my opinions, I would not have believed it. The reasons for such a sad outcome will require thorough research and reflection by historians. It will require not only reflection, but also conclusions. It will not be easy, but we will have to recognise that a war is a war. We will have to rehabilitate the victims and judge the criminals. We will have to restore the good name of our people and our country.

In the meantime, I wish prudence to our government. I wish wisdom to the court. I wish endurance to all those who are affected by the new wave of repressions, as well as to all the Ukrainian people. For myself, I wish that a future Russia will appoint me ambassador to Ukraine. To everyone who supported me directly or from a distance – don't give up! I am with you!

Appeal hearing

On 19 September 2022, a Moscow court heard Gorinov's appeal against his seven-year sentence, and reduced it to six years, 11 months. Here is his final statement to the closed hearing, published by his supporters on the Free Alexei Gorinov Telegram channel.

Seven years in prison – is that a lot, or a little? It takes eight minutes for solar radiation to reach the Earth. The light waves from a searchlight turned towards the sky will reach the star nearest to the Sun in just over four years – two-thirds of my

prison term. And it will take about 2,000,000 years for that light to reach the stellar system nearest to us, the Andromeda Galaxy.

It's unimaginably long. But think how many people have been affected by the war in Ukraine. Each of them lost years of normal, peaceful life. Some lost their lives. Do the multiplication, and try to grasp the cosmic scale of the events we're talking about. This is the scale of responsibility resting upon each and every one of us – including myself. And the very least that I can do is to call things by their proper names.

Will seven years be enough for me to reform myself from a pacifist into a hawk? Enough to concede that the “special military operation” is not a war, a military conflict, but a peacemaking effort? Will it be enough time to learn to deny the civilian deaths, including child deaths, in the course of this “operation”? To start urging others not to stop these military exploits, but to carry on? We shall see.

We're also going to see whether these seven years will be enough for Russia's political leadership to grasp the foreign-policy, economic and moral catastrophe it has brought upon our country.

Destruction, such as has not been seen since the Second World War, has been wrought on a European country. Tens of thousands dead and wounded on either side. Millions of refugees. All the same, we hear daily and hourly that this war is for peace. We're trained to accept that killing one another is a right and natural thing to do.

One TV news item shows us, ecstatically, a deadly storm of shells and rockets where every shot costs a million rubles! Next, we see humanitarian aid being delivered to the survivors, on territories just “liberated” from those very same people.

And then, we're invited to chip in for yet another expensive surgery to save a sick child.

No! This is not normal. This can only appear to be normal in an inverted picture of the world that exists in the head of one person – or perhaps several people – holding absolute power, with all of its levers, but in isolation from civil society and the people.

I want to acknowledge my guilt. My guilt before the long-suffering people of Ukraine, and before the entire global community. I'm culpable because, as a citizen of my country, I was unable to prevent this ongoing madness. I ask forgiveness, too, for the fact that I will not be able to do anything to stop it, it seems. I say this also in the name of my compatriots, who are crushed by the fear of repressions, and from whom I receive numerous letters of support.

At this moment, the leading developed countries and their governments have a responsibility for life on Earth, and for technological progress without wars. Russia, with its innumerable human losses – in the civil war, in the madness of collectivisation and the Great Terror, in two world wars and in many lesser ones – still hasn't passed the test of shouldering its fair share of responsibility.

Realising the lawlessness of what they do, those in power shift some of their own burden of responsibility onto the courts, frenziedly shoving their citizens into prisons and penal colonies – for a word, for expressing an opinion, for having convictions. The very possibility of a trial like my own in the twenty-first century, of this kind of judicial investigation, is a disgrace for our country. This has all happened before, in its history.

In light of the lessons of our shared past, and in view of Russia's imminent future, I consider myself acquitted.

Second trial

After Alexei Gorinov was imprisoned, new charges of “justifying terrorism” were brought against him. Falsified “evidence” – that Gorinov had expressed support for the Azov regiment and the right-wing Ukrainian party *Pravyi Sektor* (Right Sector), who are designated “terrorists” in Russia – was based on demonstrably untrue claims by fellow patients in a prison hospital. In November 2024, the Second Western District military court convicted him, and added three years to his sentence. Gorinov read out this statement.

All my life I have been an opponent of aggression, violence and war, and devoted myself exclusively to peaceful activities: science, teaching, education, governance and public activities as a deputy, human rights activist, member of election commissions and controller of the electoral process. I never thought that I would live to see such a level of degradation of my country’s political system and its foreign policy, when ordinary citizens who favour peace and are against war, who number in the thousands, would be accused of slandering the armed forces and justifying terrorism, and would be put on trial.

The third year of the war is coming to an end. The third year of casualties and destruction, deprivation and suffering of millions of people, on a level unprecedented since the Second World War. We cannot remain silent about this.

Back in late April, our former defence minister announced the losses of the Ukrainian side in the armed conflict – 500,000 people. Think about this number! And what losses have been suffered by Russia, which, according to official information, is constantly successfully advancing along the entire front? We still do not know. And who will be responsible for this? What is

all this for? *[Here the judge, Roman Vladimirov, interrupted, asked Gorinov to “rethink” his statement, and then left the courtroom. Gorinov continued speaking.]*

Our authorities and those who support them in their militaristic aspirations wanted this war so much – and now it has come to our land.

I would like to ask them: has our life become better? Is this how you understand the well-being and security of our country and its population? Or did you not envision these developments in your calculations?

But for now we have to answer not to those who organised the war, who continue to kill, who propagandise the war and fight as mercenaries. Rather, we ordinary citizens of Russia, who raise our voices against war and for peace, have to answer, paying with our freedom and, for some, with our lives.

I belong to the outgoing generation of people whose parents took part in the Second World War, or survived it with all its hardships. The generation that has already passed away entrusted us with preserving peace with all our might, as the most precious thing on Earth for all its inhabitants. But we have neglected these principles and devalued our memory of these people and the victims of that war.

My guilt is that I, as a citizen of my country, allowed this war to happen and failed to stop it. And I ask you to note this in the verdict. But I would like my guilt and responsibility to be shared with me by the organisers, participants and supporters of the war, as well as the persecutors of those who advocate peace.

I continue to live with the hope that some day it will be so. In the meantime, I ask the people of Ukraine and my fellow citizens affected by the war to forgive me.

Within the framework of the case in which I was accused and tried for my opinion that we need to seek an end to the war, I have expressed my attitude fully to this abominable human endeavour. I can only say that violence and aggression breed nothing but reciprocal violence. This is the true cause of our troubles, our suffering, our senseless sacrifices, the destruction of civilian and industrial infrastructure and our homes.

Let us stop this bloody, needless slaughter – needless both for us and for the inhabitants of Ukraine. Isn't it time to leave our neighbours alone and deal with our own snowballing domestic problems? Long ago we proved to the world how brave, resilient and peace-loving we are. So, maybe enough is enough?

Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy – from a letter to his son (1904): “For me, the madness and criminality of war is so clear that I can see nothing in it except for this madness and criminality.”

I endorse and subscribe to these words of our great compatriot. You can endorse them too!

Second appeal hearing

In April 2025 Alexei Gorinov appeared in the Military Appeals Court at Vlasikhe, Moscow region, where his lawyers appealed unsuccessfully against his “terrorism” sentence. Gorinov's final statement was again interrupted by the court, and then published by his supporters. Here are excerpts:

Our government, which is worried about the low birth rate in Russia, is taking desperate measures to raise it, issuing instructions about who should bring up children, and when and how. All-encompassing values of freedom, democracy, and the universally recognised inalienable rights and freedoms of people, of citizens, are substituted with talk of “family

values”, but in practice these, too, are worthless: parents lose their children in war, wives and their families either lose their husbands and fathers, who are taken from the family to serve the front – or get them back as invalids. People are torn away from their families if they say something that the authorities don’t like, and find themselves behind bars. In the near future, many of the surviving war heroes will be needed by no one but themselves.

Wouldn’t it be better for the authorities to focus on looking after our people, ensuring them, above all, freedom, security and belief in a peaceful life over the long term? But no! They have thought up a cynical scheme of moral degradation, to tempt people to kill people just like themselves, or to participate in murder for money. The targets of the propagandists and agitators for war are our fellow citizens with low social status, with few means, who unfortunately have not found a more dignified role – or people who are just aggressive by nature.

But that’s not all. The height of cynicism, its most refined form, is sending to war prisoners – including those under investigation for, or suspected or accused of serious crimes, right up to the most serious. The storm battalions are made up exactly of these people. People who, having committed crimes, have guns put in their hands, with the promise of big bucks and release from any responsibility. And they are sent to kill.

But this bloodspattered money won’t bring happiness. It is stained with the blood of our long-suffering neighbours – people like us, with whom we lived previously in one country – our relatives and friends, our classmates and fellow students, our work colleagues. Our forefathers, together, defended our common motherland from the enemy.

This war, now, is above all against freedom, and that means, against life, against the highest forms of evolution. Because freedom is the basis of life, it is life, and together with love for our nearest lies at the foundation of Christian morality.

Gorinov told the court that many Russians were afraid to speak out against the war, because those that do so publicly are so quickly accused of crimes up to and including terrorism. He concluded:

The real terrorists are those who unleashed this criminal war, this bloody butchery, as a result of which hundreds of thousands of people on each side have been killed and maimed. Those who really approve of terrorism are the propagandists of this war. They are the ones who should be on trial. Not ordinary people, who wield no power – not my dear fellow citizens, who have been persecuted for speaking out about peace, for speaking out against the war, who are horrified – as I am – by what has been done, who want to try to do something about it. Freedom to them, and peace to us all.

The path to court

Alexei Gorinov, now 64, became active in the pro-democracy movement in the late 1980s, in the run-up to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s Gorinov, a scientist, retrained as a lawyer. In the early 2000s, as repression of street demonstrations mounted, he took on numerous activists' cases. He was active in the democratic political group 'Solidarnost' (Solidarity), and in 2017 was elected as a local councillor.

Three weeks after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the district council discussed plans for municipal festivals, and Gorinov declared that he would vote against. "What sort of enjoyment and entertainment can we be talking about, when we have now moved into a qualitatively different time in our lives, when war is raging on the territory of a neighbouring sovereign state, in which our country is the aggressor?" How could Muscovites mark victory in the Second World War, he asked, "when every day children are being killed – for information I can tell you that about 100 children have died in Ukraine – when children are being orphaned, and when the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of participants in the Second World War are being thrown into the cauldron of military activity in Ukraine". Civil society's every effort should be directed towards "stopping the war and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory".

Alexei Gorinov is in prison in Barnaul in the Altai republic, southern Siberia. He is recognised as a political prisoner by Memorial: Support Political Prisoners, and supported by the Free Alexei Gorinov group, which can be found on Telegram. Gorinov's supporters are concerned that, due to a permanent disability (part of one lung missing), prison conditions could endanger his life: a cold, not rapidly treated, can give rise to pneumonia or severe bronchitis.



*“What did each of us do
to stop this nightmare?
What will we tell our
children and grand-
children about these
troubled times?”*

2. Igor Paskar

Igor Paskar, 49, was arrested on 14 June 2022 after painting his face the colours of the Ukrainian flag and throwing an improvised Molotov cocktail at the stone porch of the Federal Security Service (FSB) office in Krasnodar, southern Russia. He was charged with “vandalism” and “terrorism”, and on 31 May 2023 sentenced in the Southern District military court at Rostov-on-Don to eight-and-a-half years’ imprisonment. This is his final statement in court:

Almost a year has gone by since I carried out this action. During that year, I pictured this moment time and again, the moment when I would be given the opportunity to make my final statement. I agonised over the words I would say, and the motives that drove me to act as I did.

During the last sitting, your honour, you asked whether I regret my actions. I understood that the extent of my professed regret would influence the severity of the sentence. But if I renounced my beliefs, I would be acting against my conscience. On the contrary, during the time I have been in prison, I have seen first-hand the injustices perpetrated against the people who we call our brothers: both prisoners of war who have served in the Ukrainian armed forces and ordinary Ukrainian citizens.

The war – or whatever term we use to label it – came to their homes, destroying their lives as they knew them. No

matter what slogans and geopolitical interests we use to varnish this, in my eyes it can not be justified.

Do I regret what has happened? Yes, perhaps I'd wanted my life to turn out differently – but I acted according to my conscience, and my conscience remains clear. Rather than reflecting on who is right and who is guilty, I would like to pose this question: what did each of us do to stop this nightmare? What, ten or 15 years from now, will we tell our children and grandchildren about these troubled times?

Unfortunately, God has not granted me the joy of fatherhood; the people who were closest to me have gone, and I am left alone with myself. It was easy for me to do what I did, even though I was well aware of the consequences. There was no one to agonise about my fate, no one to worry about me, or to cheer me on. But what I really did not expect was the huge number of letters and messages of support that I have received. People have written from every corner of Russia, and not only Russia. Many were grateful for my position, so completely at odds with the notion of unanimous national support for what is being perpetrated. There were so many messages of encouragement: “stay strong”, “don't despair”. So many warm words, so much sympathy. But I'll be so bold as to read just one part of a letter that I received in May, which really touched me, and pushed me to write this final statement to the court. Here it is:

There is very little left of everyday life. It turns out that we can't live everyday lives any more. I am listening to the memoirs of prisoners from the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Right now I'm on the breathtaking biography of *[the actress] Tamara Petkevich [who spent seven years in a prison camp]*. She was arrested in 1943, and lived until 2017. When they came for her

she was only 22 – just a girl, half the age I am now. I have not read Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*, and I never got round to Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales* either. But now I’m listening to Petkevich, and it’s making me realise that this is exactly what we must listen to, what we must read at school.

As a country we are obsessed with the past, but we hardly ever think about the present or the future. The Americans have their American dream: something to strive for. We have nothing but a fixation on that which happened long ago, that which cannot return. But time and again we try to bring back what has passed, and these attempts are absolutely pointless. It’s as though the whole country is stuck in the mud. As individuals we are caught in our feelings. It’s terrible that even now, for as long as we stubbornly turn our heads back, we will never live happily, never the way we want to. Let’s hope people can find happiness in the little things.

Appeal hearing

Igor Paskar lodged an appeal against conviction, which was rejected by the Military Appeal Court on 7 November 2023. In his final statement, Paskar read this poem by Anastasia Dmytruk, the Ukrainian poet, written in 2014:

We will never ever be brothers
not by motherland, not by mothers.
Your souls aren’t free, they’re crippling –
we won’t even become step-siblings.
Christened “elder” – we don’t believe you –
we’ll be younger, but not beneath you.
You are many, but faceless of late,
you’re enormous perhaps, we’re – great.

But you smother... orbiting zealously,
you will choke one day on your jealousy.
Freedom's foreign to you, unattained,
from your childhood, you've been chained.
In your home, "silence is golden" prevails,
but we're raising up Molotov cocktails.
In our hearts, blood is boiling, sizzling,
and you're kin? – you blind ones, miserly?
There's no fear in our eyes, it's effortless,
we are dangerous even weaponless.
We have grown, became brave outright
while the snipers held us in sight.
Executioners forced us to kneel –
we stood up and all was repealed.
Rats are hiding from us, but their lot
is to wash themselves clean in blood.
They are sending new orders, devising,
we are lighting the flames of uprising.
From your Tsar, our Democracy's severed.
We will never be brothers ever.

The path to court

Igor Paskar was born in Nikolaevsky village, a working-class community in the northern part of Volgograd region, a biographical note published by Solidarity Zone states. He went to school there. After doing national service on building sites in Samara, he worked as a courier, and for haulage and construction companies.

Igor Paskar had three previous convictions. The first, at the age of 22, was for possession of a few grams of cannabis: he was given a five-year suspended sentence. "In the milieu

in which I grew up, half of the people I knew – if not more than half – smoked cannabis. It was not considered to be asocial or objectionable. But the motherland has decided that, in contrast to drinking alcohol, that's serious criminal behaviour", Paskar said.

Three years later, Paskar was in court again, and this time was sentenced to two years in prison for the theft of, and possession of, drugs. He points out that, from the moment of his first time in court, the police searched him regularly, and said quite openly that they were looking for weed.

Igor's third time in court was in 2006, when he received a one-and-a-half year suspended sentence for possession of narcotics. "That's how I came to the attention of our law enforcement agencies. And from then on, I didn't have a life", he recalled.

In 2013 Paskar moved to Moscow, worked in various jobs and helped his mother, until she died in 2017. This was around the time his social conscience took shape. "As far back as I remember, even when I was very young, I was always concerned about what was happening in our country. Our motherland, in the guise of the Russian state, always seemed like a stepmother to me, not a real mother. I was never indifferent to the pressure that the state brought to bear on those who dissented or disagreed", Paskar said in court.

In 2020 Igor went to the Belarusian embassy, to express solidarity with those who protested after the falsification of the presidential election results, in which [*Belarusian president Alyaksandr*] Lukashenko gave himself 93 per cent of the votes. "That summer and autumn, in 2020, when Belarus's tinpot dictator was pushing his people around, I was still hoping that here in Russia we would avoid that

kind of thing”, Paskar said.

In 2021 Paskar participated in a big protest staged after the arrest of Alexei Navalny. He was detained, brought to court and fined 10,000 rubles.

After the all-out Russian invasion of Ukraine, Paskar decided to undertake a symbolic anti-war action. On 12 June 2022, the Russia Day national holiday, Paskar set fire to a pro-war banner displaying the letter “Z” and the *[militarist]* slogan “We don’t abandon our own”. The action did not attract the attention he had hoped it would, and he decided on a second protest.

On 14 June Paskar threw an improvised Molotov cocktail at the stone porch of the FSB offices in Krasnodar. It set fire only to a plastic mat. Paskar stated in court that his action was entirely symbolic and carried no threat to anyone’s life; it was an expression of solidarity with people in Ukraine, and a signal to those in Russia who did not support the war, that they were not alone. “My action was peaceful, and aimed to show all who opposed this monstrous war, that they were not isolated, and to show our Ukrainian neighbours, that we *[in Russia]* have not all been turned in to zombies by state propaganda”, he said in court.

Paskar was arrested a few minutes after throwing the Molotov cocktail. “I stood outside the building and waited for them. I made no attempt to hide or to evade arrest”, he recalled in court. The police arrived, and asked if he had started the fire. When he confirmed that he had, they put him in handcuffs and took him in to the FSB premises.

“There were people in uniform, perhaps six to eight of them”, Paskar said. “They snapped a photo of me on a phone: that picture is in the case file, and it shows that I

had no injuries. Then they asked me what I wanted, why I did that. I answered that I wanted to make use of Article 51 of the Constitution, that gives you the right not to incriminate yourself. They obviously found that funny, because a split-second later a sack was put over my head. The next few hours were among the very worst of my life.”

Paskar’s arms, which were handcuffed behind his back, were pulled sharply upwards, so that “my head went down to waist level”. That was how he was dragged through the FSB’s corridors. “I was taken to some room, thrown on the floor, and then they began to kick me”, he recalls.

“They put into my hands a grenade, or a replica of one, and said they were going to pull out the pin. They put a gun to my head and said they were going to shoot. Then they attached rings to the middle fingers of both hands and started to send electric shocks through them. Then some very heavy guy sat on me so that I could not move, and they started to ask me about nothing in particular. They just wanted to see how much I could stand. I started to scream, although even that wasn’t always possible. They pushed down on me so hard that I could not breathe.”

Paskar says that he twice lost consciousness. “They took my trousers off and tried to force some plastic object – presumably some sort of imitation phallus – into my anus. All this time the sack was over my head. I could hear that they were taking photos of me in this situation. Perhaps they wanted to be able to blackmail me in future.”

People were constantly coming in and out of the room, Paskar recalled. “As far as I can understand, the senior officers were not only well aware of these illegal activities, they were encouraging them.”

They asked about “Ukrainian handlers”. “But since I had no Ukrainian handlers, after every negative answer to these questions there came another electric shock”, Paskar said. “The electric rings were moved to my feet and put round my toes. Since I understood ... when I understood, that they would keep torturing me until I gave them somebody’s name, I invented a person: Aleksandr Volf. It was a nickname someone I knew used in a *[computer]* game. *[After I said that,]* they picked me up from the floor and even gave me a glass of water.”

With the sack still over his head, Paskar was taken to the investigator of his case, Yuri Zakharchenko. He opened a case on the commission of an “act of terrorism” (Article 205.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). When, under questioning, Paskar described his action with the “Z” banner, a charge of “vandalism” (Article 214.2) was added.

After court

After sentencing in May 2023, Igor Paskar was taken to Novochoerkassk detention centre, where he was placed in a cell with supporters of, and former participants in, the war. They immediately beat him up. After this Paskar was transferred to another cell. After Paskar’s appeal was rejected by the Military Appeals Court (see above), he took it to the Supreme Court on 19 September 2024, where it was again rejected.

Igor Paskar is in the northernmost of Russia's high-security prisons, in Yeniseisk, Krasnoyarsk region. In 2024 it was reported that prison management was preventing him from receiving books and newspapers. Memorial: Support Political Prisoners has recognised Igor Paskar as a political prisoner. Solidarity Zone supports Igor Paskar while he is in prison.



*“My action was a cry
from the heart, from
my conscience, to those
who were and are
afraid, but who do not
want this war”*

3. Bohdan Ziza

Bohdan Ziza, 30, a Ukrainian artist, poet and activist, was arrested in May 2022 after painting the colours of the Ukrainian flag on to a municipal administration building in Crimea, which has been occupied by Russian forces since 2014. On 5 June 2023, he was convicted at the Southern District Military Court at Rostov-on-Don of “committing a terrorist act”, “threats to commit terrorism” and “vandalism motivated by political hatred”. He was sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment, four years in prison and the remainder in a high-security penal colony. This is his final statement to the court.

Do I regret what I have done?

I am sorry that I over-reached, and that my action resulted in charges under the Article *[of the Russian criminal code]* on terrorism. I am sorry that my grandmother is now without the care and support that she needs. Apart from me, she has nobody. And I am sorry that I cannot now help others who are close to me, who need that help now.

As for the rest: I acted according to my conscience.

And also, according to my conscience, I do not deny or disavow what I did. I behaved stupidly, and could have expressed my opinion in some other way. But did I deserve, for what I did, to be deprived of my freedom for ten years or more?

I would like to appeal to the court: do not follow the regime's script, do not participate in these awful repressions. But obviously that would have no effect. The judges are just doing what they are told in political cases like these.

For these reasons, I will continue to protest, even in prison. And I am well aware of the sentence I may receive, and how it may affect my health and even my life.

But am I worthy of the life that I live? Is each one of us worthy of a carefree life, when we stay silent at a time when, every day, innocent people's lives are being taken?

"This was the worst night of my life. I never experienced anything like it. I thought we would die. There were three Kinzhal rockets, and loads of Kalibrs. They fell very close, they were right above our building. The building shook – several explosions, one after the other. For the first time in the war there was a white glow, the sky was white from the explosions. It was as though we were in a trench, not in our own home. At one moment I thought that it was all flying towards us. There was the very clear sound of a rocket, and then a very powerful explosion. But we have been lucky, again, and we are still alive."

That was a message from my sister, in Kyiv, who had to live through another night of bombardment of the city by the Russian armed forces.

When she went out in the morning, she learned that one of the rockets had hit the next-door building.

For many people, this war that is going on now is happening over there somewhere, far away.

One of the staff at the pre-trial detention centre said to me: "Bloody hell, I am sick of this war. Whenever you turn on the TV, it's more of the same." I answered that the war is not over and so you can not get away from it. And then he said:

“Yeah, yeah, I know. It’s just that everything is getting more expensive. The cost of running a car now!”

And that’s the problem, here in Russia. For you, this war is an inconvenience, an irritation. You try to wait it out, living your usual life, trying to avoid bad news, and in that way simply not valuing simple things, not valuing the fact that you can wake up in a warm bed, in a warm flat, and say to someone who is dear to you, “good morning”. At a time when in the country next door, millions of people are losing their homes, losing their loved ones, when whole cities are being destroyed. Every day. That’s the everyday reality for Ukrainian citizens now.

In theory, Russian people’s failure to act could be explained, if it wasn’t for the fact that what is happening is being done by Russian hands. The hands of those who bear arms, and those who don’t do anything to stop them. Every day that an ordinary Russian person carries on, reasoning that this is all politics and doesn’t concern him, and living his normal life, he adds money to the Russian Federation budget and in that way sponsors this criminal war.

Of course there are those who do not support what is happening, who take action, who are not silent participants: journalists, various activists – those who refuse to stay silent.

My action was a cry from the heart, from my conscience, to those who were and are afraid – just as I was afraid – but who also did not want, and do not want, this war. Each of us separately are small, unnoticed people – but people whose loud actions can be heard. Yes, it is frightening. Yes, you can end up behind bars – where I, for sure, did not plan to be. Even for these words I could face a new criminal case. But it is better to be in prison with a clear conscience, than to be a wretched, dumb beast outside.

I am also an ordinary citizen of my country – Ukraine – who is not used to keeping quiet when confronted with lawlessness. I am not alone here today in this “goldfish bowl” [*slang for the glass cage in which the accused appears in Russian courts*]. There are more than 200 people with me: Ukrainian political prisoners, serving time in Russian prisons on fabricated charges. Many of them are Crimean Tatars, who are once again faced with repression by Russia. I am myself half Crimean Tatar, and it hurts to see what our people are going through right now.

Many Ukrainians are serving time in Russian prisons simply because they are Ukrainians, and were somewhere that the Russian state thought they should not be. In Russian prisons people are beaten up for speaking in Ukrainian. Or not even for speaking it, but simply for understanding it. Bastards among the guards at pre-trial detention centres, or other places where our people are imprisoned, address prisoners in Ukrainian, to see if they get a reaction, to see if they provoke an answer or a response. If a person reacts, they beat him up.

Those who so passionately seek “Nazis” in Ukraine have not opened their eyes to the Nazism that has emerged in Russia, with its ephemeral “Russian world”, with which armed forces have come to us, and tried to extirpate Ukrainian identity.

People in prison suffer in the most terrible conditions. Many of them are elderly. More than 40 people [*in the pre-trial detention centre*] have critical health problems, and cannot access the medical treatment that they need. People die in prison. They are not criminals. Deport them from the country! Why do you keep them here?

I am no kind of terrorist. It sounds ridiculous to even say that. I am a person with morals and principles, who would

rather give his own life than take the life of another person. But I am not ready to give my life to the Federal Penal Enforcement Service of the Russian Federation.

I declare a hunger strike, and demand that I be stripped of my Russian citizenship. I demand that all Ukrainian political prisoners be freed. If anything happens to me in prison, I want the world to know that it happened only because I am a Ukrainian, who took a stand against the war in his country.

And if this is my last word, let it be my last word in the Russian language. The last thing I will say publicly in Russian in this country, as long as this regime lasts. The “red” regime.

[Ziza then recited this poem, by the Ukrainian rapper Artem Loik, in Ukrainian.]

I am not Red, I am Crimson!
I am not playing to the gallery!
These are not rhymes, they are wounds!
And I am not Melnik, I am Bandera!
The weather: it's snowing in my summer,
From Symonenko's motherland
I go to the end like Teliha!
And I believe in wings, like Kostenko!

About the poem. The Ukrainian for “crimson” (“bahrianyi”), was also the pseudonym of Ivan Lozoviaha, a dissident writer and political exile from 1932 to his death in 1963. Andriy Melnik and Stepan Bandera were leaders of Ukrainian nationalist partisan formations of the 1940s. Vasyl Symonenko was a Ukrainian poet, active in dissident circles until his death in 1963. Olena Teliha was a feminist poet, member of a nationalist underground cell in Nazi-occupied Kyiv,

killed by the Nazis in 1942. Lina Kostenko is a Soviet-era dissident who has continued working as a poet and writer in post-Soviet Ukraine.

The path to court

Bohdan Ziza was 18 in 2014, when Russia invaded Crimea, and 27 when he made his protest and was arrested. In the intervening years he had worked in a café, but put his creative energy into photography, videography, street art, writing and poetry. His work can still be seen on his Instagram and Youtube channels.

On 16 May 2022, Ziza poured blue and yellow paint – the colours of the Ukrainian flag – on to a municipal administration building in his home town of Evpatoria, Crimea. He made and circulated a video of the action, that also carried this message to Crimean street artists:

I would like to address all the adherents of graffiti-culture, all the vandals of Crimea, Russia and Belarus. I want to remind you that graffiti-culture is, in the first place, about protest. And there will never be a more appropriate time to protest than now. The most horrific war has been unleashed by Putin and the machine of state – and their propaganda is trying to convince people that everything is fine. They are trying to persuade people that there's no need to do a thing, that we need to sit, observe, wait, and that anyway there is nothing you can do. But now it is important, vital, to get out on the streets and make our protests heard – so that those who are against this war, but who are sitting at home, scared to speak their minds, can see that they are not alone. We are many. We outnumber those who support this war. We have been robbed

of any chance of coming out to protest during the day, but we can come out at night. I call on all of you to come out at night, come out to your courtyards, make your protest. Vandalism can sometimes be for the good, and this is such a time. No to the war.

While awaiting trial in the pre-trial detention facility (SIZO) in Simferopol, Ziza responded in writing to questions by a journalist on the Krym.Realii (Real Crimea) website. In these excerpts from the interview, he talks about his motivation.

Question. Bohdan, why have you chosen this specific form of protest against the war, which has now turned into criminal proceedings against you? After all, many Crimeans keep to posts on social media, or “solo pickets” with anti-war placards.

At the start of the [full-scale Russian] invasion [of Ukraine] friends messaged me and suggested going out and picketing a public square in Yevpatoria. I really wanted to express my position and show that not everyone supports the Russian government or their actions. But back then I was really worried about potential consequences, because I was certain that it would end in me being arrested. I was also worried that this could endanger the plans that I had at that time to leave Crimea. I was also scared of drawing the attention of the authorities because they could then potentially enlist me into military service, which I had evaded since 2014.

I refused the offer, and a few hours later discovered that my friends had been arrested and the FSB had been interrogating them. Thankfully, they got away with just fines. I hope they are now doing alright and that they are now safe.

Between the start of the war and my arrest I did not make a single post on social media and made no kind of public declaration. I don't know if that was good or bad. I hid myself away and didn't speak to anyone but my sister and friends from Ukraine. I watched for the reactions of friends and acquaintances from Crimea and Russia: who was behaving in what manner and how they reacted to the war. I was very disappointed in those around me. I knew that some article online would do nothing, and I was really sick of all the horrors, of the societal silence, and most of all of myself, so I wanted to do something, at least to assuage my internal pain. I decided to get the attention of as large a quantity of people as possible, and did it in a manner that I was very familiar with, which had always saved me during difficult mental periods – paint.

When you were planning your action, did you suppose that things could turn out like this? What were your thoughts at the time about the potential cost of such a protest?

This isn't my first such action. Over the last few years, I would go out at night periodically and do "political vandalism". I never publicised this anywhere, I did it anonymously, and I told nobody about it. I already had some experience of similar kinds of hooliganism, so it was a natural fit to use that form of protest. I realised that I might be arrested and transferred to pre-trial detention, and by that point I was ready for it, but I miscalculated my strength a little, as they say.

The flammable mixture was for a flashy video I was shooting, not arson. But who can I prove that to now...? But even with that, it's not terrorism of any kind, and I will prove

that in court. Exclusively for the principle, because I am not counting on any kind of fair justice, and I will not recognise an occupation court. [...]

Are there people in [detention] with you who sympathise with you? Do you feel any kind of support while you're in pre-trial detention?

Anti-war sentiment in Russia is now equivalent to being hostile *[to the state]*. If you don't support the activity of the Russian army, that means that you a priori support the enemy. At first I tried to defend myself through pacifism, to adapt to local conditions. This partially saved me from attacks by the *silo-viki* *[security forces]* and other arrestees. But the longer it goes on, the more losses suffered by Russian troops, the more aggressive the propaganda gets, the harder it now gets to see the difference between a person who stands up against the horrors being inflicted, and a Ukrainian standing up for his people, his land, and freedom.

To Russia I'm an enemy all the same, because ultimately, I chose an open-hearted pro-Ukraine position. Above all else, this was to be honest to myself. Sure, it makes things more complicated: right now, pro-Ukraine positions in prison are tantamount to suicide. But better that than being a hostage to your own fear as well. If you do something, do it honestly and for real, and people will try to mess with you. If those people also have power, then they will do what they can to try to stop you, destroy you, throw you somewhere you'll never escape from. But once I'm stuck in the swamps, I see hands reaching out to help me. Well, you know... in the swamps...

What support would you like to see and hear?

Mass resistance in Crimea, resistance to Russian aggression and to the occupation force. That would be the best support: after all, it was the aim of my action – to show that Crimeans don't need war, it's not what anyone needs.

I understand perfectly well that it's scary, and I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't scared too. I was, and I am. But I wanted to use my example to show that the time to be scared and stay quiet has passed! And I will continue to do that, even in prison, because that doesn't absolve you of responsibility. One day our silence will force silence on some child, some father, some mother. That can't be, it's our common responsibility to ensure it can't. Take note that in my video I address myself, above all, to Crimeans and Russians.

After court

At his trial in June 2023, Bohdan Ziza declared a hunger strike, to demand an end to the forced imposition of Russian citizenship, and the release of all Ukrainian political prisoners held in the Russian federation and occupied Crimea, but ended it a few days later. On 27 September 2023, Ziza's appeal against his sentence was rejected by the Military Appeal Court at Vlasikha, near Moscow. In December 2023, word reached human rights organisations in Ukraine from his lawyer that, despite spells in solitary confinement for refusing to wear prison clothes, he was in high spirits.

Bohdan Ziza is in prison in Vladimir, in central European Russia. He is recognised as a political prisoner by Memorial: Support for Political Prisoners, and supported by Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, Zmina, the Crimea Human Rights Group and other Ukrainian organisations.



“Putin is a treacherous tyrant who has usurped unlimited power and is elbow-deep in blood”

4. Mikhail Kriger

Human rights campaigner Mikhail Kriger, 65, was arrested on 3 November 2022 and charged with “justifying terrorism”, on account of a social media post that described as heroes Mikhail Zhlobitsky, a student who died in his suicide bombing of the Federal Security Service (FSB) office in Arkhangelsk, and Evgenii Maniurov, who started a gun battle at the FSB’s Moscow headquarters, in which he died together with two officers. A charge of “inciting hatred” was added, for a post looking forward to Putin’s death. Kriger was convicted on 17 May 2023 in the Second Western District military court, and sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment. This is his final statement to the court.

Honourable court!

My charges are based on two Facebook posts that were two years old at the moment of my arrest. This leads me to the conclusion that my *[on line]* texts are nothing but a pretext. In fact, I’m being prosecuted for my initially anti-war, and now openly pro-Ukrainian, stance, because I never tried to hide it – on the contrary, I’ve always done my best to broadcast it as often as I can to the broadest possible audience. I believe this war is a rare type of conflict in which one side is one hundred per cent in the right. And it’s the Ukrainian side.

Trying to purify myself from at least some of the fratricidal disgrace my country has brought upon itself, I helped Ukrainian refugees and expressed my sincere hope for *Peremoha* [Ukrainian for “victory”] on social media, in any way that I could. I remain confident that if Russians are to find freedom, it could only come as the result of *Peremoha* – the way it came to Japan and Germany through martial law.

As Aleksandr Gorodnitsky [*a Soviet and Russian poet and singer-songwriter*] wrote, “Freedom does not always need victory; sometimes defeat is better...”

But let’s return to the charges against me. I’m being accused of allowing myself a public dream about Putin’s hanging. Indeed, I dream of living to see that festive occasion.

I am positive that our dictator deserves the same kind of execution as other war criminals that were sentenced to death by hanging at the Nuremberg trials, for instance. He, too, is a treacherous tyrant who has usurped unlimited power and is elbow-deep in blood. This assessment of mine is fully in line with the warrant for his arrest issued by the International Criminal Court in the Hague. Could it be that I forgot about clemency in my dreams, about “mercy for the fallen”, so to speak? But I didn’t. It’s at this butcher’s behest (on that I insist) that blood keeps pouring every day.

And since he won’t step down voluntarily, as we all realise, his arrest and execution is the only way to stop the fratricidal bloodshed that he, and none other, unleashed against a nation that is the closest to Russians – the people of my beloved motherland, Ukraine.

Today in my home city of Dnipro, our führer’s manic ambitions have driven my numerous relatives, former classmates, and childhood friends to basements, where they are

hiding from shelling and bombs. What did they do to deserve it? Could it be that our sun-faced leader didn't have enough toy soldiers as a kid? Could it be – my other personal observation – that he's become a fan of the real führer, and appears to have taken a leaf from his book?

Therefore, I insist on the validity, rationality, and, if you will, practicality of my “crystal dream”. Or, paraphrasing a known sycophant called [*state Duma chairman Vyacheslav*] Volodin, we could say: “With Putin, there are rivers of blood. Without him, the bloodshed ends.”

Have I provided a sufficient and clear justification for my dream?

If so, let's proceed to the second charge. I'm also being charged with inciting hatred to the FSB. True, I'm not a fan of this bureau, which is a full clone of the Gestapo in Hitler's Reich and even surpasses it in vileness and barbarity. How so? you may ask. Because German executioners, as inhumane as they were, combated real enemies of the Reich and the führer, instead of inventing them.

Meanwhile, Putin's “Gestapo” conjures enemies all the time. They use agents provocateurs to create “terrorist organisations” and then “bust” them. To get another star on their shoulders or a medal on their chest, to get a promotion, they can ruin a teenager's life and the lives of his parents without a shade of remorse, like a predator eating a rabbit.

This vile practice of theirs came to light in the cases of the “New Greatness” [*ten Moscow teenagers entrapped by FSB agents*], the “Network” [*anti-fascists framed up and jailed*], and the teenagers from Kansk. One of them, 14-year-old Nikita Uvarov, spent almost a year in pre-trial detention. When he was 16, he got five years in a penal colony. For a “terror attack

in Minecraft”. What kind of people jail 14-year-old kids? Aren’t these modern-day Gestapo officers monsters? Can they be called human?

I wrote the text that the prosecution used as the main evidence when I was deeply affected by the sentence in the “Kaliningrad case”. To remind you, two newlyweds were sentenced to 12 and 13 (!) years in jail, for the incompetence of an FSB officer who had attended their wedding as a guest. [*The officer was drunk and boasted about his job.*] Just a couple of days after the ceremony, the newlyweds got such outrageous sentences [*for treason*]. What am I supposed to feel for those working for our version of the Gestapo?

I must also add that in the “Network” case, at the very least, the defendants were subjected to electric torture to extract forced confessions. The judges chose to look the other way. Judging by the geography of these cases and the obedience of the courts, I can only conclude that this cannibalistic, horrendous practice is indeed a practice and not a handful of isolated incidents. What am I supposed to feel for the personnel of this bureau? Boundless respect and simpering delight?

What am I supposed to feel for this government agency after the poisoning of [*Alexei*] Navalny, [*Vladimir*] Kara-Murza, and others, perpetrated by a mobile unit of uniformed assassins who follow their victims all over the country? That’s what they call “blazing hearts and clean hands”.

Explain this to me: how can someone aware of everything I just mentioned feel about the agency of executioners, sadists, murderers, and snitches? Why aren’t I allowed to share my revulsion with others? Doesn’t Article 29 of our Constitution guarantee my right to share information from open sources?

Therefore, I think I’ve provided enough clarification on

my position regarding both charges. This is also why I consider Mikhail Zhlobitsky to be a hero. That doesn't mean I justify terrorism! Has Putin's government left him any other form of protest except suicide bombing?

Did the judges pay attention to the traces of electric torture on [*"Network" case*] defendant [*Viktor*] Filinkov's body during the session? How many State Duma deputies submitted their inquiries to the Investigative Committee or the General Prosecutor's Office to investigate the incident? Did [*state TV channels*] Channel One or VGTRK mention anything about the five-year sentence passed on Uvarov, who is still a minor? So what was such a heroic truth-teller as Zhlobitsky supposed to do? What forms of protest were available? When the "ashes of Klaas" throbbed on his chest? Only the "folly of the brave", as Maxim Gorky put it. ...

[The "ashes of Klaas" is a theme in The Legend of Thyl Ulenspiegel by Charles de Coster, a nineteenth-century novel that became popular in Russian translation and inspired a samizdat opera of the 1980s.]

A few more words. During the court sessions, the prosecution often mentioned my numerous administrative arrests, apparently as an aggravating circumstance. The idea must have been to present me in a negative light.

I'd like to emphasise I never joined public protests for fun or out of boredom. My only goal was to defend legitimacy, and I acted in full agreement with the Constitution, which guarantees the right of peaceful assembly in Article 31.

There's more. I considered walking out in protest as both my right and my duty as a citizen to defend my civil rights. I often made myself do it, despite my laziness, fatigue, and other circumstances.

And in doing so, honourable judges, prosecutors, and investigators, I defended your rights too. So that you could elect an accountable government. So that the deputies you elected would prioritise your response, approval, or disapproval when making a decision. So that they were dependent on you at least to some extent. So that your sons, brothers, fathers, and husbands would not get drafted to this criminal war and returned home in a body bag. I believe you're as much invested in it as I am. But you're more afraid. My good intentions got me arrested, fined, and jailed many times.

And a couple more words.

I appeal to everyone who can hear me or read my words. If you read or hear one day that “Kriger changed his mind”, “Kriger withdrew his statement”, “offered an apology”, and so on, know one thing: My loved ones or myself are in grave danger.

And finally, a few quick words for my esteemed compatriots [*Kriger delivered the rest of his speech in Ukrainian*] – the defenders of my native Ukraine.

Dear Ukrainians! My beloved friends! What saddens me the most is that I can't be by your side. In the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, for instance. So I can only wish you Victory! The best of luck to you, brothers and sisters!

Glory to Ukraine!

Appeal hearing

On 4 July 2024, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation rejected Mikhail Kriger's appeal against his sentence. This is his statement, made on a video link from the penal colony.

The last year-and-a-half of imprisonment has not changed my position. In actual fact – if, before prison, I was certain that $2+2=4$, that sugar is white and coal is black, that waging aggressive wars, capturing other people's territory and killing innocent people are wrong, then after sitting out half a century in here, will I really change my views on these simple, self-evident facts?

I would like to remind dear Russians that, when initiating this war, our unimpeachable boss explained that it was absolute necessity because of his concern, first and foremost, for the safety of our citizens. So now I would like to ask, dear Russians living in Belgorod, Shebekino, the Bryansk and Kursk oblasts: well, dear compatriots, have things become more peaceful? Do you feel like your safety has improved?

At this point, the judge interrupted, and recommended that Kriger “not make statements of that nature”. Kriger continued:

Given that I am being judged for my convictions, I am laying them out in the open and calling for them to be listened to. Once upon a time, the heads of common Germans were peppered from the sky with Soviet bombs, but everyone understood that those – at least in part innocent – people were answering for Hitler. Dear Russians, we answer for our führer much the same. Why wouldn't we? He is just as much of a bloodthirsty maniac.

It is not just my views on good and evil that have not changed, I haven't changed my truest dream either – to live to see the hanging of our führer, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. The chances of seeing that celebration are not great, but if it arrives, then that will in large part be thanks to my brilliant...

The judge turned off the sound of the video call from the penal colony and announced a break. Kriger continued talking:

... countrymen, who have washed their Ukrainian earth with their own blood, standing up for their, and our, illusory freedom. *[In Ukrainian:]* I greatly respect you for this, brothers and sisters, thank you very much. Good luck to you! Glory to Ukraine!

After the break, Kriger concluded:

I consider myself innocent. I have no hope for the outcome of this trial to change my fate in any way. I did what I could, said what I wanted, and I am content at the fact that I was able to say it all and convey my position. I have never stopped believing that $2+2=4$.

The path to court

Mikhail Kriger has been active in the human rights movement since the late 1980s, as a member of Memorial and, since the 2010s, of the Solidarnost' (Solidarity) group. He played a leading role in setting up the Union for Solidarity With Political Prisoners. Since 2014 he took every opportunity to denounce Russia's war on Ukraine, and has many times faced arrest and prosecution after participating in demonstrations and pickets. Kriger worked in the building industry and more recently in a delivery business using his own car. He was delivering produce to a restaurant in November 2022, when he was arrested by a group of masked security officers who threw him to the ground.

Mikhail Kriger is imprisoned at the IK-5 penal colony, in Oryol region in European Russia. He is recognised as a political prisoner by Memorial: Support Political Prisoners, and supported while in prison by the Union for Solidarity With Political Prisoners and the “Free Mikhail Kriger” group, which can be found on Telegram.



*“Try me for treason:
I betrayed your
deranged state”*

5. Andrei Trofimov

Anti-war activist Andrei Trofimov, 58, was arrested on 7 May 2022 in Konakovo, Tver region, north-west of Moscow, and charged with attempting to join a volunteer force fighting on Ukraine's side, and with writing social media posts supporting "extremism" and "discrediting" the armed forces. In a closed hearing in October 2023, a court in Tver convicted Trofimov and sentenced him to ten years in a maximum-security penal colony. This is the text of his speech in court, that he sent for publication in Russian opposition media.

Honourable court: I certainly did write on the internet everything referred to in the indictment. And I was right to do all that I did. I admit no guilt and do not repent. I publicly approve, heartily endorse and support the explosions on the Crimea bridge in the autumn of 2022, and the attacks by Ukrainian drones on the Kremlin and other targets in Moscow and the Moscow region in May 2023. Because Ukraine is a victim of aggression. And for myself I demand the maximum possible prison sentence. Because I despise you. I will not share the same space with you or live in the same country as you. If I cannot go to Ukraine, then shut me up in prison forever. Victory will come all the same to those who are now, arms in hand, destroying Putin's scumbags. Glory to Ukraine! Putin is a dickhead [*khuilo*].

Second trial

On account of Trofimov's speech at his first trial, prosecutors drew up a second criminal case against him, on charges of "justifying terrorism" and "discrediting the armed forces".

On 6 May 2025, the Second Western District Military Court increased Trofimov's sentence to 13 years, from ten years.

Trofimov responded with this statement in court.

Your honour, the factual circumstances of my actions, which the investigation has categorised as crimes, are correctly stated in the indictment and have been fully investigated during the court hearing.

In my statement I would like to dwell on the reasons for these actions, on my goals, to review in detail, charge by charge, my response to the allegations – that is, to explain my motives for not pleading guilty. And, in my conclusion, I would like to petition the court as to what to do with me next.

I was living quietly at the dacha with my cats and was a bother to no one. My life changed drastically on 24 February 2022. The reason for both the first criminal case and the current criminal case [*against me*] was Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I will go on to explain why I regarded this event in this way.

After all, it is for what I have said that I am in prison. I took no action in either the first case or the second. But this has been my way of being involved in the events, because it was physically impossible for me to leave the country, and I had no desire to stay silent in this situation. I mean, it is my life.

Why have I done this? I must respond to your remarks yesterday to the effect that my statements, including in court, could harm my own interests. Your honour, I have no interest

in a shorter sentence. I am already imprisoned.

What is the purpose of what I am doing? Writ large, it is a matter of self-preservation. It is just that I understand the instinct of self-preservation not as the preservation of the body per se, of its physical health, because I am not my body alone. I want to preserve my conscience in this difficult situation, my ability to tell black from white, and lies from truth, and, quite importantly, my ability to say out loud what I believe to be true.

I have not just acted in this way since 2022. I have always tried to live this way. It is just that my desire to remain like this in such situations – that is, being able to tell the truth, to keep my conscience clear – is what causes such actions.

What actions have we observed? We have witnessed concrete evidence of crimes with which I have not been charged, evidence of the violation of Article 278 of the Russian Federal Criminal Code – that is, the forcible seizure or the forcible retention of power. I am referring to Vladimir Putin, who has held the highest official post in the Russian Federation for exactly a quarter of a century. During this entire time, the Constitution of the Russian Federation has contained the principle of succession of power, set out in the guise of the two-term rule [*for Russian presidents*]. We have witnessed a direct violation of this rule – that is, the forcible retention of power.

In what has occurred since 24 February, we see concrete evidence of a violation of Criminal Code Article 353 – that is, the planning, preparation, unleashing, and waging of a war of aggression.

What have I done in this situation? Publicly, by staging a solo picket (just a protracted one), I have demonstrated the Russian state's insanity. Look, the prosecution is asking for 15 years in total – the sentence given for murder, although even

for murder, sentences are often shorter. And yet my deeds harmed no one nor caused any damage.

I am not just talking about the period covered by these criminal cases. I have never laid a finger on anyone, never stolen a penny, in my entire life. Nevertheless, *[the prosecutor wants to send me down for]* 15 years. I believe this to be a demonstration of the state's insanity. The state happily displays this quality, using me as an example.

What have I done in response? I have shown fortitude. This is vital, because I hope that Ukrainians can see what I do. Look at this: they arrested him. He was convicted and given a dozen years of maximum security. Judge the effect in terms of the second case. Did you do a good job of convincing me *[of the error of my ways]*? That is, have I stopped doing what I was doing? Has my voice become less audible? No, it has not.

We have witnessed the same thing on the military front. For four years running, the Russian state has been spilling blood in a neighbouring country. Ukraine has not surrendered and will not surrender.

Among the things that I have not exactly been charged with, but which have been repeated in the indictments and in the evidence presented at trial is my insulting Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin by using the obscenity "dickhead". What have I done? It is called desacralisation.

Because the sacredness of supreme power is one of the foundations of the Golden Horde method of governance. When I publicly, repeatedly, and daily, at the first trial, at the second trial, in the pre-trial detention centre, perform this trick, I am desacralising Vladimir Putin. This is important, because this regime will end all the same, and I very much want to hasten its end. I hate this man. And when the prosecution says that I

am motivated by political hatred, it is uttering a sacred truth. I can confirm that.

The audience I am addressing by these actions is not in Russia, because Russian society is dead and it is useless to try and talk to it. Ukraine is my audience.

As for the charges against me, I do not plead guilty here to either count of violating Criminal Code Article 205.2. At issue is one and the same text, simply posted on the internet and spoken aloud in the pre-trial detention centre. Because I do not consider the incidents which I chose to include in my closing statement at trial to be “terrorist acts”. I chose them on purpose.

What is at issue are the two attacks on the Crimean Bridge. The Crimean Bridge is a vital transport artery which supplies the Russian federal armed forces in Crimea. An attack on a military installation is an instance of armed hostilities. The attack was carried out by the armed forces of Ukraine.

Why was it categorised as a “terrorist attack”? I know perfectly well why. This was done in order, first, to use it in Russian propaganda to dehumanise the enemy. In other words, the Russian Federation is at war not with the armed forces of Ukraine, which are designated under Ukrainian law and are doing their constitutional duty, but with some purported terrorist gangs of “Banderites” and “Ukronazis”. To support this agenda, decisions are made to launch criminal proceedings on charges of “terrorism” over instances of armed conflict.

As for the second incident I mentioned, the attack on the Kremlin on 3 May 2023, what do we know? The communique from the Investigative Committee, which the prosecutor quoted yesterday, states outright that the attack was carried out against the residence of the president of the Russian Federation, who is

the commander-in-chief of the Russian federal armed forces. Moreover, the Ukrainians also hit the building of the Senate, which is in the section of the Kremlin closed to tourists and where one of Putin's offices is actually located. Excuse me, but this was not a terrorist attack. It was a Ukrainian combat operation, and a failed one at that.

I must say loudly and out loud that I do not condone or support terrorism, and that I have never condoned terrorism, nor do I intend to condone terrorism. I have a categorically negative attitude to the ideology and practice of terrorism.

Let us move on to *[the charges under]* Article 280.3 of the Criminal Code. This Article is brand-new: it was adopted after the start of what we call the "special operation".

This is a pure example of being persecuted for telling the truth. Because a situation has arisen where it has been felt necessary to shut the mouths of the war's opponents, but it is impossible to charge them with violating, say, my beloved Criminal Code Article 207.3. How can you charge a person with "disseminating fake news" if they simply voice their attitude to current events? This is how Article 280.3 and the notion of "discrediting" emerged, which is quite poorly conceptualised legally.

I have been told that my phrase "Ukraine is a victim of aggression at the hands of the country of Russia" discredits the Russian federal armed forces. What do we have? We have the UN General Assembly's 2014 resolution saying that Russia "annexed" *[parts of]* Ukraine. Those are not my words. This is a General Assembly resolution: there is no veto power there *[as there is on the UN Security Council]*, so it was passed by a decent majority *[of member states]*. This is the position of international law.

Similarly, we have a March 2022 UN General Assembly resolution, in which the events of February 24 are labelled an “aggression”. And we have a UN General Assembly resolution on Russia’s incorporation of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhya and Kherson which labels these actions “annexation”.

I should note that the statements of, say, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Masha Zakharova are not a source of international law. Statements by Russian foreign minister Lavrov are not a source of international law. UN General Assembly resolutions are, on the contrary, a source of international law, and so my assessments are firmly based on international legal documents.

But my phrase about “Putin’s scumbags” is also part of the “discrediting” charge against me, of course. First, from your viewpoint, “Putin’s” can not be defamatory because, as you see it, Putin is good. As for the second word [*in the phrase*], yes, this is my personal opinion, and it does not apply solely to Russian servicemen who carry out unlawful orders. Yes, there are also people in the Russian armed forces who do not carry out unlawful orders, but they are not the only ones fighting there.

Excuse me for characterising in this way people who murder the soldiers of a neighbouring country for money. This is my personal judgement, and it is based on [*their*] actions.

I will summarise this part of my statement. The Russian federal constitution contains Article 29, [*which guarantees*] the right to free speech, including the right to gather and disseminate information. This is what I have actually been doing. That is, I have not overstepped Article 29 of the constitution by a single millimetre. But at the same time I certainly have violated these two current articles of the Criminal Code.

How can this be the case? It can be so because the Articles under which I have been charged are unconstitutional. If Russia had a real Constitutional Court, these articles would have ceased to exist long ago.

I cannot fail to mention my report to prosecutor Zhuk, which was not part of the charges against me, but nevertheless we heard witnesses talk about it yesterday. It does not contain the text of *[my]* closing statement *[at the first trial]*. It makes no mention of terrorism or any violent acts at all. I did not say a word about the armed forces either.

The point is that this second case is the result of my statement to the prosecutor's commission. Because the case file contains two resolutions by FSB investigator lieutenant colonel Sergey Vyacheslavovich Yerofeev to dismiss the case – that is, by the investigator in my *[first]* case, with whom I have a very good level of mutual understanding and who understands exactly what I have been doing and what I have been trying to achieve. He tried to dismiss this case twice.

In the final part of my statement, I turn to how my actions should be correctly characterised. I am involved in the war on the Ukrainian side. It is just that this involvement takes place without weapons, because war is such an extraordinarily multidimensional event. Apart from the fighting in the steppes of Donbas, in the Black Sea, and in the skies above Ukraine, it is fiercely fought in the information space by state entities, by Russian bodies. On the Ukrainian side, for example, interesting entities are also involved.

I am an information warrior. In what sense? On 9 October 2022, I wrote and sent an email to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Oleksandrovykh Zelensky, asking him to grant me Ukrainian citizenship. I am entitled to it because of my ances-

try. All my grandparents hailed from Ukraine. Ukrainian law says that I have the right to *[Ukrainian]* citizenship.

I was able to enter a screenshot from Kasparov.ru into the record and have it examined in court. What does it confirm? The fact that, apart from publishing my closing statement at the trial, Kasparov.ru has published me on a regular basis. What does this confirm? That what I am being tried for now was, in fact, just an instance of my work, which I have not ceased.

I will also mention, of course, *Novaya Gazeta*, whose website also published my letters. And my latest achievement in this sphere is that I have been officially designated a political prisoner, because that is what I call myself at the pre-trial detention centre, and that is how I sign my petitions to this honourable court. But until that moment, it had been a kind of self-designation, as it were.

On 14 April of this year, the Council on Political Prisoners of the Memorial International Human Rights Defence Centre published a decision *[designating me a political prisoner]*. As part of my work, I have used the criminal cases *[against me]*, the first and the second case, as publicity opportunities.

The information war is a real thing. I am involved in it, and I am trying to prove this now. Informationally, I support Ukraine and the armed forces of Ukraine. In fact, I have defected to the enemy side in an armed conflict involving the Russian Federation. This is the essence of the crime defined in Article 275 of the Russian Federal Criminal Code – high treason.

I ask the court to send my criminal case back to the prosecutor, as the factual circumstances indicate that there are grounds for charging me with a more serious crime. Try me for treason: I betrayed your deranged state.

The path to court

At Trofimov's second trial, his son Vladimir gave evidence, and described how his father had been his primary carer when growing up, had worked until retirement in 2008 as an engineer and train driver, and supplemented his earnings by teaching geography and physics. Trofimov senior, who had supported democratic political causes since late Soviet times, had been "deeply shaken" by Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine.

Andrei Trofimov is in prison in Tver. He is recognised as a political prisoner by Memorial: Support Political Prisoners.



*“You’re not trying a
terrorist in this court.
You’re trying
a musician, an artist,
a pacifist”*

6. Sasha Skochilenko

In March 2022, artist and musician Sasha Skochilenko, 35, protested against the invasion of Ukraine by replacing five labels in a St Petersburg supermarket with information about the war. She was arrested and held in pre-trial detention until November 2023, when she was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for disseminating false information about the army. This is her final statement in court.

Your honour! Honourable court! Honourable listeners!

My criminal case is so strange and funny that it was opened, appropriately, on the first of April. My case is so strange and funny that sometimes I feel like when I come into the courtroom for the next hearing, confetti will start falling from above, fireworks will go off, music will start playing, and people will rise up, dance, and shout: "April Fools! April Fools!" My case is so strange and funny that the staff of SIZO-5 [*pre-trial detention centre*] open their eyes wide and exclaim, "Do we really put people in prison for that?" My case is such that none of even the most fervent supporters of the special military operation [*Kremlin propaganda's pseudonym for the war*] whom I have met believes that I deserve a prison sentence for what I did.

My case is such that my investigator quit his job before it concluded. In a private conversation with my lawyer he said,

“I didn’t come to work for the Investigative Committee to deal with cases like that of Sasha Skochilenko.”

And he quit my case, which promised him brilliant career growth and had already put another star on his shoulder. He left the Investigative Committee and got a job at a military surplus store. I believe that his choice is immensely brave, and I think that he and I are alike: both of us stayed true to our conscience.

The very Article 207.3 [*“public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation”*] is discriminatory at its root, because it only punishes a certain group of people – those who do not work for government institutions. Just think about it: the information that I disseminated only received such wide distribution thanks to my investigators, for whom – unlike me – it was “knowingly false”. They spread it among their colleagues, and then among the prosecutor’s office and court staff; they insulted six military witnesses with it, and created an event that has drawn incredible public attention and reached people far beyond Russia.

Had I not been arrested, this information would be known only to one elderly lady [*who reported Skochilenko to the police*], a cashier, and a security guard at the supermarket.

According to the case materials, this information had precisely no effect whatsoever on two of those three individuals. Tell me, do investigators spread drugs among their colleagues in order to try to prove someone guilty of a drug offence? Such investigators would face the same charge. So why am I the only one on trial?

If these five small pieces of paper were as frightening as the state prosecutor claims, then why begin this case at

all? So that we can chew over those five statements dozens of times? Even the state prosecutor has read them aloud – and didn't blush. Let's have the appeal hearing too, and the cassation hearing, so that we can talk more about Putin, about television – we haven't finished talking yet, we can still go on, appeal to all the institutions, and talk, talk, talk, we could go on for many years.

Alright, we've said these five statements hundreds of times. So what? Has the earth opened? Has a revolution in the country begun? Have soldiers on the frontlines started fraternising with each other? Nothing of the sort. So what's the problem?

The state prosecutor has mentioned multiple times that what I did is extremely dangerous to society and the state. How weak is our prosecutor's faith in our state and society, if he believes that our statehood and public safety can be destroyed by five small pieces of paper? What damage did I do, to whom? Who was the victim of my actions? The state prosecutor did not say a word about that. When someone starts a military rebellion that inflicts immense damage on our country, their criminal case is opened and closed within a day. So why have I been in confinement for 19 months – along with thieves, murderers, rapists and child molesters. Could it be that my humble action is comparable to the aforementioned crimes, even in the slightest?

Your Honour! Every court sentence is its own kind of message to the public. You may think of this information differently than my lawyers or I do, but you will agree that I have my moral principles and that I haven't departed from them, not one iota. You will probably agree that I have shown courage, resilience, and fearlessness. In the slang of investigators, to

put someone in jail is “to take them captive”. And I have not given up under threats of captivity, of bullying, illness, and the eight-year sentence that prosecution has asked for; I have not been hypocritical; I have been honest before myself and before the court.

If you choose to convict me, what message will you send to our fellow citizens? That you have to break if you’re taken prisoner? That you have to lie, to be a hypocrite, to change your convictions if you face some pressure? That you can’t have pity for our soldiers? That you can’t wish for peaceful skies above our heads? Is it really what you want to say to people in times of depression, instability, crisis, and stress?

My trial is being widely covered in Russia and abroad; news features and documentary films are being made, books are even being written about it. So, regardless of the verdict you deliver, you will become part of history. Perhaps you will become part of history as the person who convicted me; perhaps as the person who acquitted me; perhaps as the person who made a neutral decision and gave me a fine or a conditional sentence, or sentenced me to time that I have already served. It is all in your hands – but remember: everybody knows, everybody sees that you’re not trying a terrorist in this court. You’re not trying an extremist. You’re not even trying a political activist. You’re trying a musician, an artist, and a pacifist.

Yes, I am a pacifist. Pacifists have existed forever. They are a certain kind of people who believe life to be the highest value of all. Pacifists believe that every conflict can be resolved by peaceful means. I can’t kill even a spider – it scares me to imagine that it is possible to take someone’s life. That’s just who I grew up to be, that’s who my mother brought me up to be.

Wars don’t end thanks to warriors – they end thanks

to pacifists. And when you imprison pacifists, you move the long-awaited day of peace further away.

Yes, I am a pacifist. Yes, I believe that life is sacred. Oh yes – life! If you cast away all the trifles of this world, like cars, flats, wealth, power, success, social connections and social media, life is the only thing that remains. Oh yes – life! It is incredible, it is amazing, it is unique, it is tenacious, it is strong. It emerged on Earth, and so far, we haven't found its equivalents even far away in space. It can break through concrete, it can destroy rocks, it can turn from a tiny sprig into a colossal baobab, from a minuscule cell into a gigantic whale. It lives on the highest mountains, it hides in the depths of the Mariana trench, by its ineradicable power it spreads from the Arctic ice into the red-hot desert. Its most perfect form is the human. The human is a highly sentient form of life. It is life that can be conscious of itself. Life that can be conscious of its mortality. But most often we don't remember this, and live our life as if we will live forever. But it is not so: a human life is brief. It is extremely short. All we can do is make a short moment of bliss a bit longer. Everyone who is alive wants to live. Even on a hanged man's neck you can find traces of fingernails. It means that at their very last moment, they held onto life, they madly wanted to survive.

Ask someone who has just had a cancerous tumour removed what life is, and how valuable it is. That's why today all the world's scientists and doctors fight to extend human life expectancy and find remedies for deadly diseases. Which is why I can't understand: why have a military operation? Because warfare shortens lives. Warfare is death. We lived through the coronavirus pandemic, when we lost our dear elderly relatives – our beloved grandmothers, grandfathers, war veterans,

mentors, teachers. There was grief, there was pain, there was mourning, and just as we were finding our feet again, just as we were starting to live... a military operation. But now we're losing young people. Pain again, mourning again, grief again. So I just couldn't understand: why have a military operation?

You may call it whatever you want to – I was misled, or mistaken, or I had the wool pulled over my eyes. ... Whatever happens, I will walk out of here and I will say, “And yet it moves.” And I don't believe that one truth or the other needs to be legally enforced. The state prosecutor believes in a truth that is very different from mine. As you may have noticed, in his accusatory speech he did not explain, he did not provide any arguments as to why, exactly, it is official government sources that are the ultimate truth. No, he did not. Just as he did not explain why, after analysing a variety of sources of information, I should have concluded that it is only the official sources that tell the truth. And I can tell you why: faith has no need of explanations. He believes in the existence of the so-called “NATO sycophants” or in the fact that there is no independent media – just media that is financed from abroad, whose goal is to libel and destroy Russia. Let him believe that! It is his right. But the huge difference between our prosecutor and myself is that I would never put him in jail because of it. Especially not for eight years.

I sincerely regret it if I hurt anyone by my action. I really did not mean to do so. My pre-trial detention allowed me to understand that there are many people with their own unique individual truths in the world – and you can't argue with them, you can't convince them. The same goes for their attitude toward the special military operation. And it is a huge tragedy that we don't all share the same truth, and that some people

squabble over truth, like dogs over a bone: that divides society, destroys families and tears apart friends, colleagues, and people who love each other, it multiplies hostility and enmity on Earth, and takes us further away from that long-awaited day of peace. I will not deviate from the truth if I say that every person, every single person in this courtroom wishes for the same thing – peace. And if there is someone who wishes for the opposite – let them cast the first stone at me.

Why wage war, if all we have in this frightening world full of disasters, hardships, and tears, is each other? No, not all the wealth and power in this universe could buy your loved one out of death's grip. No, not money, not wealth, not power, not cars, not flats, not territories, not palaces, not oil wells, not atomic energy – none of it!

There's only us. We are all that we have. I have people I love too, people who are close to my heart. They come to this courtroom every time, they wait, they believe, they pray that I walk out of these doors – alive, healthy, free, and as soon as possible. At home, my elderly mother is waiting for me, along with my sister, my lovely nieces and nephews, and my beloved partner who has had a terrible diagnosis – cancer. I don't know a single person in this courtroom who really wants to see me go to prison, apart from maybe the state prosecutor.

Although I think that in his heart of hearts the state prosecutor does not want that either. I think that he came to work for the prosecutor's office to put real criminals in prison: murderers, rapists, child molesters. I think that when he is not busy with our trial, that is what he does – and I thank him for it. But a requirement of his career development is that you have to imprison those who must be imprisoned. Let's not pretend it isn't so, at least now, as our trial is coming to its end. But I

don't blame you. I know that you care about your welfare, your status, about your position in society; you care about not losing that position, and about – God forbid – never being in my position. You care about the well-being of your family, about giving them food and a roof over their heads; perhaps you care about your future children, about giving them a good education, qualified medical help... But what will you tell these children about? About how you once sent a gravely ill artist, beloved by all, to prison, for five small pieces of paper? No, undoubtedly, you will tell them about your other cases. You must comfort yourself by thinking that you're just doing your job and that you don't have a choice. But what are you going to do when the pendulum swings in the other direction?

Such is the law of history, just as absolute and fundamental as the law of universal gravitation: conservatives take the place of the liberals, liberals take the place of the conservatives. After the natural death of one political leader another comes to power, who leads the country in a very different direction. That is the moment when the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. You know, this may sound strange, but I feel sympathy for you.

Even though I am in a cage, I may be much freer than you are. I can make my own decisions, can say whatever I want, I can quit a job if it makes me do something I don't want to do, I can organise my own work schedule, I can spend as much time with my loved ones as I want. I can dress however I want. I can love whoever I want.

I don't have enemies. I'm not afraid to find myself without money or even a roof over my head. I'm not afraid to seem weird, vulnerable, weak, or funny. I'm not afraid of not being like the others. Maybe that's why my state is so scared of me,

and those who are like me. Maybe that's why it keeps me in a cage, like the most dangerous of animals.

But people are not wolves to one another. It's just that it's easy to be angry at each other because of a difference of opinion, while loving each other, trying to understand each other and find compromises, is very hard. It's so unbearably hard that sometimes it feels simply impossible – at such moments violence, pressure, and intimidation seem to be the only way. But it isn't so! We need to learn to love each other, be merciful to each other, and to compromise – it's the only way to climb out of this morality crisis in which we have ended up.

Your Honour! You have a unique chance, with your sentencing, to give an example to our society. And I don't even mean telling the international community: 'hey, we don't have repression, we don't send people to prison for five spikelets, we don't have a totalitarian or an authoritarian state, we appreciate that people have their own opinion, that they can trust the sources that they choose, that we have freedom of speech. ... I'm not even talking about that. *[A spikelet is the basic building block of a wheat plant. In August 1932, during the forced collectivisation of farms and famine that followed, the Soviet authorities issued a decree provided for severe punishment for the theft of collective property, which became known as the Law of Three Spikelets. It was zealously applied to hungry people in the countryside who stole food products – so zealously that, when cases were reviewed in 1936, 60 per cent of the 120,000 people serving prison sentences after conviction under the law were released.]*

I'm saying that you can give an example of how to resolve a conflict through words, mercy, empathy – and not with coercion into the so-called truth through a criminal sentence.

There have been many unusual circumstances in our trial. There wasn't just a mother and a grandmother in the courtroom, as with most ordinary hearings – there was a big crowd, some stayed outside the courtroom, tiresome journalists came... and perhaps, they may have annoyed you with their disobedience or by breaching the order. Please forgive them. We have very recently become interested in how our state and society work, we've just become interested in how our electoral system and our local government work... we lived without any interest in it all, and now suddenly people have come to court to see how the judicial and penitentiary system work. It's a huge step forward for our society in becoming conscious and aware, and a step towards a decrease in crime rates. Please forgive them! They are in that sense – forgive me! – a bit savage, a bit like small children; they don't know how to behave in court: on the first day, they didn't even know how to address the judge or that you can't laugh, whisper, or clap, like at the theatre... Please don't be mad at them, and don't take it out on me.

What was also unusual in our trial is that the defence presented its evidence not over two days, as normally happens, but over 22 days. My defence was very proactive: they interrupted the participants in the trial, they argued, they objected to the judge's actions, and, in your opinion, breached the order. ... Please do not be mad at them, they just did everything possible to defend me and to act in my interest. Do not take it out on me, as I am not responsible for their actions. Do not take it out on me – I'm convinced that you are wiser than this, and you are above this.

Yes, I understand, this is just your job, an ordinary case, your endless working hours, loads of paperwork. Maybe among all this routine, like at any other work for anyone else, with

time, the truth can go unnoticed, be forgotten. But the truth is that you hold an incredible power: to determine people's fates. In this case, it is the question of my fate, life, my health, my freedom, and the happiness of my loved ones. I sincerely believe that you will use your power wisely.

The path to court

The labels that Sasha Skochilenko placed in the supermarket stated:

"The Russian Army bombed an art school in Mariupol where about 400 people were seeking shelter."

"Russian conscripts have been sent to Ukraine. The price of this war is the lives of our children."

"Stop the war! In the first three days, 4,300 Russian soldiers were killed. Why are they silent about this on television?"

"Putin has been lying to you from the television screen for 20 years. The result of these lies is our willingness to accept war and senseless deaths."

"My great-grandfather didn't participate in the Second World War for four years so that Russia would become a fascist state and attack Ukraine."

After court

Sasha Skochilenko served eight-and-a-half months in prison, and on 1 August 2024 was released in Istanbul, as part of a prisoner exchange between Russia, Belarus, the USA, Germany, Poland, Slovenia and Norway. She is now based in Germany. In September 2024 she wrote about her life in Putin's Russia and imprisonment. This is how the article ends:

Pavel Kushnir was a musician who became a political prisoner. He died during a dry hunger strike in prison on the same day everyone celebrated my release. One life; one death. I am far from the best artist in Russia, I just happened to be the winner of the “Hunger Games”.

I remember how we found so much courage to despise Putin’s laws. How we invented ever more ingenious ways to circumvent the bans. No matter what happens, artists in Russia will steadfastly drift on a small floe, huddling closer together as the edges of the ice break away.



*“We stand for the
unconditional return
to Ukraine of all
its internationally
recognised territories”*

7. Aleksandr Skobov

Historian and political activist Aleksandr Skobov, 67, was arrested in April 2024 and charged with “justifying terrorism” in social media posts, and with “participation in a terrorist organisation”, thanks to his membership of the Free Russia Forum, an opposition group based in Latvia. Skobov was convicted on 21 March 2025 in the First Western District Military Court, and sentenced to 16 years’ imprisonment. During the trial, he refused to stand when the judge entered or to answer most questions. Asked if he had any response to the charges, he said:

I was brought up in the Soviet Union to believe that when a malicious, cruel aggressor attacks civilians, you have to take up arms and go do battle with him, and that if you cannot bear arms, you help the people who are doing battle and call on others to do the same.

All my work as a political commentator has been about calling on people to go do battle with the aggressor which has attacked Ukraine, to assist Ukraine with weapons and ammunition.

No one had attacked or threatened Russia.

It was Putin’s Nazi regime which attacked Ukraine, only because of the megalomania of the regime’s ringleaders, because of their inhuman thirst for power over all they survey.

Murdering hundreds of thousands of people is their way of bolstering their self-esteem. They are degenerates, scum, and Nazi riffraff.

The guilt of Putin's Nazi dictatorship in plotting, unleashing, and waging a war of aggression is obvious and does not need to be proven. Nor do we need to prove our right to offer armed resistance to this aggression on the battlefield and in the aggressor's rear.

It would be laughable to expect this right to be acknowledged by a regime which tosses people in prison for morally condemning its aggression out loud. All legal means of protesting against Putinist Russia's aggression have been eliminated.

My calls to resist the aggressor's regime with armed force have caused me to be charged with terrorism. I wouldn't stoop to argue with the aggressor's officials, even if they were to claim that my actions constitute paedophilia. Russia's courts have long ago shown themselves to be mere appendages of the Nazi tyranny, and there is no point in seeking justice there.

I will never stand up before these people, lackeys of murderers and scoundrels.

I see no point in arguing with puppets of the dictatorship about how conscientiously they execute their own laws. In any case, these laws are the laws of a totalitarian state and their aim is to stifle dissent. I do not recognise these laws and I will not obey them.

I also have no intention of appealing any rulings made by or actions taken by representatives of the Nazi regime.

The Putinist dictatorship may murder me, but it cannot force me to stop fighting against it. Wherever I find myself, I will keep calling on honest Russians to join the Ukrainian Armed Forces. I will keep calling for air strikes on military

facilities deep in Russian territory. I will keep calling on the civilised world to inflict a strategic defeat on Nazi Russia. I will keep trying to prove that the new Hitler regime must be routed militarily.

Putin is the new Hitler, a vampire driven insane by impunity and drunk on blood. I shall never grow tired of saying, “Crush the viper!”

Death to the murderer, tyrant and scoundrel Putin!

Death to the Russian fascist invaders!

Glory to Ukraine!

On 21 March 2025, the last day of the trial, Skobov made this final statement to the court.

I will not dwell on the fact that the investigation has branded the organisation I have the honour of belonging to, the Free Russia Forum, as a terrorist community. There has been no official ruling from any government body recognising the Free Russia Forum as such. For now, it is merely an “undesirable organisation”.

But I have little interest in all this petty mumbling. I prefer to speak about what truly matters. What matters here is the platform of the Free Russia Forum, a platform I was directly involved in shaping, and one that distinguishes the Free Russia Forum from most other opposition organisations.

Let me remind you that this platform is built on three principles. First: we stand for the unconditional return to Ukraine of all its internationally recognised territories occupied by Russia, including Crimea. Yes, *Krym tse Ukraina* [*Crimea is Ukraine, in Ukrainian*].

Second: we support all those who are fighting to achieve

these goals – including citizens of the Russian Federation who have voluntarily joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

And third: we recognise any form of war against Putin's tyranny inside Russia, including armed resistance. Of course, we are deeply disgusted by the methods of ISIS, when innocent people are targeted, as was the case with Crocus City Hall *[at Krasnogorsk, near Moscow, where an attack on a rock concert in February 2024 resulted in 145 deaths and 551 injuries]*.

But are the Kremlin's war propagandists a legitimate target? The Free Russia Forum has not formally debated this issue or adopted any resolutions on it, so what I say next reflects my personal position alone.

I believe that propagandists such as TV presenter Vladimir Solovyov deserve the same fate as Hitler's chief propagandist Julius Streicher, who was hanged by the Nuremberg Tribunal. Until these outcasts of the human race are brought before a new Nuremberg Tribunal – and as long as this war continues – they remain legitimate military targets.

For me, the comparison between Putin's and Hitler's propagandists is not mere rhetoric. Much of my public writings has been devoted to proving the inherently Nazi nature of Putin's regime – a regime with which peaceful coexistence is fundamentally impossible.

I appeal now, as I have before, first and foremost to Europe, which should remember the origins of the current European system. Since 1945, Europe has been building a world in which predator powers no longer prevail, a world based on the principles of law, justice, freedom, and humanity. Europe had achieved much on this path, and seemed to have rid itself of massacres and territorial redistributions forever.

Europe once believed that this safe and prosperous

world was securely protected by a great powerful ally across the ocean. Today, this world is being torn to splinters by two scoundrels on both sides: the Kremlin and Washington. People with pro-fascist values have come to power in the United States.

We are witnessing a disgusting attempt at a purely imperialist collusion between two predators. An even more despicable collusion than the Munich betrayal of 1938. If Putin's annexations are legalised, it will spell disaster for civilisation. Europe, you have been betrayed. Wake up and go fight for your world!

Letter to Russian citizens

In July 2024, Skobov wrote this letter from pre-trial detention to his wife, Olga Shcheglova, and asked her to publicise it. It was published by *Novaya Gazeta Evropa*.

A letter from Aleksandr Skobov to Olga Shcheglova and all Russian citizens

Dear Olga,

I wanted to write this letter to Lena (you can easily understand why), but I do not have any of her addressed envelopes. And in any case, this is not only for her.

You and I talked about this the first time we met. I want to explain, again, why I said no to many dear, close friends, who tried to convince me to take the opportunity to leave Russia.

I belong to the Soviet generation of dissident political prisoners. Although its numbers were small, it became a significant historical phenomenon. It became a symbol of humanity's resistance to violence. It took its place on the international stage.

And although I was always a black sheep in that generation, because I am myself a “red”, belonging to it is the most important thing in my life. It was made up of different people: some good, others not so good, some strong, some weak. It had its downsides, like any opposition milieu at any time. But it appeared to the world through its larger-than-life personalities and the moral and spiritual gold standards they set.

They have all passed away. There were never that many of us, and now only a few individuals remain. Our generation takes its place in history for entirely natural reasons. And in the new historical drama now unfolding, it can only stand on the sidelines.

They haven’t laid a finger on us for a long time. The reasoning being: we’ll die out on our own. Or we’ll leave, and live out the rest of our lives on the political and moral capital we once acquired (quite deservedly). The blows are falling on other people, most of them much younger.

I respond sceptically to pompous declarations about the passing-on of traditions and experience. Actually, that mechanism doesn’t work very well. Every new generation prefers to plough its own furrow and make its own mistakes. But I want the young people who are taking the blows now to know: those few remaining Soviet dissidents stood side-by-side with them, have stayed with them and shared their journey.

I don’t know what practical use this will be, in terms of tactical and strategical tasks before them right now. I just hope that, for someone, the world will be kinder and warmer, as a result. I want this to be the way that my generation brings its own history to an end.

The path to court

Aleksandr Skobov began his political activity in the left wing of the Soviet dissident movement in the 1970s. In 1976, together with other students in Leningrad (now St Petersburg), he formed the “left opposition” group which called for liquidation of the Soviet Union’s repressive state machine, for civil rights and for nuclear disarmament.

The group overlapped with Leningrad’s counter-cultural scene of communes and rock bands. Its journal, *Perspectives*, published texts by Lev Trotsky, the anarchist writers Mikhail Bakunin and Petr Kropotkin, and contemporary European socialists including Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Herbert Marcuse. In 1978, the “left opposition” contacted groups in other cities and planned to set up a “revolutionary communist union of youth”. Skobov and another of the organisers were arrested, and Skobov was detained for two years in a psychiatric hospital – a notorious means of punishing dissent in Soviet times.

After his release in 1981, Skobov joined the Free Interprofessional Labour Union, best known by its acronym SMOT, one of the first independent labour organisations in the Soviet Union. When Lev Volokhonsky, one of SMOT’s organisers, was arrested, Skobov joined with friends to paint graffiti demanding his release – and was himself detained again. He served a second sentence, of three years, in a psychiatric hospital.

In the late 1980s, when the policy of “glasnost” (openness) allowed for legal political activity, Skobov joined the Democratic Union. As a result, in 1988, he became one of the last people to be charged with “anti-Soviet agitation”, a case that was closed in 1989.

In the first post-Soviet years, in the 1990s, Skobov vehemently denounced the Russian war on Chechnya as a “war unleashed by Russian imperialism, with the aim of crushing the aspirations to independence of the peoples once conquered by tsarist Russia”, a war fought with the “interminably barbaric methods of colonisers of all ages and all peoples”. He joined the liberal Yabloko party and the Solidarnost’ (Solidarity) group that was active in the early 2010s.

Skobov denounced the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and publicly applauded Russians who joined the Ukrainian resistance, arms in hand. He was declared a “foreign agent”. Friends and family had implored him to leave Russia and he had refused. He was arrested on 2 April 2024 in St Petersburg, while visiting his friend Yulii Rybakov, another Soviet-era dissident.

Aleksandr Skobov is in prison in Syktyvkar, in the Komi republic in north-western Russia. He is recognised as a political prisoner by Memorial: Support Political Prisoners, and is supported by the “Skobov in prison” group, which can be found on Telegram.



*“Ukrainians do not
need any ‘big brother’,
and certainly not
the fantasy of a
so-called ‘all-Russian
imperial nation’”*

8. Darya Kozyreva

Darya Kozyreva, 19, was arrested on 24 February 2024, the second anniversary of Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine, for placing flowers, and lines from a poem, at a statue of Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine's national poet. She was charged with "discrediting" the armed forces; a second count was added, arising from anti-war statements in a video interview she gave. She was convicted, and sentenced to two years and eight months in a penal colony, at the Petrogradsky district court in St Petersburg, in April 2025 – where she denounced the war while answering lawyers' questions.

Answers to questions

On the charge of "discrediting the army", Kozyreva commented:

My opinion is that, from the moment of the full-scale invasion, this army completely discredited itself. And therefore any statement made against it could not possibly discredit anything.

The charge had been worded to suggest that Kozyreva had discredited the army's "support for international peace and security". She told the court:

Of course, there are cases where an army may be used to protect

international peace and security. There have been examples of this in the past. But I am convinced, and was convinced *[when giving the interview from which the charges arose]* that the invasion of Ukraine does no such thing. I believe now and, what's more important, I believed then, that this war is a criminal intrusion on Ukraine's sovereignty, an occupation of her land. In terms of international peace and security, not only does Russia not protect them, but poses a severe threat to them. And whatever my disagreements with some citizens of the Russian Federation may be, I still doubt whether this war is in their personal interests.

Regarding the charge arising from her display of Taras Shevchenko's poetry, Kozyreva said she had hoped to make his words heard, and that:

If this criminal case had not been opened, the public resonance that this poem now has would have been far less. *[By repeating the poem]*, I could not discredit the Russian army, simply because this army could not have been discredited by Taras, given that he lived in the nineteenth century. He discredited plenty: the empire, Moscow, the tsar. But he wasn't psychic. He could not have known of the existence of the Russian Federation or of its army.

Final statement

Kozyreva again addressed the court with a final statement. She began by citing Taras Shevchenko's poem "To Osno-vianenko", in Ukrainian.

Except the enemy who mocks ...
Laugh, then, ferocious foe,
But not too loudly, for our fame
Will never be laid low.
It will not perish, but proclaim ...

The prosecutor, Mykhail Russkikh, interrupted, saying:
“Your Honour! The proceedings are in Russian – could we
have that in Russian? I take it this is some kind of poem?”
Kozyreva replied “yes”, and, after a short pause, continued
in Ukrainian:

Our epic and our ancient song
For ever shall remain,
And that is where our glory lies,
The glory of Ukraine.

Kozyreva continued:

If Taras Hryhorovych [*Shevchenko*] were somehow transported into our time, I suppose I’m expected to say he’d be rather taken aback. But he wouldn’t be. Not at all. He’d recognise it instantly. Muscovy is at it again.

Of course, the war didn’t start in 2022. Even in the narrowest sense, the proper starting point is 2014. It was these same Russians then – the same ones responsible for every drop of spilled blood. In a broader sense, though, the war didn’t start in 2014 either. It’s been going on for centuries.

There is a striking feature in Russian history: no matter who holds power – whether tsars or communists – the regime seems governed by a kind of religion that prevents it from

simply leaving Ukraine alone. The rulers might be sporting different uniforms, but they're all cut from the same cloth.

You would think that after so many centuries they might have grasped the obvious: just stop, just let go. Yes, Moscow has won battles – many battles – but has never secured a final victory. And it never will. The Ukrainian people won't allow this. They've had enough.

But those who believe in occupation never understood that. They are not as clever as they think. No one ever gave them the right to define Ukraine's past or future. They fail to see that Ukrainians do not need any "big brother", and certainly not the fantasy of a so-called "all-Russian imperial nation".

Ukraine is a free country, a free nation. It will decide its own future. If someone repeats the occupier's narratives, then Ukrainians will hate them. And don't even try to blame Ukrainian nationalism. We [*Russians*] have brought this upon ourselves.

If anyone tries to invade Ukraine, they will be fought. And it will probably be painful. I sincerely hope Russians will come to understand these basic truths. Ukraine, once again, is a free nation. It will choose its own path. And it will choose who to call a friend or a brother, and who to name as a bitter enemy. It will itself decide how to relate to its own history. And most certainly, it will choose which language to speak.

I know these should be obvious things. But they are not. It's clear that Putin can't get his head around the fact that Ukraine is a sovereign nation. Then again, there's a lot he can't seem to grasp, such as human rights or democratic principles.

Even those who oppose Putin's regime do not always understand this. They do not always realise that Ukraine, having paid for its sovereignty in blood, will determine its own

future. I still want to believe that when Russia finally becomes democratic, sooner or later, this attitude will change. I want to believe in a beautiful future where Russia relinquishes all its imperial ambition, whether overt and bloodthirsty or hidden deep in the human psyche. God willing.

Kozyreva then began recounting how, over centuries, Ukraine fought for independence. The judge interrupted several times, asking her to stick to the case. She continued.

I already said during the oral arguments that it would be stupid to talk about shackles in the context of the current situation in Ukraine. Ukrainians would not allow themselves to be chained. And they aren't permitting it now. But in Taras [*Shevchenko*]'s time, shackles were a grim reality. That's why you won't find in his work any rallying cries to fight the Muscovites. It wasn't the right time. Nor could we have expected it in the circumstances.

His patriotic poetry is a lament. A lament for Ukraine's bitter fate. A lament for the forgotten glory of the Cossacks. A lament for the mistakes and defeats that cost Ukraine its freedom.

But he truly believed that, one day, Ukraine's glory would return. That the ghosts of its great Hetmans [*military leaders*] would rise again. That the country would finally cast off the enemy's chains. He couldn't know when. He couldn't know that within half a century, the Ukrainian People's Republic would emerge on the map, that those same Ukrainian peasants – who had not long before been bound in serfdom, deprived of rights, silent – would raise the national flag. That they would take up arms and, led by [*Symon*] Petlyura, go to fight both the Bolsheviks and the [*White army*] Volunteers.

Sadly, the Bolsheviks won. And that was a tragedy – not only for Ukrainians, but for many nations. Ukraine was left in the hands of a brutal executioner for another 70 years.

The judge again interjected: “I have to interrupt again. This isn’t a history class.” Kozyreva continued:

Let’s speak of the present. The shackles have long been cast off, and no one will put them on Ukraine again. For centuries its people have shed their own blood for their freedom. They will not surrender it now. Ukrainians remember perfectly well how their ancestors fought.

And the only question is: does their eastern neighbour remember too? The communists are gone, thankfully. The tsars are long gone. But the imperial habits seem to linger.

Yes, as I’ve said, Putin still cannot grasp the concept of Ukrainian sovereignty. What he wants, really, is a meek and submissive Malorossia [*“Little Russia”*]. Ideally, a province with no will of its own, which obeys his every word, speaks a foreign tongue, and slowly forgets its own. Somewhere along the way, he miscalculated.

He simply couldn’t believe that his “Little Russia” dream was gone, forever. Ukrainians will not let their country be turned into that. But Putin obstinately attempted it. In 2014, he annexed Crimea. He fuelled the war in the Donbas, all with the same aim.

And in 2022, he decided it was time to finish the job. On paper, it was a neat plan. A blitzkrieg, Kyiv in three days. But three years haven’t been enough – and nor would three decades be.

The invaders were kicked out of the outskirts of Kyiv,

forced to flee from Kharkiv, pushed out of Kherson. They didn't just fail to reach the capital – they still don't fully control even the areas they claim in the Donbas. Yes, part of Ukrainian land remains occupied. And yes, it may stay that way for a long time. While it's painful to admit, that sadly seems to be so.

Still, Moscow hasn't conquered Ukraine. The heroic Ukrainian people stood up to defend their homeland. And at the cost of countless lives, they held their ground. The national flag still flies over Kyiv, and it always will. Even in early 2022, when the enemy was driven from the capital, Russia was left looking like a fool.

Of course I still dream that Ukraine will reclaim every inch of its territory: Donbas, Crimea, all of it. And I believe that one day, it will. History will judge, and judge fairly. But Ukraine has already won. Victory is theirs. That's all I have to say.

The path to court

Darya Kozyreva was first arrested for anti-war protest in August 2022, in the Patriot park on Kronshtadt island near St Petersburg. Together with a friend, she tore the letters "Z" and "V", militarist symbols used by supporters of the war, from military vehicles that were on display. The pair were detained by security guards. Kozyreva, at 17 years old, was not charged; her friend was. He was fined 30,000 rubles. In December 2022, Kozyreva painted a protest message on an installation in busy Dvortsovaya Square, in the shape of two hearts, that claimed to represent St Petersburg's friendship with Mariupol, Ukraine. In the preceding months, Mariupol had been heavily bombed by Russian forces. Thousands of civilians were killed. Kozyreva wrote on the structure: "You murderers, you bombed Mariupol. You Judases."

She was charged with vandalism, and deliberate damage to property. In an interview, Kozyreva said:

They arrested me right there on Dvortsovaya Square. I went up *[to the installation]* in broad daylight, I wasn't hiding from anyone. The police detained me. Of course the cops were in favour of the war, and I was cursing it. I told them the truth, that that installation shouldn't have been there. This *[depiction of the friendship of St Petersburg and Mariupol]* was monstrous hypocrisy, a terrible lie.

In September 2023, Kozyreva, still not quite 18, started studying for a medicine degree. In December that year, she was charged with "discrediting the army". In evidence, prosecutors pointed to posts she had written on social media in March 2022, before the law on discrediting the army was passed. By failing to take them down, she was committing a crime, they claimed. The university agreed and, bypassing its own procedures, excluded her. In January 2024, Kozyreva said in an interview with the Sever.Realii website:

They will not shut me up. It's beneath my dignity to keep quiet, because that's what they want. Maybe the words I say won't change anything, but at least my conscience will be clear. I'll know that, in 2022, 2023 and 2024, I didn't keep quiet. Maybe I'll leave the country. I don't resist that idea, in principle. But for now, to leave in order to escape prosecution, doesn't really seem right. That's quite apart from the fact that I am sick of walking down the street and seeing banners advertising for "contract soldiers" to do "real work". If I leave, it would be easier for me, on a psychological level. But I am a patriot – a

patriot in the real sense, not in the sense that the propagandists give that word. I hope everything will change. No one's patience is endless, and eventually, I believe, the people will take up the paving stones – the weapon of the proletariat – and take action against these vile monsters who think they are some kind of tsars. And it will end badly for those guilty of unleashing this bloodbath, who are responsible for this evil we are living through. No evil is permanent. All nights come to an end eventually. And this night will come to an end too.

Kozyreva was again arrested in St Petersburg on 24 February 2024, the second anniversary of Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine, when she laid flowers and lines from a poem at a statue of Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine's national poet. Her trial opened in August 2024, but there was a procedural delay, due to which Kozyreva was released under a partial restriction order in February 2025. The final hearing took place in April 2025.

Darya Kozyreva is in prison in Vyborg, near St Petersburg. She is recognised as a political prisoner by Memorial: Support Political Prisoners, and supported by the "Free Darya Kozyreva" group on Telegram. In addition to imprisonment, she was prosecuted again, and fined 40,500 rubles (about €440), for "discrediting the army" in her final statement to the court.



*“I acted out
of conscience,
in accordance
with universal
human moral
principles”*

9. Alexei Rozhkov

Alexei Rozhkov, 27, was charged in March 2022 with committing a “terrorist act”, on account of firebombing a military recruitment centre, causing negligible damage. Charges of “justifying terrorism” and circulating “fakes” about the army were added, arising from interviews he gave explaining his action. Rozhkov fled to Kyrgyzstan and was kidnapped and returned to Russia for trial. In May 2025, he was convicted and sentenced to 16 years’ imprisonment at the Beryozovsky district court, Sverdlovsk region. This is his final statement in court.

I’ll try to be methodical and tell things as they are. I am on trial for, among other things, having called the “special military operation” in Ukraine a war. I don’t think it’s a secret for anyone that, in our country, expressing your own opinion, if it differs from the position of the ruling authorities, remains dangerous, fraught with the risk of prison and worse. I truly love people and my country, but I don’t identify our country with the state and its all-powerful bureaucratic machine.

The question of engagement is important to me personally. Although I have never been a politician or a statesman, I could not remain indifferent when the war began. I have a conscience, and I preferred to hold on to it.

Without a doubt, the Russian state is powerful, perhaps

one of the most powerful in the world. There is no anti-war voice in government, which is dominated by the United Russia party. There is no real opposition as such. There is, so to speak, a monopoly on power.

It's entirely predictable that millions of people have come to identify the current government, and the president who leads it, with Russia itself. And so, any expression of opposition to the war, whether it be a public speech, an isolated picket, a demonstration, an act of hooliganism and so on, will be taken as an attack on Russia, even if very often it is nothing of the kind.

I have watched the authorities' departure from the observation of democratic rights and constitutional freedoms, by introducing ever wider prohibitions; their total desire to control everything leads to authoritarianism and inevitably leads to political repression. The work of those who think differently is blocked, and they are "rewarded" with the status of foreign agents. The expression of a personal opinion, if it contradicts official political positions or propaganda, is treated as extremism and the justification of terrorism – and hooliganistic arson attacks are interpreted as acts of terrorism, as in my case.

I don't deny that at the same time the most terrible events can happen, and have happened, such as the terror attack on the Crocus City Hall *[in February 2024 at Krasnogorsk, near Moscow, which caused 145 deaths and 551 injuries]*, when people came to a concert by the rock group Picnic. The terrorists fired automatic weapons at a huge number of people and destroyed a building, across an area of more than 11 square kilometres, if I'm not mistaken. I have also heard about other scandalous cases of explosions in public places, where people have, or could have, suffered.

Unfortunately, we could give many examples of terrorist

activity. And each such case involves both murder and the population being terrorised. My own desire to draw attention to the suffering of people, through an act of hooliganism, has nothing to do with terrorism. Even if it is an act of civil disobedience, as I have already acknowledged. Calling me a terrorist means blurring the distinction between me and the inhumane murderers responsible for the act of terrorism at Crocus City Hall, and others like them.

I never intended for anyone to suffer, I never sought any benefit, I was never contracted by anyone, but acted out of conscience, in accordance with universal human moral principles, and expressed my protest against the war through an act that was not supposed to harm anyone, and did not harm anyone.

I also have no doubt that millions of my fellow Russians, women and men, young and old, are opposed to the war too, and, like me, are convinced that the war is not a solution, but a dead end. But they have no way – without risking ending up behind bars – to do anything to be heard, to ensure their opinion is listened to.

And many thousands of people are already in prisons and in penal colonies. How many really intended to kill, and did kill, out of those in the lists of extremists and terrorists? For as long as the list contains the names of those who acted against the war, without harm to other people, and faced fabricated criminal charges, it should really be called “the list of extremists, terrorists and political prisoners”.

I want to remind you that *[Benito] Mussolini [the fascist dictator of Italy 1922-43 and ally of Hitler]* defined the essence of totalitarianism: “Nothing beyond the state, except the state, nothing against the state, all for the state, in the name of the state and through the state.” He was a fascist. Do we need to

remember the Soviet dictatorship and its many millions of repressions? All the same, it is important to remember, and not to forget.

There is only one way to define the true difference between democracy and fascism. Democracy is a system that provides the economic, political and cultural conditions for the full development of the individual. Fascism, whatever it may call itself, is a system that forces the individual to submit to external aims, and that weakens the development of his or her true individuality. These are the words of Erich Fromm [*the German Jewish democratic socialist and philosopher*], and are very relevant to our own times. By the way, some of his books appear in the list of references used in the dossier compiled by the specialists for my criminal case. Erich Fromm hasn't yet been banned here.

The military conflict and the invasion of Ukraine has inevitably led to the most dire of consequences. It has led to the death of a huge number of people, both military and civilian. The start of the war signalled the failure of common sense, the collapse of former international relations and the rise of Russophobia.

How much have violent crimes increased in this time? Where has the rise in mental health problems come from? Why is the birth rate at a record low? Because the military conflict directly or indirectly affects everyone, whether or not they have realised it or understood it yet.

It would be a victory for our country if there were no direct military conflict with Ukraine, but instead it continues now for a fourth year. And every day new graves appear in the cemeteries of those who have departed before their time, because of this war.

According to the uncompromising rules of life, those who have died have lost in this war. They can't be brought back. Due to the inability of politicians to engage in constructive dialogue and diplomacy, the war has claimed lives on a daily basis across the past three years.

And from the point of view of universal human values, that is already a defeat. Victory, a universal human victory, can only be the fastest possible de-escalation, a ceasefire and an end to the conflict.

In my heart I hold that hope, and I believe that rapid changes for the better are possible. Life, freedom, culture, society – these aren't simply a given, they are things that we need to struggle for, to create and construct. Truly, culture and freedom are what make us human. They are things that are so hard to achieve, and so easy to lose. It's impossible to remain indifferent.

The path to court

"Before repression and persecution, Alexei Rozhkov led an ordinary life", Solidarity Zone reports. He worked as a sales assistant at an electronics shop; played in a rock band, Tell Me the Reason; was passionate about music; and enjoyed reading about philosophy. "Politics also played an important part in his life. Alexei described himself as a left-wing anarchist and took part in street activism: painting graffiti and making protest leaflets. He expressed his views not only in words – the back of his hand is tattooed with the anarchist symbol."

On 11 March 2022, Rozhkov became the third person in Russia to firebomb a military recruitment office: he painted a peace symbol on a fence and threw three Molotov

cocktails at the centre, causing negligible damage. He was soon arrested and charged with attempted murder. In September 2022, however, his lawyer managed to have the charges reclassified as attempted destruction of property. Rozhkov was released under a travel ban.

When arson attacks on military recruitment offices began to be widely labelled as terrorist acts, Rozhkov realised he faced serious danger in Russia and left for Kyrgyzstan. He spent about six months there, continuing to speak out against the war. In an interview with the opposition media platform Doxa in November 2022, he said:

It's very difficult to admit to oneself that people are dying – peaceful people are dying; and those who did not want to make war, but were called up, are also dying. I wanted to make some kind of call, so that people would start to fight against this war. I wanted to make a difference, to do something to stop all this or at least to weaken [*the Russian military*]. That's the reason that I firebombed the military recruitment centre at Beryozovsky. I wasn't trying to burn it to the ground.

Later, in an interview with the Khodorkovsky Live video channel, Rozhkov stated:

Putin started this “special military operation” – essentially, a war. This is fascism plain and simple, the extermination of Ukrainian citizens. The fact that the invasion has been confounded, that it has been turned back, doesn't give me any comfort. And it wasn't giving me any comfort when I committed this crime. I could not remain indifferent or stay on the sidelines. I felt I had to do something.

In late May 2023, Russian security forces came to Rozhkov's flat in Bishkek. He was unlawfully returned to Russia and handed over to the Federal Security Service (FSB) at the airport. He was taken to a detention facility, where he had a bag placed over his head, was tortured with electric shocks, and threatened with murder and sexual violence. He was then moved to the pre-trial detention centre No. 1 in Yekaterinburg.

In October 2023, the more serious terror-related charges were brought against him. Some of these stemmed from his appearance on Khodorkovsky Live. Investigators claimed that he and the hosts, Elena Malakhovskaya and Renat Davletgildeev, had conspired in advance.

Alexei Rozhkov is recognised as a political prisoner by Memorial: Support for Political Prisoners, and supported by Solidarity Zone. At the time of writing, Rozhkov has appealed against his sentence, and Solidarity Zone is raising funds to cover legal fees. He is being held at a pre-trial detention centre in Yekaterinburg.



*“My targets were
Russian military
equipment and
supply chains”*

10. Ruslan Siddiqi

Ruslan Siddiqi, 37, a Russian-Italian anarchist, in November 2023 sabotaged a railway line and derailed a 19-carriage train on its way to the Ukrainian front loaded with munitions. He was arrested, tortured, and charged with carrying out acts of terrorism, preparing an act of terrorism, training to undertake acts of terrorism, and the preparation and handling of explosives in an organised group. He said in court that he had sought to hinder Russia's military operations against Ukraine, and asked to be recognised as a prisoner of war. Siddiqi was convicted on 23 May 2025, sentenced to 29 years' imprisonment, nine in prison and the remainder in a high-security penal colony, and fined 2 million rubles (about €22,000). This is his final statement in court.

I regret that my actions endangered *[Aleksander]* Bogatyrev, *[Sergei]* Tarabukin, and *[Dmitry]* Unshakov *[the crew of the derailed train]*. They were not the target, and I am glad it did not lead to serious harm to their health.

My targets were Russian military equipment and the logistical chains used to transport military hardware and fuel. In this way, I wanted to impede military operations against Ukraine.

Of course, any explosion or news of sabotage can frighten people. Just as missiles flying over homes and the outbreak of hostilities are intended to intimidate the population of the

country against which these actions are directed.

I have said more than once that I had no intention of deliberately intimidating anyone. I chose the targets myself. I attacked the military aircraft parking area, intending to destroy the aircraft. The train was derailed to disable the railway line on which I had observed the movement of military equipment.

I would like to point out that I monitored the train traffic on the line I sabotaged and made sure there were no passenger trains running on it. For additional assurance, I maintained visual contact. If I had been indifferent to people's lives, I could have derailed the train without direct involvement.

I have nothing to do with the attempt to manufacture a new explosive device and derail another train. The explosion on 11 November 2023 caused a significant stir, and I understood that security measures would be tightened. Besides, I had enough problems in my personal life.

I bear the Russian people no ill will; while there are disagreements regarding certain events since 2014, that's no reason for me to hate anyone.

The impossibility of peacefully influencing the authorities' actions and the criminal prosecution of those who disagree with them leads some to leave the country, while others decide to take action.

In any case, regardless of the severity of the act, the use of torture during interrogation is unacceptable if we live in a state governed by the rule of law. To torture someone with electric shocks and beat them while they are tied up is an utterly despicable act. Responsibility here lies not only with those who used these interrogation methods but also with those who know about it, those who fail to react, and those who help to cover it up.

And finally, I will read an excerpt from a poem by [*the Ukrainian anarchist revolutionary*] Nestor Makhno:

Let them bury us now,
But our essence will not sink into oblivion,
It will rise up at the necessary hour
And will triumph, I believe in this.

The path to court

**A series of letters written by Ruslan Siddiqi,
after his conviction, to Mediazona, for publication.**

[*Mediazona's introduction:*] Here Ruslan Siddiqi explained – among other things – why he decided to “take up explosives”, how a fox had spoiled his first attempt at sabotage, and how torture by field telephones (known as “tapiki” in slang) differs from torture by tasers. (The security forces used both against him.)

Attacking a military airfield

The hum of the Tupolev Tu-22 and Tu-95 aircraft outside my window coincided with the strikes on Ukraine, and this determined my choice of target: Diaghilev military airfield, just ten kilometres from home. I lived with my 80-year-old grandmother and understood how hard it was for the elderly and sick without heat and light in winter. As I filled a tub with hot water, I thought about those deprived of basic amenities a thousand kilometres away, because of someone’s geopolitical ambitions. Yet at the same time they talk about “fraternal nations” and say that “Russia is not at war with civilians”.

I’ve been interested in explosives for a long time. When I was living in Italy, I came across an article in a newspaper about an explosion used to disrupt a festival. A rough diagram

of the bomb was drawn in some detail. The simplicity and accessibility of this description grabbed my attention, and I made the IEDs [*improvised explosive devices*] for the sabotage that I carried out from this model.

I learned how to make high-power explosive fillings around the age of 18 by simply downloading formulae on the internet. But apart from a few tests in the open, I didn't pursue it until 2023. I also had a homemade quadcopter with a camera, as one of my hobbies is aerial devices.

I shared my plans about the attack on the airport with a Ukrainian friend, and he put me in touch with a person who knows what's what in this field. We quickly connected, and I was invited to Latvia to test my skills. If successful, they promised to help with the purchase of a drone. I didn't mind travelling for a good cause.

They checked that I had no links with the Russian security services and the sincerity of my intentions. There were no salary agreements, the relationship was friendly, no one gave me orders. After purchasing parts for drones, I conducted experiments with carrying capacity and range.

Eventually, for safety reasons, I chose an automatic GPS flight with a delayed launch. [*On 20 July 2023*] I rode on my bike with four drones with explosives to the field, trying to drive carefully because of its shock sensitivity. I calmed myself with the thought that, if it detonated by accident, I would not have time to understand anything, and they could hardly identify me.

After setting up the drones with a three-hour take-off delay, and setting the coordinates of the areas where the aircraft were parked, I left. Before that, I noticed that a fox was running around, but I didn't think anything of it. Later, I learned

from the news that only one drone had struck: the fox probably turned over the others.

To be honest, I was afraid I would be tracked down somehow, but I chose my route with care, alternating between blind spots and areas with cameras, and the gap between the moment I left the launch site, and the launch of the drones was three hours. If it hadn't been for the incident with the drones remaining there, they wouldn't have been able to figure out the launch site either.

All the same, for a whole month I listened anxiously when someone was walking near my door. A month later, my anxiety lifted: if they had figured it out, they would have caught me within a couple of weeks.

I was rather annoyed that the action did not go according to plan. I periodically launched my homemade drone and, at some point in August, I discovered that the GPS signal disappeared at an altitude of more than 30 meters. I concluded that an electronic warfare station was operating somewhere nearby and decided to abandon further drone launches.

Did I feel like a partisan? I think you can call me that. If, during the Second World War, people who opposed the Third Reich on its territory were called partisans, then you could see me in a similar way.

Italian childhood with Molotov cocktails

I was born in Ryazan, where I lived with my mother and grandmother. It was a typical 1990s childhood for young people from an industrial area. I spent a lot of time outside, since there was nothing to do at home. It was much more fun to run from construction site guards, throw gas canisters into a fire and wait for the explosion, sneak into cellars, and build hovels.

Since early childhood, I had been interested in various types of machinery and electronics. Sensing this interest of mine, my parents bought me science books and construction kits. I think it contributed to my later hobbies.

When I was 11 or 12 years old, I went to Italy to visit my mother for a summer vacation. She'd been living there for a couple of years. Towards the beginning of the school year, my mother confronted me with the fact that I would now live and study in Italy. From that moment on, I came to Ryazan only during the summer. I missed my grandmother and my friends. It was difficult at first, as learning in a non-native language is not easy. By the end of the school year, it was much easier for me to hold a conversation and learn, thanks to my classmates.

I taught them how to prank around, just like we used to in Russia. We had to run away from the police many times. Sometimes we were caught. There was even a time when they caught us with Molotov cocktails we had thrown against the walls of an abandoned school. But they released us with the words: "Don't play with petrol, guys."

After I finished my studies, I tried to join the Italian armed forces, the alpini [*the Italian Army's specialist mountain infantry*]. I needed to channel my energy somewhere. Unfortunately, I didn't pass the selection the first time round.

I don't see any major contradiction between anarchism and joining the army of a non-belligerent country for a year without commitments. I would not join the army to fight an aggressive war. In the Italian army, I saw the opportunity to acquire skills in handling weapons, munitions and equipment. In any case, when self-governing territories emerge, the ability to protect communities and their way of life from attacks will be needed. I lived and worked in Italy, but when I came back

to Russia, I decided to stay when I was offered a job as an electrician. Life was good here until 2008. I also missed my grandmother and friends, and life in Europe seemed too boring back then. At the same time, I warmly remember Sicily – five minutes to the sea, such beautiful nature, and a quiet life for those who love warm weather.

Before the events of 2014, I travelled to Ukraine once a year for trips to the Chernobyl zone. I became interested in this place when I was still young, long before the well-known *[Ukrainian]* video game S.T.A.L.K.E.R *[which is set at the Chernobyl site]*. The very fact that unauthorised trips to the exclusion zone were forbidden only increased my attraction towards this place. I like to make my way through difficult terrain, hide from patrols, and use military equipment. I have made friends with those who shared my interests, including in Ukraine, and some of them, unfortunately, will never again go hiking....

A journey towards anarchism

I didn't become an anarchist overnight. Even before I knew of the word "anarchism", I already had my own idea of a just world: without a state, with self-governing communities. Then a friend said that this was what anarchism is like.

But I don't like to limit myself to any ideology, I find affinities with the ideas of various currents of thought. The world is changing, and what was relevant a hundred years ago may no longer fit our world. I don't like the rigidity in the ideas of some anarchists and communists, who sometimes resemble religious fanatics. One thing I can say for sure is that my rejection of totalitarianism and fascism remains steadfast. One Nazi cellmate even called me a liberal because I praised

[Yuval Noah] Harari's work. Most people are conservative and not ready for drastic changes, while some simply have no need for it – as though their slave nature was some kind of default mode.

In Russia, I have met many people who dream of Stalin's "iron hand" or the tsar's firm schlong up their backside: "So that there is order and everyone knows their place."

Maybe there will be a transition, perhaps even a violent one, from a totalitarian state to other forms of government with greater freedoms and further evolution into communities with self-government. For this to be possible, people need to change. Over the past ten years in Russia, I have become very disappointed in people, and I would not be surprised that in the foreseeable future the country will continue to sink to the level of North Korea and Iran.

In my understanding, being an anarchist means helping or participating in projects close to the movement whenever possible. Participating in actions aimed at protecting the rights and freedoms of working people. If circumstances permit, communicate your ideas to the right people. Acquire new knowledge and skills that allow you to do all this more effectively.

At the age of 16, I was interested in the idea of autonomous agricultural communes, I had read an article about such communities in the west. In Russia, apart from religious communes, I had never encountered anything like this, and any ambitious projects often did not even survive for a couple of years.

I learned about the "New Way" in 2010 through samizdat, which talked about the need for workers to help develop it. In spite of the fact that it was very different there from what I read, I continued to go there for six months every year.

["New Way" was a farming commune in Leningrad region, constituted in 1990 as a kolkhoz (Soviet collective farm). Its founders said that on the commune's territories "soviet power and communistic relationships are maintained". In the 1990s there were no more than ten people permanently resident there.] I worked in Ryazan and devoted the rest of my time to life in "New Way", doing gardening and building. Every year, I hoped to be able to create a self-sufficient production facility that would allow the commune to exist independently of any outside help. [Siddiqi wrote about the "New Way" commune, in the journal Open University, at that time: "I come here on a motorbike from Ryazan, via Vladimir – about 1,100 kilometres. I am here in the summer, and the rest of the time I am at work. During the winters I put some money aside, and then come here for the [summer] season, when there is not much work to be had. Last time I worked in the sweet store. I am a very frugal person."]

But over several years, practically nothing changed there, people came there and then left disenchanted. I stayed because of my love of nature and my desire for new knowledge. I think the project died because of the founder's intransigence in financial matters: it was impossible to organise production without selling goods. Despite our differences, I appreciate the experience I gained there, and I hope that the house I built will still be useful to someone.

24 February 2022

I had been following the situation in Ukraine since the end of 2013. I thought about taking part in protest actions then, but I didn't have an opportunity to take unpaid leave. I did not expect Russia to take such a despicable step, taking advantage

of the transition period in the country. I think it's no secret now who the people who seized Crimea were, who shot down the Malaysian Airlines plane with passengers on board, and who fought in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions under the guise of "angry Donbas miners".

In 2021–22, it was already obvious that things were heading towards an invasion. The propaganda machine produced more and more aggressive stories. Shortly before 24 February, I had a recurring dream: there was a field full of dark green military equipment, a grey sky, black trees without leaves, I was on the sidelines, with something like a grenade launcher in my hands, but some force held me back from aiming and shooting.

Early in the morning on 24 February 2022 I was riding the Ryazan-Moscow local train. I dozed off and heard snatches of phrases in my sleep: "We'll be in Kiev in the evening", "we're only shooting at NATO bases", "they wanted to attack us", "the Ukies are really gagging for a good beating". When I woke up, I started monitoring the news and saw that a large-scale invasion had begun. A month earlier, the news feed was filled with obviously fake reports of shelling and other provocations by the Ukrainian armed forces. Here we can draw a historical parallel with fake provocations before the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany or the Soviet invasion of Finland.

It was a very unpleasant feeling not being able to do anything about it. I saw trains with military equipment passing by, and I desperately wanted to bite through the barrels of the weapons.

In early March, I contacted a comrade from Ukraine, now deceased, asking if he was taking part in the defence. He wrote to me: "We burn their equipment by the hundreds, and they

wipe out our cities.” He died when they drove out the Russian armed forces from the Kharkiv region, in the summer of 2022.

The Russian government has cut off all opportunities to influence the situation peacefully: anyone who opposes the war is declared a traitor and subjected to repression. In such a situation, it is not surprising that some would prefer to leave the country, whereas others would take up explosives.

Realising that the war was going to be a long one, at the end of 2022 I decided to act militarily. The Russian army deliberately attacked Ukraine’s energy infrastructure, leaving civilians without water, heat and light so that they could put pressure on their leadership.

According to Article 205 of the Russian Criminal Code, “the commission of an explosion or other actions that frighten the population in order to influence decision-making by government authorities” falls under the definition of terrorism. The actions of the Russian side correspond to this definition.

Moreover, they adopted a “double strike” tactic: after the first strike on a site, a second strike was launched when the rescue service turned up so as to eliminate the rescuers. The Russian side simply gloated, showing stories about the suffering of the civilian population.

At the end of September 2023 [*two months after the unsuccessful attack on Diaghilev airfield*] I went on another bike tour from Ryazan to St Petersburg. On the second day, when I was already approaching Vladimir, my grandmother called me: “Ruslan, come back, my legs are numb.” I heard something very different in her voice. I turned around and rushed back. A little later, the medic from the ambulance called me saying that my grandmother had a suspected stroke, and she was already in hospital.

That day, I rode a record number of kilometres and ran out of energy when entering Ryazan. There I slept under a tree, and in the morning, I rode the rest of the distance. The first thing I did was visit my grandmother in the hospital. She recognised me, but she couldn't speak. Unfortunately, that was the last time I saw her. On 1 October, the phone rang at night: "Ruslan, come to the morgue tomorrow."

I'm very affected by death, I couldn't stand it even when my hamster was dying.... I knew that sooner or later this would happen, but I still suffered a lot, I was troubled with gloomy thoughts, my mind was foggy, even now, as I write these lines, my eyes are watering... I think this condition negatively affected my lucidity and I abandoned my sense of caution. I should have given myself a couple of months to recover, but I didn't.

The second explosion

The war continued, and I decided that since it hadn't worked from the air, I would launch an attack from the ground. The railway infrastructure is the circulatory system of a belligerent country. I shared my thoughts with my Ukrainian friend and asked him to blow up some rail tracks somewhere to calculate the capacity charge, since conducting these experiments in Russia during wartime was unwise.

From my reconnaissance, I discovered the movement of trains with military equipment along one of the tracks which bypasses Ryazan and moves towards the south of Russia. After observing it, I established how frequently trains run and worked out that this track is used only for freight transportation. I came to the conclusion that this was a good target, because even if the track itself was hit, then their logistics as a whole was disrupted.

This sabotage cost me less than 10,000 rubles. In a few days, I made two powerful bombs and a video transmitter with a self-destruct mechanism. I devised my escape route. I had a night vision device with me, and in my pockets were bags of pepper to set the dogs off my track.

I rode my bike to the site at midnight, set the charges under the tracks, fixed the camera on a tree so that it recorded the moment of detonation, and scattered pepper in the sites I was hiding out in. Having found a location with a good video signal, I got some sleep and waited for dawn. When it got lighter and the camera image was already visible, I waited for the right moment, made sure that the train was not a passenger train, and activated the charge.

After fleeing the scene, I hid my bike, shoes, and the clothes I was wearing in the woods ten kilometres from the blast site. I returned home through another path, without my bike and in a change of clothes.

I saw the results of the train bombing on the news. I sent this news to a Ukrainian friend. A few days later, he informed me that his management had decided to allocate me 15,000 dollars. I was surprised, because I had never possessed more than a thousand euros in my life. I told him that I have no problems with money at the moment and asked him to postpone this issue until better times. He was a little indignant at first but agreed that now was not the best time.

Back in the summer, when he found out that my grandmother was in the hospital, he wanted to pay for her treatment. I said that I had money, that I had saved the required amount. But I am still heartily grateful that he decided somehow to help an elderly woman from the country that attacked his country. I hope he reads these words someday.

Security cameras and suspicious dacha owners

When I was conducting reconnaissance of the area near the railway, I came across some dacha owners a couple of kilometres from the site of the future explosion. These owners will often cast suspicious gazes upon any strangers in their territory, and they might have remembered me. If they were questioned, all those fitting my description could have been rounded up.

They may have searched for security camera images within a radius of several kilometres in a given period of time. They could also track all the people who came out of the blind zone where I hid.

I had to change the location of the explosion after I ran into the dacha owners a week earlier. It was necessary not to return to the city immediately, but to stay in the forest until nightfall. And I had to walk along minor footpaths that I knew very well, but because I was tired, I walked the last kilometre on tarmac, thinking that the danger was over.

The security camera, whose image was used for the search, recorded me at about 11 or 12 o'clock, that is, five hours after the explosion. I had to find some clothes which would help hide my identity to return home.

The chekists [*i.e. security services*] said they couldn't track where I came from to the site of the explosion. The explosion occurred on 11 November, and I was detained on the 29th. I made them sweat a little, and they were in a dead-end situation, just like in the case with the drones. Even when they caught me, they weren't sure if I was involved in any way.

Having seized my phone, they saw who I subscribed to on Telegram and concluded that I was, at the very least, no supporter of the so-called special military operation. This is another mistake I made: I needed to look like some ordinary

ultra-patriot online. Knowing your rights when detained, and knowing how they work, would not have hurt either. When they extracted a confession out of me, one of the chekists said: “I already wanted to pulverise all the cyclists in Ryazan.”

Detention and torture

It had been almost twenty days since the explosion. I’d let my guard down and didn’t pay attention to the fact that there was a cop at the entrance *[to the block of flats where Siddiqi lived]*. He compared me with the photo from that surveillance camera and instructed me to go with him to police station No. 4 in Ryazan. They took a saliva sample for DNA testing. Then people in civilian clothes arrived and called me into the office. They started asking various questions about what I was doing on 11 November 2023. I made a couple of blunders in my answers, and the “person” who asked the questions realised that I was hiding something.

He threatened that they would get a confession out of me anyway: they would take me into the open countryside, torture me, and then shoot me, staging an escape attempt. Then they asked me questions: “Do you have any chronic diseases?” After I answered “no”, they hit me on the head, which knocked me on to the floor, and then started kicking me mercilessly. They tied wires to my legs and after the command “Call!” they begin to torture me with an electric current.

When they electrocuted me, they shouted at me to sing the national anthem of Ukraine, but because of my mental confusion, I could not remember it. I couldn’t even remember the pattern lock to unlock my second phone.

The instrument of torture was the TP-57 field telephone or its equivalent. I am familiar with this device. I was fond

of infiltrating various underground facilities and abandoned buildings and collecting civil defence items. Shortly before my arrest, I decided to sell off part of my collection, including a pair of TP-57 field phones [*popularly called “tapiks” because of the abbreviation TP*].

When my apartment was searched, one of the security officers asked: “I saw you selling tapiki on Avito [*a kind of equivalent to Craigslist classified online ads site*], don’t you have any left?” It’s good that I had sold them all by then, or else these freaks may have caused unbearable pain to other people with my own devices. There’s no doubt why they were asking – they didn’t really look like collectors.

After they turned on the tapik, one of the security officers ordered the other: “Put a rag in his mouth so that he doesn’t bite his tongue and scream.” When they asked questions, they took out the cloth and turned the tapik’s handle more slowly, but it was impossible to say anything when it was being twisted. One of them was standing and filming on his phone.

When they finished torturing me with the tapik, someone told them to carry me to the car. The masked man asked the other how hard I could be beaten, to which they replied: “So that there are no visible marks on him.”

When they carried me, my legs just hung down and wouldn’t obey me, which caused the handcuffs to dig into my skin, cutting it, and some of my fingers went numb. They drove me around in a car with a bag over my head all night and beat me, pinning me down between the seats.

When searching the apartment, one of the chekists saw the medals of my grandparents and insistently wanted to know if there were any valuable ones among them that could be sold. I wouldn’t be surprised if they stole some things....

When I showed them where I had thrown out the reagents, I was beaten again and then dragged along the road by handcuffs strapped to my arms, injuring my shoulder joint. At the same time, they stole my watch, which slipped off my hand. In the morning, I was taken to the police station next to the train station, where I lay on the floor for a long time, strapped up. Later, they made a fake video of my detention and confession. In the evening, I was taken to temporary holding facilities.

The next morning, masked men took me away and immediately began beating and torturing me with a taser. The officer from the Investigative Committee rode in another car. *[Identified as Lieutenant V. V. Osipov, investigator in the first section for high-priority cases of the Western Inter-Regional Investigative Department for Transport of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation.]* Compared to the tapik, the taser is pale by comparison, but it burns through clothes and leaves burns on the body. Even a part of the tattoo on my shoulder was burned off. I still keep the underpants that are full of holes burnt into them by the taser....

In the evening, on my ride to the detention centre, the man who tortured me called someone to give him a fully charged taser so as to arrange, as he put it, a “farewell roast”. But the person he called didn’t bring it along with him for some reason.

The next morning, I thought they would torture me again, but they just laid me on the floor in the car, strapped me to the leg of a seat, and drove me to Moscow. The medic in the detention centre was stunned by the sight of me, she asked the police escort why my whole body was bruised. They didn’t say anything. I replied briefly that I had fallen....

Here I have briefly described the events related to torture.

Unfortunately, this method of interrogation is still widely used in Russia. During my year behind bars, I met about five people who were tortured with electricity and other savage methods. Let's hope that those who gave their consent to using such methods will be punished. The use of such interrogation methods and techniques with the falsification of evidence show the lack of professionalism of the Investigative Committee and the FSB, because it is much more difficult to identify a person's involvement by using violence. And with the help of the tapik, they could have framed me for the Crimean Bridge if innocent collective farmers had not already been (falsely) imprisoned in this case.

Behind bars

For the first two weeks, I was in Detention Centre No.7 in Moscow, in a cell with "extremists" and "terrorists". It was hard to wake up to the national anthem and the song "Where the Motherland begins" and realise where you are. Especially if you had a dream about walking outside in freedom....

At first, I suffered greatly from bruised kidneys, it was painful to lie on my back, the cuts festered, my right arm could not move properly, and it hurt to lift my legs when walking. In this condition, it was difficult for me to climb onto the only available upper bunk.

And for the first six months, when I went to bed, I constantly had flashbacks of being electrocuted, and so vividly that I still seemed to feel the passage of electric current through me. I went to a psychiatrist in jail with this problem, and she prescribed me a course of pills.

A week after my detention, people who had been involved in the torture came to me and tried in every possible

way to crush me morally by describing my further prospects. Clearly in this state of mind you can hardly have an optimistic outlook. I constantly thought that to avoid such situations, it was possible to sew an ampoule with a strong poison under the skin, which could be broken when captured.... Well, I got this idea from films about intelligence agents.

When I was transferred to Detention Centre No.1, there was a strange incident. After I got a lawyer, an investigating officer came to me and asked with a grin: "Do you really think he's going to set you free?" He was also very interested in who he was and where he was from. On the same day, I had a conflict in my cell, and I was transferred to another one, and the person with whom the conflict occurred had been sent somewhere a couple of hours before.

Later, at various times, there were times when temporary cellmates were obsessively interested in things that the investigating officer also wanted to find out.

Among the positive moments of life behind bars has been meeting decent people with whom I would be glad to stay in touch if I am ever free again. Although I'm an atheist, the thought sometimes occurs to me that everything which has happened to me since I was caught is punishment for how frivolously I regarded my life and failed to value it. And it is an admonition that has made me come to love life again and learn to enjoy each day.

On support and hopes

Already in Detention Centre No.5, security officers came to me and persistently suggested that I dismiss my lawyer. They probably don't like him. If nothing depended on him, they wouldn't give a damn about him.

They were very worried about who was paying for it, what we were talking about, and why, in their opinion, he came to me too often. The lawyer's visits did not allow them to isolate me completely, and his active approach has given me a ray of hope.

I realise that they will nail me with a long prison sentence, and I don't particularly indulge any hopes for a favourable outcome. I suppose that exchange options may be possible in the future. There are a considerable number of pro-Russian [*Ukrainian*] citizens in prisons in Ukraine. Most of them ask to be exchanged, but the Russian side is against such a deal.

I received my first letters from people I didn't know in January, a little over a month after my arrest. The investigating officer and the chekists told me that everyone would turn away from me, and that those who helped me ran the risk of being called in for "sponsoring terrorists".

It is certainly pleasant to receive letters from people I don't know with words of support. Generally speaking, letters have a special value because you are cut off from the world.

If you want to brighten up the life of prisoners in some way, write letters, send postcards, it makes them smile, despite all the hardships. Unfortunately, letters in envelopes take a very long time to be delivered, and sometimes they are "lost". For this reason, I have not been able to establish normal contact with some people. I suspect that someone is deliberately obstructing this. I reply to everyone without exception, and I also pack all the letters and postcards in my bag.

There aren't many ways to spend time in prison. From what I see, most people watch TV, some play board games, some read.

Some of those who write to me provided me with books on topics of interest to me. These are books on programming,

foreign language textbooks, and some fiction books. I am currently updating my knowledge of Italian, and I would also like to learn Ukrainian. One kind girl signed me up for scientific journals where I can read news about space exploration, animals, physics, etc – everything that I love. Of the board games, I sometimes play chess.

Now I have more books, and people to correspond with, and I spend less time playing games. My priority is answering emails. I don't watch TV very often and, when I do, I mostly watch channels about science, travel and animals, especially if they are about hamsters or rats.

I think I can be classified as a prisoner of war, as my actions were within the framework of the war between Russia and Ukraine. I would be a political prisoner if I were locked up for a peaceful anti-war rally or putting up stickers that “discredit” the armed forces of the Russian Federation.

My actions fall under the category of “sabotage”, but not “terrorism”, since I had no aim to frighten the civilian population. The goal was to destroy planes so that they would not be able to bomb, and to destroy railway tracks so that it would be impossible to get military equipment through.

Despite the fact that the war is over for me, and I have been caught, I am sincerely grateful to the guys from Ukraine for their trust. I'm the only one to blame for being behind bars.

I hope that Ukrainians will endure all their trials with dignity. I wish everyone a peaceful sky above their heads.

Ruslan Siddiqi is supported by the “Free Ruslan Sidiki” group and “Ogni svobody” (“Fires of Freedom”), both on Telegram.



*“I painted the entrance
with the colours of the
Ukrainian flag, and
wrote, ‘I will not go
to kill my brothers!’”*

11. Kirill Butylin

Kirill Butylin, 24, threw firebombs at the military recruitment centre at Lukhovitsy, Moscow, on 28 February 2022. Eight days later, on 8 March, he posted a film of the resulting blaze on Telegram, with a message. He was arrested and charged with justifying terrorism, public advocacy of terrorism, and vandalism, and on 15 March 2023 sentenced in the Second Western District military court in Moscow to 13 years' imprisonment, three in prison and the remaining ten in a high-security penal colony. This is the Telegram message:

A couple of days ago, I set fire to the military recruitment centre at Lukhovitsy, Moscow region, and recorded it on a GoPro. I painted the entrance with the colours of the Ukrainian flag, and wrote, "I will not go to kill my brothers!" After that I crawled under the fence, poured petrol on the front of the building, broke some windows, and threw Molotov cocktails through them. The aim was to destroy the archive held there containing details of those eligible for conscription. This will obstruct mobilisation in the area. I hope that I will not see my old classmates taken prisoner, or in the lists of those killed at the front.

I believe that we should do this everywhere. Ukrainians will know that people in Russia are fighting for them – that not everyone is scared and not everyone is indifferent. Those

who are protesting here need to take courage and act more decisively. And this will surely help to break the spirit of the Russian army and the government. Let those fuckers know that their own people hate them and will snuff them out. The land will soon be burning under their feet, and hell awaits them at home, too.

The path to court

Kirill Butylin's protest came four days after the all-out Russian invasion of Ukraine, and one day after his 21st birthday. It was the first known case of such an anti-war protest. The building he firebombed was empty and there were no casualties. There was superficial damage to the exterior, estimated by the fire service at 12,000 rubles [about €130]. On the day that Butylin's online manifesto was published, he was detained by the Belarusian border police while trying to enter Lithuania. Five days later, he escaped by jumping out of a window, but was soon re-arrested.

We have not found any independent account of the court proceedings, but the state news agency, TASS, reported that, in answer to a question, Butylin stated: I admit my guilt, in full. I agree with the charges.

Kirill Butylin is in prison at Yeniseisk in the Krasnoyarsk region in Siberia. He is recognised as a political prisoner by Memorial: Support Political Prisoners. Solidarity Zone gives support to Butylin during his imprisonment.



*“What is happening
in Ukraine I called
a crime, because
thousands of innocent
people are being killed”*

12. Savelii Morozov

Savelii Morozov, 24, appeared before an enlistment commission at the military recruitment centre in Stavropol, southern Russia, on 12 May 2022 and applied to do alternative (non-military) service. On account of his statement to the commission, he was charged with “discrediting” the Russian army, and on 9 June 2022 convicted by the Oktyabrsky district court in Stavropol and fined 40,000 rubles (about €435). The text of the statement is not available, but Morozov repeated what he had said in an interview with the Kavkaz.realii website. Here are excerpts.

Question. What happened at the 12 May hearing, where you gave an anti-war speech?

First of all, the ones who were going to the army walked through. It all took literally a minute: they came in, they were told where they’d be sent, and they left. I think that I was the only one to apply for alternative civilian service.

When you enter the office, you are supposed to introduce yourself as follows: “Comrade chair of the enlistment commission, I, conscript so-and-so reporting, as you have instructed!” Having done my legal homework, I didn’t introduce myself this way. I believe that this formulation immediately belittles the conscript, puts them in a dependent position. I simply said

hello. The military commissar asked me: which forces would I like to join? I reminded him that I had applied for alternative service, and asked for time to explain my position.

I told the story of my mother, who lived through the war in Grozny [*capital of Chechnya, heavily bombed by Russia in 1994-96 and 1999-2000*], and said that I would not accept war in any form, because human life is priceless.

The only form of war, which can be in any way justified, is defence of your homeland. I gave the example of the Great Patriotic War [*i.e. the Second World War*]. But what is now happening in Ukraine, I called a crime, because thousands of innocent people are being killed. I spoke for around five minutes.

The commissar interrupted me and said, without having discussed it with anyone, that the enlistment commission had approved the substitution of military service by alternative, civilian service.

My speech provoked a predictable reaction. Some guy in a Cossack uniform started to argue with me along the lines that Russia occupies a sixth of the surface of the earth, that we have many natural resources, and that everyone seems to want to gorge themselves on our territory, to sneak up on us, that “a generation of Nazis” had grown up in Ukraine, that we are threatened. ...

I started to answer, and I was interrupted. A policeman was sat there, and didn't say a word. Then the next day, I got a call from the police station, telling me that the policeman had written a report on me and that I was going to be charged with an administrative offence. [...]

When asked if many people around him support the war against Ukraine, Morozov admitted: most people in society want to support the status quo, and so they approve of the leadership's actions, and adapt to the changes.

If I am honest, there are also those who actively support the military actions. I encounter people like this at work, and among my relatives. I try to talk with them, but without success. This is all the result of the propaganda that has brainwashed people for the last eight years.

It seemed that, after the Great Patriotic War, for decades, the whole country repeated the mantra, “at least let there be no war”. Because people were still alive who remembered how horrible it really was. That generation is gone, and that’s why we now hear the calls, “we can do it again”, “let’s go to Berlin”. These attitudes are flourishing now.

I think the right thing to do isn’t to seek vengeance on someone, to try to put them down or crush them, but to do good within your own country. Not to trash your neighbour’s place, but to clean and repair your own flat.

What do you say to those who repeat the line from the TV: “where have you been the last eight years”?

I say, Russia directly caused the events of spring 2014, and the subsequent war in Donbas.

In Ukraine, there were supporters and opponents of integration into Europe. But in those parts of Ukraine that hadn’t been infiltrated by Russian special service placemen like [Igor] Strelkov, where artificial quasi-states hadn’t been constructed, life was settling down. There wasn’t any oppression, or bans

on the Russian language there. Meanwhile, in the parts of Luhansk and Donetsk regions that were under Russian control, for the whole eight years, a constant stream of weapons was coming in. And a stream of volunteers and “holidaymakers”.

Do you think Russian supporters of the war will come to their senses?

I read somewhere, that after the Second World War, some Germans, when they were taken to the concentration camps, and were shown proofs of grotesque torture and murders, simply refused to believe. They said: this has all been set up to blacken the führer’s reputation.

I imagine some Russians would take the same line. But I want to think that most would change their point of view. It’s very hard to understand the way that, immediately after 24 February, everything became black and white. While everyday life goes on much as before, getting your head round that is difficult. It’s hard to understand that somewhere Russian soldiers are shooting, killing, and bombing blocks of flats just like ours.

The path to court

In 2020, at the age of 19, Savelii Morozov began studying for a degree at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, but had to withdraw the following year due to money problems. The exemption from military service he had had as a student lapsed, and he registered for service, as required by law.

Morozov, who had previously been active in pacifist movements and in support of Aleksei Navalny, contacted the Conscientious Objectors Movement, which supported his

application to do alternative service. Despite the court case, this application was approved by the enlistment commission. Military service for 12 months is usually substituted by civilian service for 21 months.

13. And many more

The anti-war speeches in court that comprise the first ten chapters of this book are only a small proportion of the total. Since Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, at least another 17 people used their final speech in court to denounce the war. Others denounced the state suffocation of free speech to which they had fallen victim; others still, victims of crude frame-ups by the security services and prosecutors, protested their innocence.

One protester who articulated that he was using his speech to strengthen the anti-war movement was **Dmitry Ivanov**, a Moscow State University maths student, sentenced in March 2023 to eight-and-a-half years' imprisonment for circulating "fakes" about the Russian army.

"I am using this trial as a tribune from which to denounce the war publicly", he told the court. "I will do all in my power to help those who, for taking a stand as citizens, are now, with me, behind bars. You [*the public*] have even greater possibilities to act today, to make our common tomorrow better."

Ivanov's "crime" was to write 12 anti-war posts on the "Protestny MGU" ("Protest at Moscow State University") Telegram channel that he helped to set up. Any Russian person with a conscience felt guilty about the war, he told the court. "We love our country, and so we find it especially sickening and shameful that this inhuman war is being waged in its name."

Statements such as Ivanov's are being collected and amplified for international audiences by the "Poslednee Slovo" ("Final Word") website. We record our thanks to its creators, who are building a collection of much wider scope than ours: significant final statements to Soviet and post-Soviet courts since the 1960s.

Other modern-day protesters who denounced the war in court, whose statements are in the collection, include:

Andrei Novashov, the first journalist convicted of "discrediting" the Russian armed forces with social media posts, sentenced in March 2023 to 11 months' community service. In his statement to the court, in Prokopyevsk, in the Kuzbass coal-producing region of southern Siberia, Novashov denounced "Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine" and the numerous war crimes committed in a "war needed by no one except Putin". The case against him had been fabricated by security services officers who despised his outspoken journalism, he added.

Mikhail Simonov, a Russian citizen who lived in Belarus and worked in the restaurant car of international trains, who shared two news items about the Mariupol massacre perpetrated by the Russian army in Ukraine, and asked God to forgive Russia. Simonov was arrested when his train stopped in Moscow. In March 2023, he told a Moscow judge who sentenced him to six-and-a-half years' imprisonment that, his mother having lived through the siege of Leningrad and his father having served in the army, "I always believed and now believe that human life has value that is unconditional, that always takes priority – although in our country people do not think so".

Vladimir Sergeev, a motor industry engineer, arrested at an anti-war demonstration in March 2022 with explosives in a rucksack. He had planned to firebomb a transportation depot of the OMON riot police. In April 2023, before being sentenced to eight years' imprisonment, he told a military court in Moscow that by preparing direct action he had "protested against injustice and done my duty as a citizen".

Liudmila Razumova, a photojournalist and artist from Khabarovsk in the Russian Far East, who posted anti-war messages, including "Ukraine, forgive us", on the Odnoklassniki social media site. In May 2023, before a court in Tver sentenced her to seven years' imprisonment, Razumova said that no one should be jailed for expressing their opinion, "all the more so if that person speaks out against war, they should not be put in prison. Any person with common sense is always against war."

Igor Baryshnikov, an engineer and activist from Kaliningrad, who wrote 18 posts on his closed Facebook account about the massacres at Bucha and Mariupol. At his trial in June 2023, he told the court: "My case has been fabricated along the lines of 1937 [*when Stalin's purges peaked*], when they sent people down for ten years, or shot them, on the most fantastic charges." Despite Baryshnikov living with a tube fitted to his stomach due to cancer, and caring for his 97-year-old mother, he was sentenced to seven-and-a-half years' imprisonment.

Dmitry Skurikhin, a political activist who runs a shop in the village of Russko-Vysotsk, near St Petersburg. In March 2022 he displayed a banner saying "Peace to Ukraine. Freedom to Russia", and photographs of Ukrainian children killed by

Russian bombing. In August 2023 Skurikhin was tried for “discrediting” the armed forces, and told the court that he supported the armed forces’ defence of Russia, its citizens and international peace – “but how is the madness being wrought in Ukraine connected to the defence of our interests?” Skurikhin was sentenced to 18 months’ imprisonment. His release, in July 2024, is believed by campaigners to be the first since the 2022 invasion of a jailed anti-war protester.

Nikita Tushkanov, a history teacher from the village of Mikunya in the Komi republic, in the north-east of European Russia. He wrote social media posts opposing the war and stating that the Crimea bridge, damaged by the Ukrainian army in October 2022, was a legitimate target. In May 2023 he was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment and a 150,000-ruble fine for “justifying terrorism” and “discrediting” the armed forces. He told an appeal hearing in September 2023 that he was really being judged for his “opposition to the aggressive war unleashed by Vladimir Putin in the name of the Russian Federation and all its citizens. Because I am against the fact that thousands are dying, and millions are suffering – including my friends and people I know – due to the criminal ambitions of one man.”

Mark Kislitsyn, a transgender man from Moscow, who, after the Russian invasion, sent a bank transfer of 865 rubles (about €9.50) to a fellow trans rights activist in Ukraine. Kislytsin was charged with treason, and at his trial in December 2023 said he had two wishes: “a peaceful sky above my head – and in this I am not alone, millions of people in my country support me”, and “to stay in Russia” to help those he could help. He was

sentenced to 12 years in a women's prison colony, where he has been refused hormone therapy, forbidden from participating in group activities and repeatedly placed in solitary confinement.

Boris Goncharenko, a history teacher and pacifist, who in October 2022 was accused of throwing four petrol bombs at the military recruitment centre in Krasnodar, southern Russia, causing negligible damage. In January 2024 at the Rostov-on-Don military court, he acknowledged helping with a “hooligan protest” against Russia’s war on Ukraine, but rejected the charge of terrorism, and was sentenced to 12 years’ imprisonment. Goncharenko told the court that he is a “reasonably politicised person and I have oppositional, but not extremist, views”. “I am a pacifist by conviction, and consider that any military conflict is an unacceptable way to achieve any political goals.”

Andrei Prikazchikov, a 60-year-old decorated army veteran, twice wounded during the military conflict on the Tajik-Afghan border in the 1990s, who in the 2010s participated in pro-democracy protests. In 2022 he published anti-war social media posts and wrote to president Putin calling on him to stop the war in Ukraine. In February 2024, before being sentenced to three years’ compulsory labour and a 100,000-ruble fine, he told a court in Orenburg that as a result of the war Russia was “sliding into a grandiose catastrophe” that he “could not have imagined in his wildest dreams”.

Roman Ivanov, a journalist working in the local media in Korolev, near Moscow, who denounced the Bucha massacre and other Russian war crimes in social media posts. In March

2024, before being sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, he told the court that he felt he had to speak out about the "criminal essence" of the war, "that it brings nothing but fear, pain, grief, destruction, loss – to another country and to our country too. Thousands of families have been left without their relatives: fathers and sons have not returned." He knelt and asked Ukrainians' forgiveness for his failure as a Russian citizen to stop the war.

Olga Smirnova, an architect, artist and activist in the Peaceful Resistance group, charged with circulating "fakes" about the army for anti-war social media posts and sentenced to six years' imprisonment. Her appeal against the sentence was heard in March 2024; as she started to make her final statement, the appeal judges unlawfully left court. In the statement, published on line by her supporters, Smirnova said her case proved that "it's impossible, if a state has contempt for its own international obligations, not to destroy the basis of statehood within the country too. You cannot wage a war with no moral or legal basis, and preserve even the semblance of legality in Russia as it adapts to that war."

Aleksei Semenov, an ecological activist from Izhma in the Komi republic, who placed a sack with anti-war messaging on the steps of a local cultural centre, and in social media posts called on men who were called up to refuse to serve, so as "not to kill our Ukrainian brothers, and to save your own life". He was put under house arrest for four months, and, after the case against him was stymied for procedural reasons, tried in January 2025 for "discrediting" the armed forces, and released. In court he denounced the "fratricidal war" against Ukraine.

The pensioner and civil rights activist **Konstantin Seleznyov**, sentenced in February 2025 by the Lefortovo court in Moscow to eight years' imprisonment for a social media post denouncing Russian war crimes. Since 2014 he had written numerous protest letters to state authorities questioning the legality of Russia's foreign policy.

Elena Abramova, activist, translator and single mother of a teenage daughter, from St Petersburg, arrested in 2023 for demonstrating with placards calling for peace, for "Russia without Putin", and for the release of political prisoners. In March 2025, before being sentenced to two years' imprisonment for "discrediting" the army, she told the court: "We have reached a point where it's not considered unacceptable to persecute someone for refusing to accept mass killing. Where the aggression itself is not considered unforgivable."

Roman Shport, a 28-year-old Muscovite from a Ukrainian family, arrested in 2023 for distributing leaflets published by the Russian Volunteer Corps that fights alongside the Ukrainian army. He was sentenced to two years and three months' imprisonment, but, with his release due in April 2025, new charges were brought of contact with the "Free Russia" legion and he was sentenced to a further six years. In court he said he feared that he would not return from prison alive, that he is a "Ukrainian patriot" who opposes Russia's "special military operation", and that he "cannot accept genocide, one of the most terrible crimes".

Other protesters used their final statements to assert the right to free speech: **Marina Novikova**, a human rights activist

and lawyer from Seversk in the Tomsk region, fined one million rubles for anti-war social media posts, said “I am ready to pay for the right to remain a human being with my own personality”. **Dmitry Vasiliets**, a first lieutenant in the Russian army who, after five months at the front, declared himself a Buddhist and pacifist and refused to return to duty, told the court that sentenced him to 26 months’ imprisonment: “In this world, the person who is genuinely happy is the one who can live without hatred, among people who are overflowing with hate.”

Final statements were made, too, by people swept up in the witch-hunt who had not broken even Russia’s repressive, dictatorial laws, such as **Nadezhda Buyanova**, a 67-year-old pediatrician, born of Russian and Belarusian parents in Lviv, Ukraine, who had lived and worked in Moscow for more than 40 years. In November 2024 she was sentenced to five-and-a-half years’ imprisonment for “discrediting” the Russian army, solely on the contradictory “evidence” of a patient’s mother, who claimed Buyanova had made an anti-war remark during a consultation. More than 150 doctors signed a letter demanding Buyanova’s release.

Another case that drew public comment, even in dangerous Russian conditions, was that of **Artem Kamardin**, a poet and artist, and **Egor Shtovba**, a philology student, who participated in a poetry reading on Mayakovsky square, Moscow, in protest at military mobilisation. They were arrested, beaten and tortured, and in December 2023 sentenced to seven and five-and-a-half years’ imprisonment respectively.

The Ukrainian ethnography researcher **Aleksandr Dmitrenko**, who ran a social media group in Voronezh that discussed Ukrainian and Russian politics, was convicted in March 2024 of treason, preparation of acts of sabotage and

illegal possession of explosives, and sentenced to 23 years' imprisonment. He told the court that security services officers had tortured him and fabricated evidence that he was preparing railway sabotage and planning to hand lists of nuclear industry staff to the Ukrainian intelligence services; "our country has sunk into a time of falsehoods, lies and hypocrisy. Decent, honourable and brave people have been made outlaws."

14. The twenty-first-century gulag

The preceding chapters give some insights into the motivations of those who are resisting Russia's war. This chapter comprises a brief description of that resistance; of the repressive machinery of murder, torture and imprisonment that has driven it underground and across Russia's borders; and of the political prisoners trapped by that machine.

War provokes resistance; war and resistance turbocharge state repression. The all-out invasion in 2022 was met by fierce Ukrainian resistance, both civilian and military. This gave rise to the largest mountain of violence, intimidation and imprisonment, on Ukrainian territory – a mountain that had already been accumulating in territories occupied by Russia since 2014. Now tens of thousands of Ukrainians, both military personnel and civilians, are counted as “missing in special circumstances” by the Ukrainian authorities – most likely in detention, or dead. These include more than 5,000 civilian victims of “enforced disappearances” in the areas occupied in 2014 and in 2022. A smaller number of Ukrainians such as Bohdan Ziza (chapter 3), and dozens of Crimean Tatar activists, have not disappeared, but remained visible during their nightmarish odysseys through the Russian prison system, thanks to families' and support networks' efforts.

The best estimates of the number of political prisoners in Russia itself count more than 3,000, although the human

rights defenders who monitor the information stress that it is effectively impossible to be certain – and that there are many cases where the borderline between political repression and other forms of social discipline is unclear.

Protest and repression in the occupied territories of Ukraine

In the Ukrainian territories newly occupied by Russia in February 2022, civilians demonstrated peacefully against the invasion from the first day, waving Ukrainian flags, playing Ukrainian songs and appealing to the soldiers to leave. Protests were reported in Enerhodar, Nova Kakhovka, Melitopol, Khereson and Skadovsk. Initially, Russian troops did not intervene, but after a few days began ordering demonstrators to disperse, and firing smoke grenades and live ammunition.

Within a month, Russian forces began arresting demonstrators, and systematically pursuing and arresting local politicians, journalists and activists. “Enforced disappearances” of civilians became widespread and systematic, alongside arbitrary use of military force, enforced imposition of Russian citizenship, enforced deportations including of children, and other human rights abuses.

The disappearances were a key instrument of “a coordinated state policy aimed at quelling resistance and protest in the occupied territories, by terrorising the Ukrainian civilian population”, the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group stated in a submission to the International Criminal Court. The campaign of “arrests, detentions or abductions” was targeted at civilians “who were perceived as being ‘hostile’ or ‘dangerous’ to the Russian regime”. This included “journalists, volunteers, public servants, activists, teachers, former military

personnel and law enforcement officers, religious leaders and other civilians who were perceived as being capable of forming resistance against Russian occupation authorities and spreading anti-Russian views”.

In August 2023, two Ukrainian human rights groups, Zmina and the Centre for Civil Liberties, listed 923 arrested civilians, of whom 585 were still in detention or missing, including 146 local government representatives, 69 former military personnel, 85 volunteers and activists and 12 journalists. In most cases, neither families nor the Ukrainian authorities knew where these people were. The UN Human Rights council had by late 2024 verified the arbitrary detention of 16 journalists and media workers in the occupied territories: notoriously, one of these, Viktoriia Roshchyna, was arrested in August 2023, and brutally tortured before being killed in September 2024. In December 2024, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky said that Yevhenii Matvieiev, mayor of Dniprorudne, had been tortured to death in captivity, and at least another six mayors of eastern Ukrainian towns were missing.

Russian terror in the areas it occupied in 2022 built on precedents set in the territory it had occupied since 2014. In Crimea, international organisations and human rights groups highlighted the repression of Crimean Tatar political and social organisations. The Donetsk and Luhansk “republics”, with their dictatorial, arbitrary legal systems, became notorious for torture of detainees, exploitation of prison labour and lawless imprisonment, in particular under laws providing for “preventive detention”.

After the first few months of expanded occupation, resistance has been limited to armed partisan activity on one hand, and, on the other, covert actions: painting graffiti, displaying

posters and Ukrainian symbols, and defacing Russian flags and other signifiers of occupation. Groups such as Zhovka Strichka, and Zla Mavka, a women's group run anonymously through social media, continue to report on such everyday subversion in 2025.

Protest and repression in Russia and Belarus

From 24 February 2022, when the all-out invasion of Ukraine began, thousands took to Russia's streets in protest. People were arrested wholesale, as they had been in preceding years at demonstrations against ballot-rigging, censorship and state violence. Within weeks, police intimidation had dispersed the crowds. In September 2022, when conscription was introduced, there was a smaller round of street protests. Since then, no further large-scale anti-war demonstrations have been reported in Russia, up to the time of writing.

The human rights research group OVD-Info registered 18,900 arrests at public anti-war protests in 2022, but that number fell sharply, to 274 in 2023 and 41 in 2024, as the screws were tightened. As opposition to the war was driven off the streets, the security services focused on social media posts: in 2023 and 2024, prosecutions for on-line statements were ten times as common as for statements elsewhere.

Meanwhile, alongside street protests, bolder forms of resistance proliferated: in the first place, the firebombings of military recruitment centres and other government buildings, such as those by Kirill Butylin (chapter 11), Igor Paskar (chapter 2) and Alexei Rozhkov (chapter 9). Mediazona, which has monitored this trend, reported 113 such attacks in the first 15 months after the all-out invasion. None of these attacks are known to have caused injury: they were aimed at inspiring

people to resist, and/or at destroying military service records. (While in 2022 and 2023 the vast majority of attacks were made as political protests, by 2025 these were outnumbered (187 to 93) by attacks incited by phone scammers, who first extorted money from victims, bullied them into committing crimes, and then reported them to police, to get them out of the way by means of arrest.)

Cases of railway sabotage have also mushroomed since the invasion of Ukraine. By October 2023, at least 137 people, most of them under 25 and one-third of them minors, had been charged arising from these, journalists at Mediazona found. “Railway saboteurs” names are typically redacted from court records, and motivations are unclear. Court press releases have claimed “financial gain” as a motive in 54 of the cases. Anti-war motivation was unambiguous, though, in the case of Ilya Podkamenny, 19, of Irkutsk, who was sentenced to 12 years in June 2024, for disrupting a railway line (with no injury or damage) and distributing leaflets.

In Belarus, in the weeks after the invasion, “railway partisans” opposed to Belarusian cooperation with Russia’s war did tangible damage. As Russian troops and equipment were moved through Belarus to the Ukrainian border, saboteurs damaged signalling equipment, on-line management systems and stretches of track. The attacks started several weeks before the invasion, and by early April 2022 the interior ministry had recorded 80 incidents.

The “partisans” organised in online groups including the Railroad Workers Community, Cyber Partisans and Peramoha (Victory), independent Russian media reported. Eleven people were arrested, and declared to be political prisoners by an alliance of Belarussian human rights organisations. In the

best-known case, in Svetlogorsk, Denis Dikun, Dmitry Ravich and Oleg Molchanov were sentenced to 23, 22 and 21 years' imprisonment respectively.

In Russia, as the war dragged on, harsh jail sentences were imposed on the above-mentioned saboteurs and fire-bombers, and on people who tried to join armed formations fighting on Ukraine's side or who contacted the Ukrainian military. A very large number of prosecutions have been brought for refusals to serve in the Russian army – 5,517 in 2023 and 10,308 in 2024 – but refuseniks' motivations are not well known, OVD-Info has reported. Other small but unambiguous acts of defiance have attracted non-judicial punishments: teachers have been fired for expressing anti-war views, and members of the clergy dismissed for refusing to read prayers for Russian victory.

The laws and the courts

Well before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the rights to freedom of speech and assembly in Russia had been endangered by the laws on “foreign agents” (targeting organisations and individuals who are supported, or allegedly supported, with funds from abroad), on “undesirable organisations” and on “extremism”. After Vladimir Putin won his third term in office, in 2018, these and other laws were used to terrorise opposition, in the first place the anti-corruption movement headed by Alexei Navalny, who was killed in prison in 2024. Repression of protest against Russia's war in Ukraine goes back to 2014: an important case is that of “Levoe soprotivlenie” (“Left resistance”), based in Kuban in southern Russia: one of its activists, Daria Poliudova, was jailed in 2015-17 for her political activity, including opposition to the war, rearrested in 2020,

and charged with four others in 2021 with participation in an “extremist organisation”.

Immediately after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a new raft of laws was passed to facilitate the security services’ clamp-down on opposition. Most notorious are the criminal offence of “disseminating knowingly false information about the Russian military” and the administrative offence of “public activities aimed at discrediting the use of Russia’s military”. These prohibitions, known popularly as the “laws against fakes”, are used widely against people who circulate information about Russian army atrocities on social media, or who call the war in Ukraine a war, and not a “special military operation”. Other existing laws were widened, including those on “cooperation with a foreign power”, spying, “armed insurrection”, “sabotage”, “propagation of banned symbols” and “calls for sanctions against the Russian Federation”.

New laws have continued to be passed: in July 2022, a law on prohibited cooperation with a foreign state or organisation; in December 2022, laws on facilitating, receiving training for or organising sabotage; in February 2024 provisions allowing for the confiscation of property of those convicted of anti-war offences, and other measures, expanding the criteria for adding citizens and organisations to lists of terrorists and extremists; and in December 2024, a wider legal concept of “enemy”. At least 557 people and organisations have been added to the list of “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations”, OVD-Info reported.

Russia’s slide into dictatorship has also produced a sustained assault on legal principles. Torture of suspects, such as Igor Paskar (chapter 2), Alexei Rozhkov (chapter 9) and Ruslan Siddiqi (chapter 10), was common before 2022, but has

intensified. The former president Dmitry Medvedev threatened firebombers with “shooting, without trial or investigation”. Pressure on lawyers who defend political clients has been severe: Dmitry Talantov is serving a seven-year jail sentence, while others have sought asylum outside Russia. Another trend is to bring fresh prosecutions, e.g. for “discrediting the armed forces”, against prisoners already serving long sentences, such as Alexei Gorinov (chapter 1) and Andrei Trofimov (chapter 5).

In total there were 5,254 political prosecutions in Russia in the three years since the all-out invasion, according to analysis of justice ministry records by the human rights media project Avtozak.live. The charges used most often were “calling publicly for terrorist action” (651 cases), “act of terrorism” (641 cases), “treason” (528 cases), “disseminating knowingly false information about the Russian military” (386 cases), “unlawful acquisition of explosives” (250 cases), “discrediting the Russian armed forces” (232 cases) and “organisation of, or participation in, a terrorist organisation” (231 cases).

The prisoners

In counting the political prisoners incarcerated in Russia, the most difficult task is estimating the numbers from occupied parts of Ukraine. Neither human rights organisations and international agencies, nor the Ukrainian authorities, have been able to determine the number of Ukrainian civilians in Russian captivity, let alone how many of them may accurately be described as political prisoners. The Russian authorities consistently refuse to share information about these detainees.

In September 2024, Ukraine’s deputy minister of internal affairs reported that, of the 48,324 people on Ukraine’s unified register of persons “missing under special circumstances”, 4,700

were confirmed to be in captivity, but the number could be “much higher”. The Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group has identified more than 5,000 civilian victims of “enforced disappearances” (see above), while the Office of the Ombudsman of Ukraine has identified 1,700 such cases.

Earlier in 2024, when the registry of persons “missing under special circumstances” contained about 35,000 names, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) determined that about 16,000 of those were adult civilians. Its investigators pointed out the heterogenous nature of the category “civilians arbitrarily deprived of liberty”, which included not only e.g. journalists, community leaders and activists (of which human rights organisations had identified 585 behind bars in 2023, see above), but also e.g. citizens unwilling to take up work for the Russian authorities. (Note that these are civilian prisoners, not prisoners of war, the numbers of which have been estimated in 2025 at 8-10,000.)

Some groups of political prisoners have been more clearly identified. In Crimea, human rights organisations support and monitor the treatment of these prisoners, many of whom were detained before 2022. In June 2025, Crimea Platform reported that 222 people in the peninsula, including 133 from the Crimean Tatar community, were imprisoned on “ethnic, religious, and political grounds”; the Crimean Human Rights Group counts 265 prisoners as political.

There are thousands of civilian prisoners who have been transferred from occupied Donetsk and Luhansk to the Russian prison system since 2014. Some people arrested by the security services of the Donetsk and Luhansk “republics” have subsequently been tried in Russian courts. A notorious political case is that of Natalia Vlasova, Serhiy Hruzynov and Viktor

Shydlovsky, arrested by the Donetsk authorities in 2018-19, transferred to Russia, and sentenced in December 2024 for participation in a terrorist organisation and spying to 18, 20 and 22 years respectively; Vlasova in particular was savagely tortured in detention. Moreover, there are a large but unknown number of civilians who were subjected to “preventive detention” in the “republics”, and never brought to court.

In Russia itself, despite the assault on legality by the security services, human rights organisations are aware of, and attempting to monitor, most political cases. The Memorial: Support Political Prisoners project, established outside Russia after the repression of Memorial, Russia’s oldest non-governmental organisation, has a list of more than 3,000 people deprived of their freedom for political reasons. This includes those who meet Memorial’s strict criteria, based on international law, for political prisoners; those whose cases are under review but have clear political elements; and those who fall outside the criteria, but whose persecution is evidently political. OVD-Info’s database of politically-motivated criminal cases includes 2,643 people who have been deprived of liberty.

In August 2024, campaign efforts in support of political prisoners led to a prisoner swap between Russia and Belarus on one side, and the USA, Germany, Poland, Slovenia and Norway on the other. The 15 prisoners released by Russia included Ilya Yashin and Vladimir Kara-Murza (see Introduction); Sasha Skochilenko (chapter 6); the journalist Alsu Kurmasheva; and Oleg Orlov, co-chair of the Memorial Human Rights Centre.

Hundreds of less well-known Russians have received heavy jail sentences for the most modest forms of anti-war protest activity. (Some of these, who made anti-war speeches in court, are covered in chapter 13.) The jailing of single father

Alexei Moskalyov, persecuted by security officers after his 13-year-old daughter drew an image depicting Russian missiles raining down on Ukrainian civilians, has become notorious. And punishment psychiatry has returned on a scale not seen since Soviet times: the victims include Viktoriia Petrova, sent to a psychiatric institution in December 2023 for online anti-war statements, and Mikhail Davydov, arrested in Oryol in August 2022 for allegedly throwing a molotov cocktail at a regional administration building.

The security services have taken to launching sprawling, drawn-out and often blatantly fabricated cases against groups of people. Examples include the Tyumen case, in which six anarchists were arrested and charged with belonging to a terrorist organisation, and then with preparing acts of terrorism, and the case against six members of the Vesna, a pacifist group. In one investigation across 81 Russian regions in the spring of 2025, 57 administrators of Telegram channels and chats were detained.

The security services also build on their pre-invasion cases, for example by arresting mathematician Azat Miftakhov as he left jail in September 2023 after serving time on charges trumped up in 2019, or by reviving in 2023 a case from 2020 against the publishing house Eksmo for promoting “gay propaganda”. Another significant group of cases result from the work of agents provocateurs, such as those who trapped Valeria Zotova, a Yaroslavl teenager who spoke out against the war, leading to a frame-up trial and six-year sentence. Human rights organisations say that the principal aim of such activity is to terrorise the population as a whole into silence.

The twenty-first-century gulag

Repression in Russia is now in some ways harsher than at any time since the “thaw” of the mid 1950s to mid 1960s that did away with some of Stalinism’s most brutal features. The bare figures are worth considering.

Memorial’s list of political prisoners, now swelled to more than 3,000, had 420 names on it in 2021 and fewer than 50 in 2015. Memorial’s researchers estimate that in the last years of the Soviet repressive machine – in the early 1980s before Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms – there were about 700 political prisoners. The numbers had fallen gradually since the early 1970s, when historians’ estimates of political prisoner numbers range from 5,000 to 10,000 (in the 15-republic Soviet Union, the population of which was nearly twice that of Russia alone).

The exemplary sentences handed out to high-profile defendants such as Ilya Yashin, Alexei Gorinov (chapter 1) and Sasha Skochilenko (chapter 6) far exceeded those given to dissidents in the late Soviet period, the journalist Azamat Ismailov concluded from comparative research in 2023.

Prosecutions of cases the authorities deem to be “extremist” were higher in six recent years under Putin (5,613 in 2018-23) than those for “anti-Soviet” offences under Nikita Khrushchev (4,883 in 1956-61) or Leonid Brezhnev (1,576 in 1968-79), analysis by journalists at Proekt showed. These are of course not exactly like-for-like comparisons, but they show a trend. In 2018-23, more than 10,000 people in Russia faced criminal prosecutions with a political character, and more than 105,000 administrative prosecutions (similar to civil cases in English and similar legal systems). In 2024-25, such prosecutions have kept accumulating.

The Proekt journalists showed the rapid expansion in Putin's Russia of prosecutions for things people say, especially online. For example, they analysed the fall-out from the bombing of an FSB office in Arkhangelsk by the teenager Mikhail Zhlobitsky in 2018. Zhlobitsky, himself one of the four fatalities when his bomb went off, clearly acted alone. But officers subsequently opened 56 criminal cases, 23 administrative cases and 30 other investigations for "justifying terrorism" and similar offences, many of them arising from social media comments on the bombing. One such case was brought against Mikhail Kriger (chapter 4).

The all-out invasion of Ukraine, and opposition to it in civil society, has revitalised this repressive machinery. In 2022 Russia's internal affairs ministry said it had brought 1,566 cases under "extremism" legislation, 50 per cent more than in 2021. It grouped 378 of these in an "anti-war case", which far exceeded previous record-breaking mass prosecutions, of 181 protesters supporting the opposition presidential candidate Alexei Navalny in 2021, and 36 participants in the "Bolotnoe" case arising from anti-ballot-rigging demonstrations in Moscow in 2012.

The war on Ukraine has given shape to a twenty-first-century gulag. Modern versions of Stalinist methods – the creation of domestic enemies, fabrication of crimes from expressions of dissenting opinion, violence up to and including torture against detainees, forced confessions and frame-ups – are increasingly central. It is no coincidence that statues of Stalin are again being unveiled in Russia. This revival encompasses not only the security services and police, but also the system of prisons and penal colonies. As a team of academic researchers of prison conditions, led by Elena Omelchenko, recently concluded:

The violence of Russian prisons functions to immobilise domestic opposition to the state's revanchist aims, by spreading fear of the consequences of arrest and imprisonment, and by incapacitating opposition politicians and the leaders of national or ethno-religious groups perceived as constituting a threat to national security.

What to do

The regime in prisons and penal colonies has always been harsh. But reports of officials' lawlessness and arbitrary cruelty have increased, with the influx of Ukrainian prisoners of war, prisoners from occupied areas of Ukraine and political prisoners detained in Russia. Under these conditions, aid for prisoners by human rights organisations and civil society is more important than ever. Despite being forced increasingly to operate outside Russia, those organisations, working with communities and prisoners' families, are building networks of support.

The authors of OVD-Info's comprehensive study of repression in the first three years since the invasion of Ukraine offer a discussion of resistance to repression, and identify three trends:

- Some sentences were mitigated, and in some cases compensation was awarded for violations of people's rights by the security services. Without legal challenges, this would not have happened;
- Even if it is not possible to free persecuted people from detention, public attention and solidarity can alleviate their suffering in captivity. It can help them access medical care, communicate with loved ones and improve their conditions; and

- Despite the hardships, there still remains space for defending human rights and solidarity in Russia.

The OVD-Info authors also enumerate positive developments, including prisoner exchanges; the (rare) release of defendants or reductions of their sentences, either in courts of first instance or on appeal; improvements in conditions of detention due to outside pressure; and help in leaving Russia, provided to people threatened with prison.

Many of these small successes in protecting victims of persecution were only made possible by “acts of public solidarity”. Between 2022 and 2025, OVD-Info has witnessed people collecting food and other essentials for detainees, helping to pay fines, organising fundraisers to support prisoners and helping in other ways.

In a talk given in September 2024, Sergei Davidis of Memorial: Support Political Prisoners listed, as ways to support political prisoners: the collection, systematisation and circulation of information; writing letters (which is not practical for non-Russian speakers); material (financial) support for prisoners and their families; the formation of support groups for individual prisoners and trial defendants; and advocacy on prisoners’ behalf, which is of limited use within Russia in current circumstances, but important on an international level.

Solidarity Zone, formed in 2022 to support those who took action against the war and were not already supported by other organisations, focuses on establishing and maintaining contact with arrestees and their loved ones; finding trustworthy legal representation and raising money for it; arranging parcels or packages for prisoners; and, where prisoners wish it, sharing information about their cases and addresses for letters.

With respect to the occupied territories of Ukraine, human rights organisations including Zmina, the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, Protection for Prisoners of Ukraine, the Centre for Civil Liberties, and others, in addition to documenting war crimes and human rights violations, monitor the fate of victims of enforced disappearance and work with others to support Ukrainian prisoners in Russia.

Organisations that support political prisoners in Russia are listed in chapter 15.

15. Contact information

English-language resources of organisations that support political prisoners in Russian prisons, monitor and disseminate information about them, and campaign for their release.

Russia

Memorial: Support Political Prisoners – memopzk.org

OVD-Info – ovd.info

Mediazona – en.zona.media

Solidarity Zone – solidarityzone.net

Ukraine

Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group – khpg.org

Crimea Human Rights Group – dela.crimeahrg.org

Zmina – zmina.ua

International

European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine – ukraine-solidarity.eu

16. Notes

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Chapter 1. Alexei Gorinov

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Wars and dictatorships compete for your attention, crowding each other out. Information spaces work in such a way that Russian anti-war prisoners' 'final words' in court are becoming the first words that people elsewhere read about the nature of Putin regime, and about resistance to it in Russia. The beauty, tragedy and political power of this book is in its structural simplicity: words spoken in court by prisoners who have no illusions about the length of their sentences; short biographical notes; and information about which prison that person is in now.

Darya Serenko, Russian writer and coordinator of Feminist Antiwar Resistance

This book gives voice to the thousands of political prisoners held by Putin. They represent the best of Russia and deserve our solidarity in their fight against the dictatorship.

Søren Søndergaard, Member of Parliament in Denmark (Red-Green Alliance) and former Member of the European Parliament

This collection conveys a sense of power. On one hand is the power of Russian authoritarian imperialism, which put these people in prison and which has been killing people in Ukraine and elsewhere. On the other is the power of those who have the courage to stand against the regime and its imperialist aggression, in Russia and in Ukraine, despite everything. Which one prevails depends on us.

Oksana Dutchak, researcher, co-editor of *Commons/Spilne* online journal, Kyiv

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