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“We are few and we can’t cope with the repression stream”

Interview with Solidarity Zone

Autonomous Action

29 March 2023

“Solidarity Zone” is a project that helps people repressed for anti-war resistance. Altleft talked to activists of the project about solidarity in the Russian society, forms of protest and the prospects of the end of the war. Questions were answered by participants that work in Russia.

1. How did the idea for the project emerge? Did you have prior experience in helping political prisoners or did you start from scratch?

Chobot: A comrade called me and told me about the concept of the project. I immediately agreed, since it’s a very important initiative. It was the midst of protests and arsons, so I thought how can I help the society in war situation. Before that, I was actively helping political prisoners – was participating in supporting campaigns, organizing some things by myself. But I was completely unaware of the process of search for an arrested person that I don’t know personally and the infrastructure of his support. You get very few information from the news, search for a lawyer, often in a distant

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and unknown city – it’s hard. Comrades were helping me a lot in adapting and learning this difficult, but important task.

Cinnamon: I was also helping political prisoners. I knew a bit about how it was happening from within, after finding myself on the victim side. That’s when I got my initial experience. I was also learning from the best, so to speak. I was observing comrades that had more experience than me – how they act, set a framework for support and which actions they undertake in extreme situations – for instance, when problems arise in the interaction with lawyers, relatives or with yet another “trick” from the government. I started participating in support campaigns and events as well. The search also became for me a new activity. Advice from comrades on how to do it more efficiently were helping a lot. I’m still learning something every day.

2. Whom and how do you help?

Chobot: we help those arrested for anti-war action. Those who human rights organizations refuse to deal with due to their militant choices of action (arsons, sabotage). Currently, I curate the support of Oleg Vazhdaev – he set fire to a military office in Krasnodar, and try to figure out the situation with Ilya Baburin – he was arrested in Novosibirsk on terrorist charges (set fire to military office), and according to information that security services impress upon him, he faces life imprisonment.

Cinnamon: Currently we are monitoring cases of 14 detainees. Each is curating her own cases independently. Our main support lies in providing lawyers, establishing contact with the relatives of detainees, organizing of parcels, writing to detainees and calling others to write them letters, providing media support. Of course, we provide support depending on the request of the detainee himself. But we always provide the first visit from a lawyer.

3. Tell us about the most difficult processes. About how you find psychological and material resources for your work?

Chobot: the most difficult process is dealing with obstacles life itself poses. FSB robs letters from lawyers, state-appointed lawyers

are threatening and impeding our work, accusing us of “shadiness” and the detainee of “working for a foreign state”. Once, a lawyer deceived us and didn’t visit the detainee at all. He was stalling time and then disappeared. Intimidated detainees themselves refuse help or difficultly make contact. All this exhausts you. The thing that helps is that you can reach out to your colleagues and they will try – also at the exhaustion of their resources – to come up with a way out of this situation.

Cinnamon: Here I guess I can add that, in times, it becomes difficult to establish a contact with relatives of detainees because they think that no one will “help just like that”, so they see danger, they are afraid. Regarding resources, I get them from good news on detainees’ cases. Yes, they are not as many as the bad and the frustrating ones, but they exist. In our group, some are working, some are studying or balance all at once. We consider that its normal to give yourself a rest, take leaves or partially delegate tasks on other participants, if it’s possible.

4. Is there something the project critically lacks?

Chobot: First and foremost, that’s human resources. We are few, and we can’t cope with the flow of repression, Russia currently experiences. It’s simply massive. A lot of people revolts against the war and part of them find themselves behind bars. At the moment, we can’t take all the cases that we would have wanted. We take as many cases we can handle. Also, we volunteer in the project, and get nothing of it. By choosing to spend time and energy on unpaid work, we lose basic, vital things.

5. How can one support the project? Are there volunteering vacancies?

Chobot: You can subscribe to our Patreon – the collected funds are shared equally between the participants. Unfortunately, you can’t subscribe on Patreon with a Russian card. Therefore, this is relevant only for people from abroad. You can find information on how to support prisoners on our social media.

Cinnamon: We don't have any specific vacancies. We are calling people who are ready to help, but for us it's important to know that we can trust the person. Therefore, we always discuss that type of stuff and can't invite anyone who wishes to work with us. I think this is valid, as not all participants are out of Russia. There are people who help us with some tasks, for instance, with the writing and editing of texts for posts. This is an important support. Sometimes there is no time or energy to write a news piece, even if that requires 7–10 minutes.

6. In your opinion, are there any forms of protest, that can have tangible results?

Chobot: In my opinion, the only thing that can stop this war is the impoverishment of the Russian army – in terms of financial and human resources. But what can we say here? A part of European states is buying Putin's gas, without arresting Russian oligarchs' bank accounts. Sanctions affected predominantly the ordinary people. A part of people from Russia are given into the hands of military commissars and go to die for imperial ambitions of Putin and his gang. People are walking around in t-shirts with the letter Z on them and write denunciations on those against the war. I think every action is meaningful. Both the peaceful and the militant. A common fight, from all sorts of different fronts will give results. We need a comprehensive approach.

Cinnamon: I believe that, to an extent, protests within the army could work. In that regard, they have toughened the legislation even for "Wagner" – that's concentration of cruelty. Everything is aimed at suppressing any resistance at its conception. But decentralization always makes sense. Historically, states strove to create standing armies and forcefully incorporate territories. Sabotage is a possible form of protest, at least in the case of Vietnam war. And let's not forget about what is happening in society. I also think about the ethnic protests on territories that Russia persistently colonized and that don't belong to her. In general, I'm talking about the same decentralization, just on different levels.

events and also support each other and be empathetic. From my experience, taking care of each other in a group is highly effective.

7. Is the Russian society capable to foster solidarity? How far do you succeed in getting beyond the activists' circles and attract new people in our work? For instance, do relatives and friends of conscientious objectors participate in the support of only their own close ones?

Chobot: Relatives and friends are often in a state of shock, they are being traumatized by the repression and they don't have the energy to participate in anything. Because repression in Russia is not just intimidation. It's terrible tortures, abductions and murder. My close ones have been subjected to tortures. When that happened, I could think nothing else than solving that situation. And I think that's normal. If we speak globally, then people in Russia who are even slightly interested in politics, demonstrate high levels of solidarity to each other. On a night event of solidarity to political prisoners, 300–400 cards can be signed and thousands of rubles can be gathered, even though we live in poverty. But if we're talking about the population over 45 y. o. that watches TV, they are so brainwashed by propaganda, that it's unlikely that they will believe information from other sources. So, they can hardly be considered in support campaigns.

8. The war and Putin – are they going to last for long? Do you believe in the end of Putinism in case of Russia's defeat in the war?

Chobot: Considering the factors that I mentioned, it's going to last for long. Of course, I would like to believe that a military defeat could possibly entail a revolutionary condition. But, if we think logically, it would rather be a coup. Kadyrov, Prigozhin or someone else will take the power. And I don't know, what is worse.

Cinnamon: Considering that, despite the war Putin unleashed, Russia still has support. It's just underground and obscure. And money is the main resource for the continuation of this war. We can't tell exactly when this money will end. But Putin is holding on to his seat. Therefore, he will take it till the end.

9. From your first-hand experience with the repressive system, is the regime ready for mass repressions or that strategy is too costly?

Chobot: Mass repressions are already undergoing. Yes, they are not as they were during 1937–38, nor is the level of police organization that high. Currently the defendants of anti-war cases are “only” 440 people. But the campaigns of intimidation are on all levels – from administrative arrests, huge fines to criminal charges that can reach up to 10 years for changing price tags in supermarket. There’s a positive tendency – part of the people who participated in arsons of military offices didn’t receive huge sentences. Unfortunately, it seems that that “shortcoming” of the system was fixed, so now people face on average from 10 to 20 years for arsons. We’ll see what future brings. But we will not surrender under any circumstances. We are preparing for the worst, but hope for the best! In our group, there’s an opinion that prosecutors can’t handle 2 thousand times more cases than now. Namely, the scale of repression can’t reach 1937 levels. I wish that was true!

Cinnamon: I believe that the regime is, not only ready for mass repressions, but it already escalates them. In 2012, during “Bolotnaya Square case” the regime couldn’t quite understand what to do. In my opinion, “Bolotnaya case” became the key event both for the society and state’s preparation for the repressions that would follow. If there is a wave of discontent, then they have to know how to restrain it. Targeted repressions begun. In 2017 we had the notorious “Network case”: horrific tortures, long sentences, numerous repressions followed. Articles on “terrorism” or its “justification” became the main political. And it makes no difference to the government if they’re dealing with adults or teenagers. Kids of the so-called “Kansk affair” came under repression. Currently, the 250 terrorist articles are appearing in “anti-war affairs”. If they initially charge under p. 2 Art. 167 of Russia’s Criminal Code (deliberate destruction and damage to property), later they change the offense to p.1 Art. 205 (terrorist act) or to p.1 Art. 30, clause “a” p.1 Art. 205 (attempt to terrorist act). Some defendants, whose cases we curate, are charged with both articles. The pressure that is being exerted is

very strong, but still, the will, the inner freedom and man’s ideals are stronger than repressions.

10. Some of the participants are in Russia. Can you tell us about their experiences?

Cinnamon: Work “in the shadow” is not represented in general. One can’t work in Russia openly; otherwise repressions will affect activists as well. To be honest, it gets scary. But the most important is not to give in to fear and not to get paranoid. When you work from Russia the concerns are more on (cyber)security and general cautiousness. You always have to have a clear plan in your mind, be ready for evacuation and constantly be in contact with those who will help you in that moment. Usually, that type of plan already exists. The important is to stick to it and not to panic. I want to continue to work from Russia as long, or as far possible. I have a choice and I choose to stay. Therefore, for me (and others) it’s important to maintain anonymity. That type of psychological pressure consumes a lot of resources. Sometimes it feels like you’re constantly on the edge. In those moments you have to exhale and remember that you’re not alone. I can turn to my comrades for help and support and it helps a lot.

Chobot: There is a certain tiredness and helplessness. It feels like, by being an activist in Russia there is always a chance of criminal charges. For myself, I choose to be imprisoned not for a comment or a re-post, but for something worth sitting in prison for. Of course, we work anonymously, follow activist safety rules, but morally I still try to prepare myself for the worst, so that it doesn’t happen “out of the blue”. I’m glad that entire initiatives on emergency evacuation of people from Russia are being organized. There is a hope. There is also the problem of invisibility of our work – when you work anonymously, you see little support and you constantly come across with your anxious thoughts: have I done enough, could I have done more? The camaraderie in our group helps a lot; where you can share your anxieties, happy or sad life