

# Russian Women Political Prisoners. A System of Violence

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**What is it like for women convicted under anti-war articles? How does carceral violence intersect with gender today? Feminist and anti-war activist Fikus talks about women political prisoners in Russia**

“For a year, I have been asking myself: how could this have happened? All my life I have been trying to stick to my principles: be kind, do not hurt others, but help them. Bring light, not darkness. In school, we were taught that fighting is bad, that violence is wrong. And now, having followed these principles, I find myself in jail. After nearly 20 years, it turns out that going against violence is a crime.”

This is an excerpt from a letter by Anna Arkhipova, a political prisoner involved in the “Spring” case, accused under seven articles of the Russian Criminal Code, including “creation of an extremist community,” “rehabilitation of Nazism,” and “spreading fake news about the army.” Anna has been in custody since June 6, 2023. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, anti-war-oriented women in Russia faced mass repression from the state, and many found themselves imprisoned. Thus, women who spoke out against state violence ended up within a system solely based on it.

Currently, in Russia, according to [OVD-Info](#) and [Memorial project](#), over 30 women are being detained for their anti-war views. They are held in remand centers (known as SIZO), colonies of general regime and psychiatric hospitals. All prisoners in Russian jails — both those whose persecution is politically motivated and those imprisoned for other reasons — found themselves in isolation, where unlimited state power goes along with their own powerlessness. This is frightening in itself, and news of torture, medical and psychological abuse in colonies lead many to see these places of detention as a hell. However, political prisoners live under these conditions for years; this is their everyday reality. If we genuinely want to understand what they face, we must analyze specific instances of violence in the broader context of life within a Russian prison.

## Isolation

More than half of the current defendants in cases related to anti-war laws (for example, Article 207.3 — “fake news” about Russia’s armed forces, Article 280.3 — discrediting the armed forces, Article 275 — treason) are currently held in detention centers. Despite the fact that they are not meant for serving sentences and normally function as institutions to hold those who have not yet been convicted, life there is harsher than in colonies. The conditions in pre-trial detention centers are essentially equivalent to those of a strict regime under Article 72 of the Criminal Code; paragraph 3.1 of Article 72 states: “The time a person spends in custody is counted towards the term of imprisonment <...> at the rate of one day for <...> one day served in a prison or a strict or special regime correctional colony.” Moreover, according to Article 58 of the Criminal Code, women cannot serve their sentences in strict regime conditions. This is just one case in an infinite series of

discrepancies that occur between legislation and reality of Russian prisons.

When a woman enters a detention center, she is first placed in a so-called “box”, a tiny quarantine facility for newcomers. After a few days, the detainee is transferred to a cell that usually accommodates eighteen, nine, six, three, or some other number of people. In an eighteen-person cell, newcomers have a particularly hard time. According to the prison code of conduct, the detainees are not allowed to sit on the lower bunks during the daytime. Moreover, such a crowded cell eliminates any possibility of personal space. Female prisoners are allowed to shower twice a week, which does not ensure a basic level of hygiene, especially during menstruation. Women are forced to invent new hygiene practices utilizing available resources such as washing themselves over the toilet using water bottles. In an eighteen-person cell, each prisoner has nearly seven minutes to do this, as they fill the bottles in the evening and try to arrange everything in the 3 hours left before the curfew. [Sasha Skochilenko](#), who was detained in St. Petersburg’s SIZO-5, has described this situation. However, some larger cells have their own shower, which significantly improves living conditions.

In a SIZO, life follows a strict schedule. Wake up time happens around 6 a.m, followed by a time slot for basic morning hygiene and breakfast. From 8 a.m. till 9 a.m the staff checks the cells while the detainees wait in the corridor. Detainees must be provided with three meals a day and be allowed to promenade up to an hour. The «promenade» takes place in a concrete space covered with a barred ceiling. During these walks, the only things you can see are the concrete walls and a patch of sky, and it’s difficult to breathe fresh air since most detainees smoke. Nonetheless, this is the rare opportunity to step outside of the cell, and it’s highly appreciated.

For the rest of the day, detainees are allowed some flexibility. The cells are equipped with a television and a radio, but the radio often plays all day, and the detainees are unable to turn it off or change the station, which quickly makes it unbearable. The television also tends to stay on continuously, but by the detainees’ own choice. The constant broadcasting of propaganda becomes especially distressing for political prisoners, though occasionally, adjustments can be negotiated. For instance, Sasha Skochilenko managed to explain to her cellmates that she didn’t want to listen to such programs so they made efforts to watch them only when she was away.

But it doesn’t always work that way. Distinct political views can lead to judgment, attempts at re-education, brutal invasion of privacy and physical violence from inmates. Activist [Darya Polyudova](#) has been repeatedly bullied while in custody. Daria is a leftist activist accused of extremism, creating an “extremist community,” and justifying terrorism. She was sentenced in December 2022 to 9 years in a general regime colony. She was beaten multiple times by other detainees due to her opposition views, such as her criticism of Putin.

The harshest condition in a SIZO is solitary confinement, which amounts to psychological torture through isolation. This practice is widely used by the administration as a tool to suppress political prisoners. One such case is that of [Lyudmila Razumova](#), who was accused of spreading “fake news” about the Russian Armed Forces due to her anti-war graffiti and social media posts about the war in Ukraine. She spent most of her time in SIZO in solitary confinement. Lyudmila described this time in her letters as “unbearable”. She regularly pleaded with the administration to transfer her to a different type of cell, but was denied each time because the administration considered this kind of move as “an unreasonable luxury.” In March 2023, after she was sentenced to seven years in a general regime colony, Lyudmila wrote that she was eagerly awaiting her transfer as it would liberate her from total isolation.

SIZO staff tend to practice not only psychological but also physical violence. Journalist [Maria Ponomarenko](#) recounted in one of her letters that [Federal Penitentiary Service](#) (FSIN) officers

attempted to force her to undress during a body search. After she refused, they called a medical team that took her to the hospital. She was then held for three days without receiving any treatment. Maria wrote that she was “beaten while being dragged <...> into the ambulance, struck on her back, chest, stomach, and head, and thrown against the steps”. When in the hospital, one of the attendants assaulted her because she “didn’t finish her cocoa drink in time.” The pressure from the administration did not stop there. Maria was repeatedly sent to the punishment cell, supposedly for resisting FSIN staff, and in November 2023, a new criminal case was opened against her under part 2 of Article 321 of the Criminal Code (use of violence against a staff member of a place of deprivation of liberty). Maria denies the accusation of attacking anyone mentioned in the case. The launch of additional criminal proceedings represents another way to exert pressure on political prisoners.

## **Zone of Lawlessness**

Many female political prisoners are being placed in general regime colonies after pre-trial detention centers (SIZO). The living conditions there are significantly different from those in detention centers. Inmates live in large communal spaces, typically designed for about 40 people. These spaces are not locked, and there are no restrictions on walks. Like in the SIZO, female prisoners constantly face humiliation from the staff. Political prisoner Maria Ponomarenko described her experience in an interview for the book *Voices of Russian Feminism* as following:

“The hardest part is the separation from children, pets, and social isolation. The second hardest issue is the abundance of injustice and humiliating procedures. For example, upon arrival at IK-6, you are forced to remove all of your own clothes and wait for several hours for a clothing allowance, staying under surveillance cameras with other women dressed only in panties and bras. It is considered normal if staff open the bathroom door while women are taking a shower, asking them what they are doing here or humiliating the prisoners with abusive tirades.

The ultimate distinction between colonies and SIZOs lies in the work requirement. All inmates must work, and for women, this typically involves sewing production. The working conditions are horrific. Women work for 10-12 hours a day despite the officially established eight-hour work shift. Salaries are significantly below the subsistence minimum, and in some colonies prisoners earn less than one hundred rubles a month.

The colony administration has been known to refuse women permission to use the bathroom more than once or twice during the workday, which forced inmates to set up buckets next to their work stations. During strenuous labor, inmates sustain injuries and fall ill, while the prevailing unsanitary conditions in living quarters further worsen the situation. Accessing medical assistance in the colony is nearly impossible. Sick inmates are forced to continue working and endure their ailments. Some of them die in the colony without receiving treatment. For instance, in January 2019, inmate Tatyana Lozhnikova from IK-6, who suffered from diabetes, died after the administration refused to allow an ambulance to enter the colony. In 2020, a former inmate of IK-16 in Krasnoturinsk, Olga Nilova, recounted to “Novaya Gazeta” that during her sentence she witnessed the deaths of three women who did not receive necessary medical treatment.

Another important aspect of prison life seems almost like a joke. It is connected to the cultural and recreational activities organized by the administration, among which are beauty contests, KVN (a popular Russian humor TV show), singing and dancing competitions. These events do not occur once a month. In half a year, their number can rise up to 70. The prisoners are driven to participate not by genuine enthusiasm, but by the hope for conditional early release. The chance of early release has become one of the key tools of pressure on female prisoners. Most of them have children, so it is crucial for them to leave the prison as soon as possible to reunite with their families. The

administration of the colony weaponizes such hope and exploits it for their own purposes. Female prisoners often stay silent about administrative violence, in order to not jeopardize the opportunity for an early release.

All female colonies belong to the “red” type, which is managed solely by the authorities. On the contrary, male colonies can also fall under “black” ones, where the control is divided between the administration and prisoner. The major decisions are made by criminal leaders. Another significant difference is the caste system. The prisoner’s status is defined by the level of the offense in a clearly articulated prison hierarchy. No caste system can be found in women’s colonies. All offenses are treated more or less similarly, with some exceptions such as “infanticide”. Since there is no strict hierarchy, the prisoners do not take a privileged position. However, they are more likely to face aggression from other inmates, largely due to the boundless power of the administration. Political prisoners are less likely to remain silent about the violence in the colonies. They report it to journalists and write complaints against the administration. Such actions certainly provoke discontent among the staff and lead them to target not only political prisoners but also other inmates. The deprivation of early release is one way to enforce such punishment. The person who triggers this process is likely to become the object of hatred.

Despite the fact that the arbitrariness of the administration affects all prisoners, the political ones get special “treatment”. The administration tends to ignore violations of certain rules, but this is not the case for political prisoners. The same misconduct can lead them to incarceration in a punitive isolation cell ([SHIZO](#)) or to a regime with stricter conditions (SUS). Lyudmila Razumova, after being released from the unbearable conditions of solitary confinement in the SIZO, continued to suffer from the administration’s special treatment in the colony. She has already been placed to SHIZO at least four times; once she was accused of going out to smoke without permission. Non-political prisoners usually do not face any consequences from the administration for such actions. Furthermore, upon her arrival at the colony, Lyudmila was assigned a very heavy workload. Then her letters stopped being delivered. The pressure on Lyudmila is most probably related to the open expression of her political views during incarceration.

## **A bad article**

Pressure on political prisoners is connected not only to their political stance but also to the specific charges against them. This primarily concerns Article 205 of the Criminal Code (Committing a terrorist attack ), applied to political prisoner [Valeria Zotova](#), who has served her sentence in a general regime colony since December 2023.

Valeria, 21 years old, was accused of attempting to set fire to a collection point for humanitarian aid intended for Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine. On February 16, 2023, she arrived at an administrative office of the [Karabikha village](#) where items for the soldiers were being collected and was detained by armed security officers. Several months before her arrest, Valeria started communicating with a person named “Andrey,” who offered her a two thousand dollar reward for setting fire to the administrative building. Later, she began receiving messages from someone named “Karina,” who actively encouraged her to commit arson. As is clear from their conversation, Valeria had no real intention of going through with it. She planned to trick “Andrey” by photographing a bottle of petrol against the backdrop of the building and receive the money she had been promised. However, she ended up being the one deceived - the chat about the planned arson turned out to be part of an “operational experiment by the FSB.”

After her arrest, the security forces beat Valeria, threatened her with a taser, forced her to go barefoot in the cold, and submerged her face in snow. The violence continued in the colony. The administration of IK-3 in the Kostroma region, where Valeria is currently held, tried to force her to

report on other inmates. When she refused, they threatened to plant drugs on her and spread rumors that she was a drug addict. The administration also loads her up with unpaid overtime work, denies her medical assistance, and refuses her basic needs, such as access to shampoo. They also tried to punish her with isolation by placing her in a punishment cell and threatening her with harsher measures. Valeria recalled a situation when a staff member approached her and ripped a tag off her uniform. She immediately asked Valeria why the tag wasn't properly secured and then filed a report on her. Such a report could lead to her being sent to the punishment cell.

Many political prisoners face the same pressure from the administration. In Valeria's case, particular emphasis is placed on her "terrorist" charge. The colony staff once called in bomb disposal experts to check for explosive materials in her package and asked her if she planned to blow up the colony.

The atmosphere created by the administration also greatly affects her relationships with other inmates. Whenever Valeria manages to befriend someone, that person is transferred to another group. The longer Valeria stays in the colony, the harder it becomes for her to hold on. At the very beginning of imprisonment she asked her mum not to worry, saying that "the sentence isn't eternal." Today, she prefers not to be asked about her well-being in letters.

Another prisoner accused of attempted terrorism is Ukrainian [Irina Navalnaya](#). She is not recognized as a political prisoner, but according to OVD-Info, her prosecution may be politically motivated. Irina was born in Mariupol. In May 2022, she evacuated with her mother to Ukraine after her hometown was invaded by Russian soldiers. Her mother reported that during the filtration process, FSB officers mocked Irina because her last name matches that of Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny. According to her testimonies, the officers also held Irina against the wall for two hours with a gun to her head. In August, Irina returned to Mariupol to check up on her grandmother and cats, but she was arrested a month later, accused of planning to blow up a polling station on the final day of the 'referendum' for the annexation of the 'Donetsk People's Republic' to Russia. Irina denied the charges and attributed her prosecution to the fact that her stepfather served in the Azov regiment.

Irina is currently held in a Donetsk SIZO. According to former inmates who were released during a prisoner exchange, the staff at the facility beat her "until she had black bruises." Irina's grandmother is not allowed to see her granddaughter and refused to send her any packages on the grounds that Irina allegedly wanted to kill people. She is also not permitted to make phone calls. Throughout her imprisonment, Irina has only been able to send one note to her family. In Ukraine, Navalnaya is recognized as a prisoner of war. As there is no possibility to establish communication with Ukrainian female prisoners of war, it is quite impossible to fully understand the conditions in which they are currently living. The available data would suggest that their prison conditions are much worse than those of Russian political prisoners. In October 2024, Irina was sentenced to eight years in a general regime colony.

## **Forced Treatment**

After SIZO, political prisoners can end up not only in a penal colony but also in forced psychiatric treatment in a hospital. They are often heavily medicated against their will. Additionally, this form of treatment is not clearly limited, making it almost indefinite in duration. In many ways, the experiences in SIZO and in a psychiatric facility do not differ significantly from each other.

[Victoria Petrova](#) was transferred from SIZO to a psychiatric hospital after being accused of spreading "fake news about the army" in December 2023. According to her lawyer, Anastasia Pilipenko, Victoria immediately faced violence upon her arrival at the hospital. The employees forced her to undress and take a shower in the presence of male personnel and did not allow her to change

her pad during her periods, mocking her situation. Victoria was then tied to a bed and brutally injected with a drug that left her unable to speak for two days.

Such blatant abuse is not always directly connected to political motives, as violence systematically serves as a cornerstone in Russian psychiatric clinics and internats.

## **Gender and Prison**

A prisoner is a severely oppressed individual, stripped of basic rights and placed under total control. Upon entering jail, one becomes part of a system rife with violence, where accountability is often nonexistent. While most male political prisoners may have not experienced such conditions before, many women are all too familiar with these circumstances. Outside of prison, women struggle to deal with physical, sexual, and emotional violence perpetrated by men in general. Russian legislation does not recognize domestic violence as a separate issue, frequently treating women who defend themselves as criminals. According to the Consortium of Women's Non-Governmental Organizations, 79% of women convicted of murder acted in self-defense against domestic abuse. Society tends to excuse abusers and blame the victims.

Journalist Maria Ponomarenko, accused of spreading "fake news about the army," experienced an intersection of gender-based and state violence. In April 2022, Maria was arrested and placed in a SIZO. During her detention, her mental health deteriorated significantly, she experienced severe claustrophobia and expressed concerns for her two underage daughters who lived with her ex-husband, with whom she had a strained and abusive relationship, further fueling Maria's anxiety for the girls' safety and well-being. Ultimately, her mental health declined to the point that she attempted suicide in solitary confinement.

Following this, the court ordered her to be placed under house arrest, but the arrangement lasted less than three months. Maria was sent to live in an apartment with her ex-husband and his parents, all of whom held pro-Putin views and condemned Maria's civic stance. Under house arrest, Maria was prohibited from communicating with anyone except family and her lawyer, leaving Maria trapped for two and a half months with people who supported the war in Ukraine and without any chance to connect with like-minded individuals.

During the New Year holidays, her relationship with her husband worsened, culminating in an attack where her ex-husband attempted to strangle her. Maria had to flee the apartment, violating her house arrest conditions. "Upon leaving home, Maria informed her FSIN inspector and requested to return to SIZO because the conditions of her house arrest were unbearable," said Ponomarenko's lawyer. For political prisoners, domestic violence tends to be more terrifying than incarceration itself. Maria is still in SIZO awaiting transfer. She mentioned in one of her letters that her now ex-husband volunteered to go to war in Ukraine.

The system of violence against women in colonies is part of a patriarchal system of oppression. Many prisoners can be easily manipulated due to the roles imposed on them by society while they were still free, such as the role of a submissive woman who worships the family ideal. They become accustomed to enduring abuse and do not expect help. They will do anything to be reunited with their children. They may participate in beauty contests, striving to become "real" or "proper" women again. The authoritarianism and patriarchy continue to feed off one another. The war exacerbates this situation, as combat operations are always accompanied by an increase in gender-based violence. For anti-war activists, the violence is twice as strong, as it targets them not only as women but also as political victims.

However, in places of detention, fear, pain, helplessness, and despair are not the only things that

exist - there is also solidarity, mutual support, and sisterhood. The endless, multilayered violence of the Russian penitentiary system cannot prevent people from helping each other, forming friendships, and experiencing love. [Antonina Favorskaya](#) spent two weeks in SIZO with her fellow inmates staging and rehearsing a play, *Alice in Wonderland*, just to cheer up a cellmate on her birthday. [Anna Arkhipova](#), who has experienced problems with her spine, gave her orthopedic mattress to an inmate with multiple sclerosis. [Sasha Skochilenko](#) openly expressed her love for her girlfriend, Sonia, throughout her imprisonment. Now they are together and free. In a country where opposing violence has become a crime, these women continue to choose kindness and mutual support even in the darkest times.

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