

Nobel Peace Prize winner Alexander Cherkasov: ‘The history of post-Soviet Russia is a chain of wars, crimes and impunity’

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EL PAÍS spoke to representatives of the three organizations that were jointly awarded the 2022 honor: Viasna, Memorial and the Ukrainian Center for Civil Liberties

Since he was forced into exile, Alexander Cherkasov has carried with him only a suitcase, some clothes and the memory of the “[war crimes](#)” committed by his country. “Leaving was not a personal decision,” says the chairman of Russian human rights organization Memorial, which was awarded the [2022 Nobel Peace Prize](#) together with the Ukrainian Center for Civil Liberties and the director of the Belarusian Viasna Human Rights Center, Ales Bialiatski, who was imprisoned in 2021 by the Aleksandr Lukashenko regime. “It was a collective decision,” Cherkasov continues, in a gravelly voice, during a conversation with EL PAÍS in a Barcelona hotel, alongside Oleksandra Romantsova and Natalia Satsunkevich, representatives of the other two Nobel winners. They are in Spain to attend a series of civil and institutional meetings in the Catalan capital and in Madrid. Their goal, they say, is to share their cause for peace and human rights.

The story began to accelerate at the end of 2021. The Kremlin had decided to “liquidate” the association presided over by Cherkasov, ordering its closure, blocking its accounts and occupying its headquarters, including its historic building in downtown Moscow. Since its foundation in 1987, during the *glasnost* of [the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev](#), Memorial had stood out as one of the last bastions of the Russian conscience in the face of terror. “We continue the tradition of Soviet dissidence”, says Cherkasov, who together with his colleagues have investigated Stalinist crimes such as the purges, as well as the ravages of the two Chechnyan wars (1994-96 and 1999-2009) - “with between 3,000 and 5,000 citizens disappeared, in prisons, tortured or executed” - and current human rights violations: “The history of post-Soviet Russia is a chain of wars, crimes and impunity,” he says.

The October 7, 2006 assassination of Anna Politkovskaya - on Vladimir Putin’s birthday - enters the conversation. A journalist at *Novaya Gazeta*, a newspaper politically critical of the Kremlin, Politkovskaya was also conducting similar investigations into events in Chechnya. The editor-in-chief of *Novaya Gazeta*, Dmitry Muratov, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021.

Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor to the KGB, had been investigating the members of Memorial. “On the day [of the invasion](#), [February 24, 2022], another of my colleagues was arrested,” says Chersakov, who prefers not to give any details about his relatives for security reasons. He travels alone. “Just me and my suitcase,” he notes, with a slight smile. He is also accompanied by the documentation of his investigations into the Kremlin’s actions in Chechnya and Syria, work he continues “with more intensity than ever.” Other colleagues have also had to leave Russia, especially those who were under the greatest threats because they were investigating the situation of political prisoners. Together, they made the decision to go into exile. “They were looking

for me, they wanted to question me,” Cherkasov recalls. “As I was the president of our association, my name was on the liquidation document: it was decided that I should leave the country.” A few months ago, he settled in Paris.

Investigating war crimes in Ukraine

“Every day when you wake up, you don’t know if that sound is an air raid alarm or just the clock,” says Oleksandra Romantsova, an economist who worked in the banking sector until she dropped everything to join the NGO Center for Civil Liberties (CLC), which since 2007 has focused on the development of democracy in Ukraine. In 2014, though, everything changed. “In my profession, I was able to see how the criminal system of [former president Victor] Yanukovich destroyed the future of the people, their work.” That year the pro-European Maidan revolution took place, in which Romantsova, now the executive director of CLC, was an active participant. The uprising brought down the government of Yanukovich, who fled to Russia.

It was also the year of Moscow’s [illegal annexation of Crimea](#) and the beginning of the conflict in the Donbas, which prompted CLC to begin documenting war crimes. “I had discovered that human rights organizations were what could make us a better society,” Romantsova says. The organization now focuses most of its efforts on this task, which aims to [compile evidence](#) for a hypothetical international tribunal to try Russian war crimes committed during the invasion. The project is called the Putin Tribunal.

The UN recently began investigating accusations against Ukrainian forces over the alleged executions of 10 Russian soldiers on the Luhansk front. When asked if the CLC has also received cases of potential war crimes carried out by the Ukrainian military, Romantsova replies: “If there is any soldier who commits an illegal act - we have come across this possibility twice - a criminal trial is opened, the authorities react. We document absolutely everything. But it is important to understand the proportion of cases. Since 2015 we found one or two troops who tortured people when they took them prisoner. And they were put in prison.”

“My goal is to return to Belarus”

Natallia Satsunkevich went to Egypt on vacation in January 2021 and has not yet been able to return home. She received a call: she was told that some of her colleagues from the Belarusian NGO Viasna were being imprisoned. The organization’s director, Ales Bialiatski, was detained shortly afterward. Aleksandr Lukashenko’s regime holds hundreds of political prisoners, many of them arrested following the fraudulent elections of 2020. Protesters are still being detained now. “We decided it was better not to go back,” says Satsunkevich. She has since settled in Vilnius, where she continues Viasna’s work from exile, focusing mainly on the defense of human rights and the release of political prisoners.

Satsunkevich admits she has suffered from “many psychological difficulties.” Being away from her family, her home: because of this, she decided to focus solely on her work. “But I think it was the right decision, because I am charged with the same charges as Ales and other colleagues. My name was mentioned [during a trial](#), they have searched my apartment, they have confiscated my belongings...” Satsunkevich, though, says she remains optimistic. “My goal is to return to Belarus. But I can only return if the democratic changes are real, with respect for human rights.”

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