

«There is still hope for Russia» – Ilya Yashin writes from prison

Wednesday 1 November 2023, by [YASHIN Ilya](#) (Date first published: 6 October 2023).

OVD-Info and Memorial appealed to the UN Human Rights Committee with a complaint against Article 20.3.3, the «wartime fakes» article designed to persecute anti-war dissidents. The appeal unites the interests of 10 political prisoners. Among them is politician Ilya Yashin, sentenced to over eight years for speaking out against the war. We decided to write to Ilya and ask him whether it makes sense to defend one's rights in Russia now. Here is Ilya's response.

Please tell us how your days go now – how do you cope with the prison routine, do you feel any longing, how does your sense of self differ from that outside of prison?

On the whole, days in prison are very similar to each other. Your life is subject to a monotonous regime, you constantly see the same bars, the same walls, the same people. And in this routine, it is easy to lose yourself, because it is as if life is put on hold here. You become one with the prison cell, while somewhere out there, events, impressions, months, and years are passing by. Of course, the feeling of life slipping away from you is depressing. Coupled with the pangs of homesickness and the longing for one's family, it's no wonder that many inmates grapple with chronic depression.

I won't lie; there are moments when I, too, succumb to apathy. It's only natural considering that it's been nearly a year and three months since I found myself incarcerated. However, it's crucial to push back against this sense of apathy; one must confront it daily. If you begin self-pitying, if you allow yourself to grow complacent and surrender, prison is certain to break you down and, years later, release you emotionally crippled.

To prevent this, first of all, you have to consistently engage in intellectual activities. That's why I make an effort to read extensively, write articles, respond to letters, and continually brainstorm ideas that my associates on the outside are working to bring to fruition. This allows me to keep my mind sharp and dispels boredom.

Then, you have to exercise regularly. Now, I have the opportunity to go to the prison gym a couple of times a week. It reminds me of those sketchy gyms from the 80s, the atmosphere is cool and very vibrant. I enjoy lifting weights. I work with both barbells and dumbbells. During periods when I didn't have access to the gym, I improvised workouts in my cell and the prison yard, which included holding plank positions, performing push-ups, and doing pull-ups on the bar. You can always do something to keep yourself busy, but the main thing is to train regularly and fight back against lethargy that saps one's vitality.

Lastly, maintaining a sense of humour is crucial; it works like a miraculous elixir. For instance, my cellmate returned from a court hearing where the prosecutor had requested an 18-year sentence in a strict-regime penal colony. We were all left in disbelief, grappling with the shocking news. He's a big guy, standing at about two metres tall and weighing over 130 kilograms. He shrugged and

quipped, «Well, a great ship asks for deep waters.» We shared a hearty laugh, the atmosphere lightened, and he himself appeared to feel better. He began calculating how much time he had already served and how many years he needed to reach parole eligibility... Suddenly, it didn't seem as daunting.

Who are your cellmates now? What do they think of you and your case? What do they think of current affairs?

I'm being held in a special block of the «Bear» pre-trial detention centre, and, unlike the common buildings, there are small four-bed cells here. The big guy, facing an 18-year sentence request, is in jail for large-scale cocaine sales. My other cellmate is suspected of engaging in fraudulent activities in an insurance policy. Lastly, the third inmate once fought in Ukraine for the Russian army. However, in February, he was apprehended by the FSB [Federal Security Service] on charges of arms trafficking.

I can't say that my fellow inmates are particularly interested in politics. They prefer watching football and action movies on TV rather than news and political talk shows (and I'm grateful for that).

Yet, sometimes they do ask me about what is happening in the country and listen with interest. I haven't noticed any sympathy for the government among them. They don't understand why Putin started the war against Ukraine either. What's more, even the dude who fought himself and, by the way, got wounded near Izium last summer, does not understand it either. He honestly admits that he went to the front because of the pay. The money is genuinely good, you can't make that kind of money in ordinary peacetime life. And he considers himself «fortunate» with his injury, as more than 3 million rubles [US\$ 30 000] were deposited into his account for the shrapnel in his arm.

But I had a lot of conversations with this soldier... I tried very hard to set his mind straight. I don't know how sincere he was, but he promised not to take up arms again and not to kill anyone. Maybe he won't keep his word, I'm not sure. But at least I tried to save his life and his soul.

As for my sentence, it leaves nearly everyone perplexed. Both my cellmates and the detainees in the cell blocks simply cannot comprehend how it is possible to give a person 8.5 years for an anti-war video on YouTube. Our courts often hand out shorter sentences for cases involving murder and robbery and everyone knows this very well.

In general, the prisoners (with few exceptions) are quite amiable towards me, irrespective of their political affiliations. Most sensible people understand that I am not a real criminal or a villain, I'm in prison for my convictions.

Do detainees somehow defend their rights? Do they file complaints or appeals? How do inmates generally view the concepts of defending their rights and sending complaints, for instance, to international organisations?

Based on my observations, it's clear that most detainees lack a proper understanding of legal matters and tend to follow the path of least resistance. Many of them cannot afford a lawyer, and state-appointed legal representatives typically pressure them to admit guilt and avoid antagonising the judge by prolonging the investigation. They say will result in a shorter sentence. In their own trials, individuals frequently take on the role of mere bystanders, without even attempting to assert themselves or their rights, regardless of whether they are genuinely guilty or not.

The exceptions here, perhaps, are detainees charged with financial crimes and political prisoners.

They typically have a good understanding of the law and often seek private attorneys to assist them. In such instances, state investigators and prosecutors find themselves compelled to actively work on their cases, rather than merely being present. There have been instances where those charged with economic offences through legal proceedings and complaints, managed to have investigators suspended, or even get them put in prison. Additionally, they nearly always file appeals against court rulings.

Interestingly, when «financial» or «political» detainees end up sharing a cell with others, it often results in an overall improvement in the legal knowledge of the entire cell. They organise legal seminars, begin educating their fellow inmates about their rights, identify inconsistencies in the evidence, and provide assistance in drafting complaints and appeals to both the courts and the prosecutor's office. For instance, Alexei Gorinov, a former municipal deputy, while in the Matrosskaya Tishina prison, submitted numerous complaints on behalf of fellow detainees, causing considerable consternation for the prison authorities. [We covered Gorinov's story and published his [interview](#) earlier — *OVD-Info*]

However, when it comes to appeals to international institutions, it appears that such notions are currently absent within prisons. It's widely understood that the European Court of Human Rights no longer accepts applications from Russian citizens. As for complaints to the UN Human Rights Committee, only one individual has ever broached the topic with me: Oleg Antipov, a young man who was tricked [into helping the Ukrainian military] to try and blow up the Crimean Bridge and is now being tried as a terrorist. We crossed paths a couple of times in the filtration cell, and his exploration of all available options seems to stem from sheer desperation. It seems that other detainees are largely unaware of the possibility of appealing to the UN.

What are your personal thoughts on current efforts to address these issues: trying to overturn court decisions, filing complaints with the Constitutional Court, and trying to draw the attention of the international community to these problems? Does it still make sense?

I adhere to the principle «do what you ought, come what may.» In the present circumstances, it's evident that no complaints or appeals to international bodies will reverse the inhumane sentences imposed by Putin's courts. It's also evident that numerous laws passed by the State Duma are fundamentally unconstitutional and even criminal in nature.

Clearly, the Kremlin's criminal clique is steadfast in its belief in its own impunity and absolute authority. But we should not start believing in it too. They seek to foster an environment of legal nihilism within the nation, and we must champion the principles of the rule of law. Their aim is to turn us into non-citizens [i.e. inactive], but we must resist and uphold the civic norms prevalent in civilised societies. There's no need to resort to howling like wolves when living among them [a Russian saying equivalent to «when in Rome, do as the Romans»]. Amidst the chaos and impunity, we must remain normal, civilised individuals.

Some might perceive this as a sign of weakness. They may question the purpose of staging protests with signs and legal documents against armed criminals. However, political struggle is not akin to a street fight. True strength resides in political and legal culture, in unwavering dedication to principles, and in the firmness of one's convictions.

Look up archival materials regarding Andrei Sakharov [Soviet nuclear theoretical physicist and 1975 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, known for his vocal advocacy of human rights and civil liberties]. He stood at the podium of the Soviet Congress, enduring jeers and ridicule from the aggressive and compliant majority, and yet, he spoke with composure and conviction: «The government has initiated

a criminal war [referring to the Soviet war in Afghanistan]. Respect human rights. Respect your Constitution.» And now, who has a street named after them — Sakharov or those who derided him? [Sakharov Ave. is a central Moscow street]

It might sound odd, but have you experienced anything inspiring lately? What is currently a source of strength for you, and how are you finding solace? What is helping you in these times?

I have said many times and I'll say it once more: I am mainly inspired by people. Russians currently have a bad reputation in the world, often branded as aggressors and occupiers, accused of conformity, complacency, and cynicism. Yet, I know how many genuinely caring and good people are in Russia.

And it is not just about activists who have always been at the forefront of the democratic and human rights movement. Consider the hundreds of political prisoners whom the Kremlin threw into prisons for their anti-war protest. Who are these people? Elderly, teachers, students, workers, engineers, regional journalists... Ordinary people who simply refused to accept a criminal war and chose not to be silent. Every day people who simply couldn't condone a criminal war and chose not to remain silent. Propaganda may assert that the populace supports Putin, the war, and the restoration of the empire. Yet, here are my fellow citizens: imprisoned for their efforts to obstruct the war machine and halt the invasion of Ukraine. People of different ages and generations, of diverse social statuses, and spanning nearly all professions. It's a cross-section of our society. This reaffirms my belief that there is still hope for Russia. There are still more good people here than evil. Unfortunately, evil is better organised.

What is the hardest thing about being in prison?

The hardest thing for me is certainly the lack of a normal social life. I'm not overly particular when it comes to practical matters; I can easily fall asleep on a hard bunk, and serenely accept the decrepit condition of a prison cell and its discomfort. I'm not picky about prison food. However, I am a social creature, and I yearn for live interaction. I relish meeting people, strolling through cities, hosting friends, and making new acquaintances. All of these aspects are sorely lacking here. Additionally, as I await a transfer, I'm currently unable to even see my parents. But there's no way around it, so I'm endeavouring to quench my thirst for communication through correspondence. Fortunately, I still receive numerous letters from both loved ones and strangers.

Suddenly, people I haven't seen for years resurface. I find new penpals. Girls flirt and send their photos, which is especially pleasing. Moreover, volunteers provide transcripts of interviews from Dud and Gordeeva's channels [popular political YouTubers], as well as articles from independent media outlets. Without all of this, the situation would likely be disheartening.

Share the Yashin secret: how do you manage to maintain such high energy and resilience while incarcerated? It appears that many individuals outside of prison lose hope, and there's a prevailing sense of futility. What should they do?

I'll answer you with a quote from my favourite Nautilus Pompilius [song](#): «Calm yourself, Andrew, there is no secret.» [the song by the popular Russian rock band narrates a dialogue between Jesus Christ and Andrew the Apostle]

The key lies in wholeheartedly and profoundly believing in the cause you're pursuing and dedicating your life to. After all, I'm not in prison for a stolen cell phone or a stash of mephedrone. My arrest stems from my opposition to a barbaric war, and I feel like a part of a larger humanist movement. I

take pride in making my utmost contribution towards hastening the end of bloodshed and destruction, and in ensuring that war criminals face justice. I strive to inspire and uplift individuals who share my values and convictions through my personal example.

I apologise for this pathos, but I genuinely believe that, despite the challenges of prison life, my existence carries profound significance. I wish to underscore that the lives of all those who make even a modest contribution to the anti-war and democratic resistance are inherently meaningful, whether they are free, incarcerated, or in emigration. The fight for freedom and human dignity, by its very nature, cannot be meaningless. After all, our civilization, albeit at a gradual pace, continues to progress from obscurity towards enlightenment. This transformation occurs precisely because in every generation, there are individuals who refuse to lose hope and never surrender.

Are there occasions when you find yourself in despair, losing hope? How do you cope with such situations, considering the constraints of your prison environment?

Certainly, there are such moments. After all, I'm not a robot but a living, breathing person, susceptible to mood swings, stress, and overwhelming fatigue. When those moments arise, I make a conscious effort to seek out enjoyable distractions or redirect my attention toward other matters to ward off negative thoughts and avoid dwelling on them.

At times, a mere cup of coffee with some chocolate does wonders. On occasion, I revisit certain letters that hold a special place in my heart. There are moments when physical activity is the remedy, so I do push-ups. And then there are those instances when I simply splash cold water on my face and compile a list of things I will do once I regain my freedom.

You mentioned that you wouldn't want to be a part of an exchange to Ukraine, even if such an opportunity arose due to the recent proposal from Ukrainian authorities. Why is that? Don't you want to be free? Could you possibly contribute more while incarcerated than if you were free, albeit in a different country?

Of course, I don't like being in prison (I'm not crazy) and I want to be free. However, I will not trade my freedom by exchanging it for emigration or anything else. It's a matter of principle: I stand up for our fundamental right to reside and work in Russia, participate in independent politics, and openly voice our views. In order for all of this to come to fruition, we must persist. So, I persist.

Is it possible to work effectively from abroad? I firmly believe it is. I can cite numerous Russian journalists, activists, and human rights advocates who continue to make significant contributions to the public good even while living in emigration. Yet, a political leader, it seems to me, must remain with their country and their people — as they say, in both sorrow and joy.

I believe that even from prison, I can serve a purpose as a vocal advocate against war and as a representative of the sound-minded segment of our society. It's improbable that anyone would dispute the notion that a voice opposing war and dictatorship in Russia (especially from within a Russian prison!) resonates louder and carries greater significance than one heard in a Brussels café or at a Berlin gathering of «good Russians».

In any case, everyone makes their own choices. I don't judge those who left. Quite the contrary, I support their initiatives and root for them. However, I want my choice to be respected as well. I know that on social media commenting on my declining the prisoner exchange, many people, while claiming to respect my principles, still insisted and even demanded that I agree to the exchange and emigrate. In my opinion, true respect for someone's principles entails respecting the decisions made in honour of those principles.

Ilya Yashin

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