

Interview with Anarchist Black Cross Moscow

Anonymous

September 12th, 2022

- During the last months you have been very busy with supporting anti-war activists. How many anti-war prisoners are you supporting at the moment?

We are looking for political prisoners in anti-war cases who need help together with a group called Zone of Solidarity, which formed in April. At that time we realized that the scale of repression was very significant and that the human rights organizations were not helping all people. It takes a lot of effort to find the data that makes it possible to contact the relatives and the prisoners themselves. Sometimes they refuse being contacted at all.

We are now supporting 9 people to varying degrees, including correspondence, sending food parcels, paying for a lawyer, advising relatives how to pass parcels, how to raise funds to pay for a lawyer, etc.

Letters to prisoners are very important. The ABC-Moscow website has the addresses of about 35 Russians who spoke out against the war in Ukraine and who are currently in prison. Unfortunately, in most cases, the administration of the SIZO only allows letters in Russian.

These people have different political positions, as some have a lot of support because they were already well-known activists. As for some others, no one had ever heard anything about them before. We publish the correspondence addresses of all the people we know, as long as they don't hold nationalist views. There are more people in jail for anti-war protests, but we don't know everyone's name and location, because when people are arrested, the police tend not to publish their names, in order to isolate them from the outside world.

We try to find people who have just been arrested and find out if they have a lawyer and support from relatives or friends. If not, we hire a lawyer and send parcels with food and everything they need. Food in pre-trial detention facilities in Russia is poor and they don't give out hygienic items, clothes, dishes or stationery. Prisoners share with each other, but that is why as soon as a person gets a chance, he starts asking for things not just for himself.

Support for prisoners is needed at all times. Approximately half of all prisoners in Russia do not get help from family or friends when they find themselves in a pre-trial detention center. Yet, a prisoner can be transferred to another pre-trial detention facility and leave some of his belongings in the cell for others. Or, for example, a person was arrested in the spring, and then summer came and it got hot and he needed summer clothes.

- Most of them are accused of "Spreading fake information about the use of Russian armed forces". What exactly does it mean? When was the law introduced, and what is the possible maximum sentence? How many people have been accused or arrested due to that law in Russia all together?

This is not entirely true; there are a lot of cases under other articles as well. For example, there are 31 criminal cases under the criminal article "vandalism" (spraying inscriptions, desecration of buildings, defacement of public property), and 44 people are prosecuted. For such actions one can get up to three years in prison. There are charges under the article "terrorism" for arson of military registration and enlistment offices and other radical actions. On the whole, more than 200 criminal cases were initiated for anti-war protests in Russia (we think at least 250, since not all actions are considered as political actions by human rights NGO's - who have their own criteria). Among them are 73 criminal cases for "fakes". "Fakes" in Russia are the dissemination of any information about the actions of the Russian Armed Forces that differs from the official version.

A lot of accusations are made against journalists under these articles; now in Russia it is impossible to write about the war if your version differs even slightly from that of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation and the Kremlin. Many medias have closed down, others are on the verge of disappearing.

Penalties under the criminal article on fakes can be very wide. If it is an "ordinary fake," it can be a fine or up to three years in prison. But if there are aggravating circumstances, the prison term can be up to fifteen years. Under the article on "discrediting the army", the maximum term is five years in prison.

In early August a sentence was handed down to English teacher Irina Gen from Penza, who in March spoke very emotionally to children about the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine and the sanctions. The children were upset that they could not take part in international competitions, and Irina explained that the sanctions and bans were an inevitable consequence of the war. One of the children recorded her speech on her phone and told her parents, who took the matter further. Irina was forced to quit her job, the police instituted criminal proceedings, and as a result she was sentenced to 5 years probation and 3 years of trial period. That is, for the next 8 years she will live under the control of the police and will have to behave very carefully, so that the probation is not replaced by a real one.

In addition to criminal articles, there is an article "for discrediting the army" in the Code Of Administrative Offences Of The Russian Federation, which involves punishment as a fine of up to 100 thousand rubles (about 1.5 thousand euros) for ordinary citizens and more for those who hold some official position.

In last six months, about 3 500 protocols have been drawn up under this article. Not all of them have been considered in court yet, but if we look at those who have already been considered, we will see that in the overwhelming majority of cases the court does not conduct a judicial investigation, but passes judgment (fine) solely on the basis of the police officer's opinion. Very often posts, reposts and comments in social media that talk about any events in Ukraine are imputed. In fact, there are a huge number of such posts, and fines are just given randomly if some person or post attracts the attention of the police.

- Many people were arrested due to posts on social media, others for statements in public. A special case is that of Dmitriy Kurmoyadov. Can you say a few words about him?

Very little is known about this case. In June 2022, former priest of the Russian Orthodox Church Ioan (Dmitry) Kurmoyarov was sent to the pre-trial detention center on charges of false public statements about the actions of the Russian military (up to 10 years in prison). In December 2021, Kurmoyarov asked the Investigative Committee to bring Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to justice for insulting the feelings of believers - this is how he interpreted the design of the Russian Defense Ministry temple. After that, he was stripped of his priestly rank. On the 24th of February the priest started to actively express his opinion against the war in Ukraine and distributed a video about Vladimir Putin and the Russian army. It is not yet known which of these videos was the reason for the criminal case.

A further example, there is another criminal case - Sergei Komandirov. In 2019, Karim Yamadaev, an oppositionist from Tatarstan, posted a video "Judge Gramm" on YouTube. It staged a trial of people with black sacks on their faces and nameplates with the names of prominent figures in Russia and state-owned companies: all of them were "given a death sentence." Yamadaev was accused of publicly calling for terrorist activities on the Internet and for insulting a representative of the authorities. He spent more than a year in pre-trial detention, but the court sentenced him to a fine.

Sergei Komandirov was a volunteer in the headquarters of Alexei Navalny, he was arrested and fined for handing out leaflets. In May 2021, Sergey made a repost of the video "Judge Gramm" in the social network "VKontakte" and offered to collect money to pay the fine of its author Karim Yamadaev. Six months later he was arrested and recently a court found him guilty of justifying terrorism for reposting this video and sentenced him to 6.5 years in prison. Therefore, in Russia it is currently impossible to predict what the consequences of this or that action will be. The court carries out orders to put this or that person in jail.

- A case quite well-known is that of feminist artist Aleksandra Skochilenko. What action is she accused of, and what is her actual situation about?

Skochilenko faces up to ten years in prison for replacing the price tags in the supermarket with leaflets. These leaflets contained information about the crimes of the Russian army in Mariupol (city in Ukraine). A criminal case was opened against Aleksandra under the article on fakes. It is harder and more dangerous for her to be in jail than most others, since she suffers from celiac disease, and it is impossible to follow a specific diet in prison. However, she has a very good support group and a lot of media attention, and we hope that she will be transferred to house arrest soon and will not get a real sentence.

- Some activists were arrested after anti-war assemblies in the spring, or after other actions against the Russian attack on Ukraine. Some of them are accused of "preparation of hooliganism" or even of "terrorism". Has there already been trials, or are they still in investigative custody?

In most antiwar cases, the investigation and the courts are still ongoing, in Russia it usually takes at least 3 months to investigate, 1 month for the prosecutor to check the case, and then it goes to court. And the judge or lawyers can go on vacation in the summer, and then the hearings are stretched out for several months. Crimes under such articles of the criminal code as terrorism are investigated for 1.5 years and trials take half a year. Among other things, the accused is sent to a psychiatric examination and he is in a psychiatric hospital for a month, which in some ways is worse than pre-trial detention. The examinees are not allowed to wash themselves, this procedure is done by the orderlies, it is impossible to send a letter, etc.

So far there are about 15 sentences in anti-war cases. In some cases we don't even know the outcome of the trial. Five sentences were handed down under the article "violence against a representative of authority," this is for resisting police during protests or while getting detained, including those who glued leaflets or put graffiti on walls. Four people received 1 to 2 years in prison and one person received a probation. For example, the court sentenced 22-year-old Anastasia Levasheva, who threw a Molotov cocktail toward the police, to two years in prison.

Six sentences were handed down for "fakes": one fine of 1 million rubles (14.3 thousand euros), two probations, two sentences of correctional labor, and one 7-year prison sentence. The last one (7 years) was given to Alexei Gorinov, a municipal deputy from Moscow, for "fakes about the armed forces using his official position". Russian authorities are very nervous about the "fifth column" (traitors) in their ranks. A deputy at the municipal level has no real power in Russia, but his opinion is not just the opinion of a simple worker. He is seen as a representative of the authorities. According to the investigation, the crime was committed by prior conspiracy, with the use of his official position and for reasons of hatred and enmity. What was the crime? During the meeting of the deputies, Gorinov called Russia's invasion of Ukraine a war, not a "special military operation," and reported that children were dying in Ukraine.

- How are the prison conditions for anti-war activists?

Conditions for anti-war activists in prisons are the same as for other prisoners, that is, not very good. The cells do not always have sleeping places for all prisoners, they are not taken out for regular walks, the food is poor, and it is very dangerous to get sick, because the quality of medical care is very low. When there was an upsurge of covid disease, if one person in a cell got sick, they stopped taking the whole cell out - they just passed food through the window and did not give any medication, there were no vaccinations for prisoners either.

- How do you support them? And how is it possible to support your work?

We provide support to prisoners and defendants on anti-war actions, depending on what their needs are and what their support situation is from family and friends. We can fully or partially pay for a lawyer, packages with food and clothing, send books, write letters and attend court hearings so that the person understands that they are not alone.

For example, in June we started helping Irina Bystrova, a 57-year-old art teacher from Petrozavodsk. At the very beginning of the war, she published calls on the social network Vkontakte for Russian soldiers to turn their weapons against the Kremlin and called the actions of the Russian army "criminal". In March, she was charged with "justifying terrorism" and spreading "fakes" about the Russian army. Irina was not arrested, but she got a "ban on certain activities" (she cannot use the Internet and communicate with anyone except relatives and a lawyer) and she lost the opportunity to teach. We collected money to help Irina hire a nurse for her 84-year-old mother while she will be in a psychiatric hospital for an evaluation.

To help, you can write letters to prisoners (prisons only allow letters in Russian and please do not write anything about the war in Ukraine or calls for radical action). You can also send a letter to abc-msk@riseup.net, and we will print it out and send it to you.

We need financial help for food parcels and lawyers. Unfortunately, lawyers in Russia do not work pro bono and charge quite a lot for their work.

Paypal abc-msk@riseup.net

And cryptocurrency:

Ethereum [0xe8438E88226FA15Df11FA55E68e5092194818615](https://etherscan.io/address/0xe8438E88226FA15Df11FA55E68e5092194818615)

Monero [492K8eQY7zHA1pWnHJnrmN9FnesxNpgsxN5kXhyuEwn7T8TRnxnLHVG3ErsituEEYQgxWNH2j1kYrQ](https://moneroexplorer.com/address/492K8eQY7zHA1pWnHJnrmN9FnesxNpgsxN5kXhyuEwn7T8TRnxnLHVG3ErsituEEYQgxWNH2j1kYrQ)

Dash XjtYQsqXjnuQxp1HAj3iJtqubukvNsSZex
Bitcoin bc1qhu02jedtulqw5tw8nnktf6d0ujn8dyx3gk556e
Zcash t1RFKaTs4yvU7PeTKeEBJwh3YrcE8mN33up

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