



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

East and Southeast Europe



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PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

Political Prisoners from East and Southeast Europe

ANALYSIS

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WHY WE CARE?

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) is a German liberal organization promoting freedom and responsibility worldwide. The rule of law and human rights are central to our mission and our values. We support like-minded organizations and individuals who share an interest in liberal politics and subscribe to our basic values, both in Germany and throughout the world. We consult, inspire and motivate leaders, and we identify, develop and market innovative freedom themes for tomorrow and beyond. For more than 60 years now, FNF with offices in more than 60 countries, has aspired to be the freedom platform for all liberal minded people worldwide.

**“BEING COMMITTED
TO FREEDOM MEANS
BEING COMMITTED
TO HUMAN RIGHTS.”**

Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger

Deputy Chair of the Management Board of FNF
and former German Federal Minister of Justice

As human rights are jeopardized around the globe, we as liberals cannot remain silent. Thus, we strive to defend and support people, who stand up for human rights personally or professionally. Every year hundreds of people around the world are wrongfully imprisoned for no other reason than being critical of those in power. In some countries such as Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia, human rights advocates, opposition leaders, journalists, activists and others have been targets of persecution and crackdowns on critical voices. They have become prisoners of conscience.

It is our hope that this report will contribute to raising the importance of this vital issue. We also want to encourage our readers to take direct action. Write to your elected political representatives, ask political parties and governments what they do to address the suffering of persons deprived of their personal liberty because of their political, religious or other beliefs. Support human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other human rights organizations or create your own action group. The world of social media offers a plethora of opportunities to advance freedom and human rights in every corner of the world. Help to promote freedom, help to defend human rights.



ONE POLITICAL PRISONER IS ONE TOO MANY PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE FROM EAST AND SOUTHEAST EUROPE

In mid-December 2019, Elvin Isayev, an Azerbaijani blogger and activist, who has regularly criticized his home country's government, was deported from Ukraine to Baku for "violating immigration laws". Azerbaijani authorities did not elaborate on what ground Isayev was detained and what charges he was facing. The move came days ahead of the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's trip to Azerbaijan, where he was scheduled to meet with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. Following the news, the independent watchdog group Freedom House promptly called for his release, saying that the blogger was deported on politically motivated grounds.

"The Azerbaijani government's targeting of its critics abroad, including through the use of political pressure, extradition requests, and INTERPOL "red notice" requests, extends the country's ability to attack critics and dissidents beyond its borders," said Marc Behrendt, director of Freedom House's Europe and Eurasia programs, in a statement. While human rights groups are still seeking further information about Isayev's deportation, it appears that it might be just the latest case of political imprisonment in Azerbaijan.

Every year hundreds of people in Eurasia are jailed for no other reason than being critical of those in power and/or exposing government wrongdoing. At a time when populist and far-right movements are on the rise, the importance of fundamental rights and freedoms has dwindled, posing new challenges to human rights non-profits. Repressive governments have become increasingly creative when it comes to intimidating independent media, restricting and limiting the work of activists, and silencing critics of the state. The current picture is quite grim, particularly in countries such as Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia, where human rights defenders, opposition leaders, journalists, have long been targets of persecution.

"Across Eastern Europe and across Central Asia, civil society faced a range of harassment and restrictions, says Amnesty International's latest report which documented the human rights record of 159 countries and territories in 2017.

"Dozens of individuals were jailed for their peaceful activism and became prisoners of conscience in Belarus and Russia, amid ongoing legislative restrictions on media, NGOs and public assemblies."

"Conditions for journalists and civil society are getting worse through the Eurasian region. But that's the story of the world, too," said Alexander Cooley, a Claire Tow Professor of Political Science at Barnard College. "Places like Russia, Turkey, Georgia, which once upon a time were thought to be relatively safe for political exiles, and journalists, and dissidents, have ended up clamping down on oppositional figures at the request of other governments," he added.

Since the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government has been cracking down on critics by jailing hundreds of opposition politicians, judges, teachers, journalists, and activists. Many remain in prison on what international advocacy groups are calling fabricated and trumped up charges. Amnesty International stresses that in 2017, for the first time in the organization's history, both the chair and director of a section became prisoners of conscience themselves. "This year's census marks the first time in four years that Turkey has not been the world's worst jailer," reads the latest report of the Committee to Protect Journalists, an international media watchdog.

However, Gulnoza Said, the Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator of the Committee to Protect Journalists, CPJ, says that the reduced number of prisoners does not signal an improved situation for the Turkish media. "The cycle of imprisonment, when dozens and dozens of journalists are put in jail, often multiple times, we see that the authorities are trying to silence journalists," Said said in an interview. "Now, journalists are either in jail, those who are out are practicing self-censorship, or trying to flee the country out of fear of persecution."

The fall to 47 journalists in jail from 68 last year reflects the successful efforts by the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to stamp out independent reporting and



criticism by closing down more than 100 news outlets and lodging terror-related charges against many of their staff. "By silencing journalists and controlling the flow of information the authorities hope to have tighter control over society."

The situation in Azerbaijan is not much different. Baku has been under severe international scrutiny for years due to the abuse of human rights and repression against fundamental freedoms of activists, reporters, and critical voices." At least 43 human rights defenders, journalists, political and religious activists remained wrongfully imprisoned, while dozens more were detained or under criminal investigation, faced harassment and travel bans, or fled Azerbaijan," reads the annual report of Human Rights Watch about Azerbaijan. "Restrictive laws continued to prevent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from operating independently. Other persistent human rights problems included systemic torture, undue interference in the work of lawyers, and restrictions on media freedoms."

Cooley, the professor at Barnard College, is concerned about the extraterritorial nature of some of the cases. For example, Afgan Mukhtarli, an Azerbaijani investigative journalist who was kidnapped in the Georgian capital Tbilisi in 2017 and brought to Baku where he was later sentenced to six years in prison. "That was an extraordinary case because it seems to have revealed informal cooperation between the Azeri and Georgian security services," said Cooley in a phone interview. "It's an example of a neighboring country exerting pressure on a neighbor and trying to limit the kind of third-party safe space."

Russia continues to suppress and shut down human rights organizations and activist groups under the so-called "undesirable organizations" laws, which allow authorities to investigate, fine, and even jail the employees of organizations, which the Kremlin sees as inconvenient. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny has been a target of multiple arrests in recent years. He spent the summer of 2019 behind bars. In October this year his Anti-Corruption Foundation, already officially declared by Russian authorities, as a "foreign agent", was raided. Russia still remains one of the worst places in the world to be a journalist. "In Russia, for example, we have seen a number of legislative changes in recent years that made it practically impossible to be an independent journalist, especially if you are collaborating with foreign media outlets," Said from CPJ noted. "There are fewer journalists killed, it's not as brutal as it used to be in terms of how authorities treat journalists..., but it does not mean that there are more freedoms or safety for journalists."

There is, however, a beacon of good news. In September Kyiv and Moscow exchanged dozens of political prisoners, a move which many saw as historic, given the strained ties between the two countries after the conflict in Ukraine. Among those freed was Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian film director, sentenced by a Russian court to 20 years in prison for "plotting terrorist acts" following the Russian annexation of Crimea. After his release he was awarded the 2018 Sakharov Prize in person which he dedicated to "all Ukrainian political prisoners that have been in Russian prisons and to all that are still there."

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine between the Ukrainian government and Russia-backed armed groups continues to simmer. It has killed more than 4000 civilians as of February 2019, since its start five years earlier, according to the United Nations. Ukraine's Security Services have not acknowledged the alleged existence of secret prisons for torture of Russian separatists and international organizations report the country has made little progress investigating the case. Meanwhile, human rights violations have been widespread, as Ukrainian authorities pressure independent press and activists. In 2018 the Ukrainian government took further steps to limit the freedom of expression and association.

Similar to other countries in the region, Belarusian government has long repressed independent reporters, human rights advocates, and activists. In Belarus hundreds of demonstrators were arrested in 2010 when violence erupted after people took to the streets to protest against the election results in a huge but mostly peaceful rally. Many were sentenced for taking part in the protest, including opposition politicians and activists. Some were in custody until Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, the country's strongman who has been in power for 25 years, decided to free six of those political prisoners in August 2019. While international watchdogs hailed their release, they warned that they would continue to follow the situation in the country. In October 2019 Dzmitry Paliyenko, an activist and a former political prisoner, was sentenced to two years of "freedom limitation", a sentence with restrictions similar to parole, on a hooliganism charge. Many see the trial against him as politically motivated and just the latest example of repression from the Belarusian authorities. Belarus is the only county in Europe that continues to use the death penalty.



While international human rights watchdogs have been raising the alarm about the plight of political prisoners and Eastern Europe and Asia, the issue has largely fallen down the agenda of political leaders and trans-governmental organizations.

The European Court on Human Rights is one of the transnational institutions, which documents and sanctions cases of political imprisonment. However, often its recommendations for reform fall on deaf ears when it comes to local governments implementing the court's directives and amending their human rights record. Alexandra Stigmayer, Brussels-based Senior Analyst for the European Stability Initiative, a think-tank with a focus on the Balkans, Turkey, Central Europe and the South Caucasus, remembers the time when the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, PACE, has had a leading role in tackling the issue of political prisoners. "It was a big issue in the early 2000s when Azerbaijan joined the Council of Europe," she said. "Since then, however, it slowly died down."

Over the years, however, efforts to tackle the issue of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, notorious for its severe abuse of human rights, fell short. Stigmayer says the fact that PACE's member countries have political prisoners is unfortunately not much of an issue within the organization, calling the matter a "forgotten topic". Moreover, in recent years the Council of Europe has been rattled by scandals. Last year more than a dozen members of PACE, were forced to leave the organization for accepting gifts and bribes from Baku. Journalistic investigations revealed cases of caviar diplomacy, as Azerbaijan alleged spent \$2.9 billion in payments and luxury goods to influence members of PACE and to prevent the institution from criticizing its poor human rights record.

Experts say those alleged corruption schemes have tarnished the organization's image and reputation as a guardian of human rights and democracy. "If things were different, we would push for the establishment of an expert group on political prisoners," said Stigmayer. The idea is to have a more effective mechanism to tackle the issue of political prisoners, by establishing a "commission of renowned independent experts" who would carefully examine individual cases of political prisoners where the problem is systemic. Cooley sees the different global political context as another potential reason for the lack of

interest toward political prisoners. "The champions of the traditional human rights order are dealing with domestic crisis themselves – between groups or parties that take more illiberal lines," he said. "There is definitely a turn away from paying attention to what is going on in the European periphery." Cooley says there is a credibility issue, too. "People like Erdoğan can say: Why are you criticizing us? You guys are a total mess. You don't have any credibility left." he noted.

Observers see a myriad of challenges ahead, with no magic formula to put an end of jailing people critical of their governments. Some experts stress that the trend of extraterritorial cooperation is something that is quite significant. "Once you consolidate power domestically and you can have these tools for surveillance and for intimidation, it's only logical that then you start taking them abroad, exporting them to areas where you can target opposition members and exiles, and activities of journalists," said Cooley. "It's relatively simple to do and it's not very costly." "Azerbaijani journalists don't feel safe in Georgia, which is one of the more open countries in the post-Soviet space in terms of media freedom, and other countries," Said said.

Cooley, on the other hand, thinks that the West should also reconsider its approach to tackling political imprisonment and human rights violations in general. "When the West cannot get its own house in order, how is it supposed to influence others? There needs to be a recognition that things are not going into the right direction and some of the assumptions of the 1990s are no longer operable and the architecture for preserving these kind of rights is either broken or not very effective anymore." He suggests that accusing countries of not upholding rights is not working and it is probably better to appeal to countries' sense of prestige and encourage them to step up their anti-corruption efforts. "One of the ways forward is to continue these deep investigative accounts of how influence peddling occurs, how it is a systematic part of some of these groups, and certainly outreach," he said. "In other words – exposing the enablers in this provides some naming and shaming."

Disclaimer: This overview analysis was produced in December 2019.



Putting an end to political imprisonment has never been an easy task. First, there is no universal definition of the term political prisoner.

According to the definition, adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2012, a political prisoner is:

“A person deprived of his or her personal liberty is to be regarded as a ‘political prisoner’:

- a** if the detention has been imposed in violation of one of the fundamental guarantees set out in the European Convention on Human Rights and its Protocols (ECHR), in particular freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression and information, freedom of assembly and association;
- b** if the detention has been imposed for purely political reasons without connection to any offence;
- c** if, for political motives, the length of the detention or its conditions are clearly out of proportion to the offence the person has been found guilty of or is suspected of;
- d** if, for political motives, he or she is detained in a discriminatory manner as compared to other persons; or,
- e** if the detention is the result of proceedings which were clearly unfair and this appears to be connected with political motives of the authorities.”

Amnesty International, for example, uses the phrase “prisoner of conscience”, which refers to someone who is jailed because of their political, religious or other beliefs which are not in line with those of the government.

Second, tracking down and further researching cases of convicting someone for political crimes takes a lot of time and resources. In some cases the lines are blurred. Thus, it is difficult to determine who is a political prisoner.



PROFILES OF PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

Every year hundreds of people around the world are jailed for no other reason than being critical of those in power and/or exposing government wrongdoing. In some countries such as Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia, human rights advocates, opposition leaders, journalists, have been targets of persecution.

The Regional Office of Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom for East and Southeast Europe decided to shed light on the plight of political prisoners in Europe and South Caucasus. In the first two report editions, FNF has profiled the following fifteen current and former political prisoners: Polad Aslanov (Azerbaijan), Afgan Mukhtarli (Azerbaijan), Gozel Bayramli (Azerbaijan), Elchin Ismayilli (Azerbaijan), Marfa Rabkova (Belarus), Yury Dmitriev (Russia),

Azat Miftakhov (Russia), Zafira Sautieva (Ingushetia, Russia), Anastasia Shevchenko (Russia), Nedim Türfent (Turkey), Osman Kavala (Turkey), Ahmet Altan (Turkey), Nazli Ilicak (Turkey), Emir-Hussein Kuku (Ukraine), Roman Sushchenko (Ukraine).

It is a worrisome trend that many of the political prisoners profiled in this series are journalists, who have been sentenced because of their work.

FNF strongly welcomes the release from prison so far of several individuals since 2019, when FNF began this research. As a Foundation for freedom and protection of human rights, FNF calls for the release of the wrongfully jailed prisoners of conscience.



POLAD ASLANOV

AZERBAIJAN

In the summer of 2019 Azerbaijani journalist Polad Aslanov and his family were on their way to Iran to attend a friend's wedding. Little did they know that they would not be able to make it for the ceremony. At a border crossing, trying to enter Iran, Aslanov was detained along with his wife and daughter. Later his spouse and child were released but he was charged with treason. Azerbaijani police accused him of conspiring against the government and selling state secrets to Iran. Authorities also confiscated some of his belongings after searching his and his mother's homes.

The reporter denies all the charges. In the summer of 2020, Aslanov went on a hunger strike to protest the investigation and trial against him, which he believes, are politically motivated. Aslanov, founder and editor of two independent news websites Xeberman and Press-az, says he has been targeted because of an investigation of alleged high-ranking corruption and his previous criticism of the state.

In November 2020, a court in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, sentenced Aslanov to 16 years in prison for treason.

Following the sentence, international media rights organizations such as Reporters Without Borders, RSF, and Committee to Protect Journalists, CPJ, condemned the sentence and expressed concern that the Aslanov didn't receive a fair trial.

"Everything indicates that Polad Aslanov is the latest victim of Azerbaijan's constant persecution of critical journalists," said Johann Bihl, the head of RSF's Eastern Europe and Central Asia bureau, in a statement. "We call for his immediate release and the release of the six other journalists who are unjustly imprisoned in Azerbaijan."

CPJ also called Azerbaijan to free the journalist. "By jailing a critical journalist on trumped-up charges, Azerbaijan is only cementing its reputation as one of Eurasia's leading jailers of journalists," said Gulnoza Said, CPJ's Europe and Central Asia program coordinator, in a statement.

Aslanov is not the first Azerbaijani journalist to be detained on fabricated charges. In 2017 Afgan Mukhtarli, an Azerbaijani investigative journalist living in self-imposed exile in Georgia, was abducted and detained in Georgian capital Tbilisi and was later convicted for smuggling. Two years earlier, investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova, known for her investigations of high-ranking graft, was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison. After continued international pressure for their release, both Mukhtarli and Ismayilova have been freed.

In 2019, Azerbaijan, a country known for its tight control on media and its abysmal press freedom record, ranks 166th out of 180 countries in RSF's World Press Freedom Index.



Disclaimer: As of 31st March 2021, research shows that Polad Aslanov is still in prison, serving the remaining of his sentence.

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AFGAN MUKHTARLI

AZERBAIJAN

In May 2017 Afgan Mukhtarli, an Azeri investigative journalist living in self-imposed exile in Georgia, went out to see a friend in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. Once the meeting was over he rang his wife Leyla Mustafayevato to let her know that he was on his way back home. However, he never returned. Instead, a day later he appeared in a detention center in Azeri capital Baku. He was later charged with illegal border crossing, smuggling, and resisting arrest. In January 2018 an Azerbaijani court found him guilty and sentenced him to six years in prison.

Mukhtarli said that he had been forcibly pushed into a car by four strangers who were speaking in Georgian, some of whom wearing police uniforms. At the time of his disappearance, he was working on an investigation into the assets of the Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and his family in Georgia.

Mukhtarli and his wife fled to Georgia in 2015 following threats the journalists had received in relation to a story exposing corruption in Azeri defense ministry. As an investigative reporter, he has been working with many independent publications, including the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Radio Free Europe, and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

Since 2017 a number of local and international human rights organizations and media watchdogs have been calling for his release and urging Georgia to investigate his alleged abduction. Georgian Prime Minister has denied any involvement of Georgian authorities. However, two years after the incident, the investigation of the case is still pending.

In the summer of 2017 the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg started to examine the journalist's case as a priority and sent questions both to the Azeri and Georgian governments. The European Parliament also issued a strong resolution, condemning Mukhtarli's detention in Baku, describing his case as a "serious violation of human rights and a grave act of breach of law". The European Members of Parliament stressed that the "prosecution of Afgan Mukhtarli follows bogus charges and reiterates that he is trailed for his work as an independent journalist".

Mukhtarli is not the first Azeri journalist to be sent to jail investigating high-ranking graft in his home country, infamous for this. In 2015 investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova, known for her investigations into corruption involving Aliyev and his family, was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison on what many human rights organizations saw as fake charges of tax evasion and embezzlement. One year later, amid mounting international pressure, Azerbaijan's Supreme Court released her on probation.

In the meantime, Mukhtarli remains in jail, where his health has been deteriorating. In September 2019 he went on a hunger strike and refused to take his Diabetes 2 medication because of the alleged mistreatment of his lawyer by prison officials.

Following the detention of her husband and fearing for their safety, his wife and daughter left Georgia and received asylum in Germany.

Disclaimer: As of 10th December 2019, research shows that Afgan Mukhtarli is still in detention.

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GOZEL BAYRAMLI

AZERBAIJAN



In May 2017, Gozel Bayramli, an Azerbaijani politician and deputy chair of the opposition Popular Front Party, APFP, was returning to her home country from a medical treatment in neighboring Georgia. At the border an officer asked her to step aside for further questioning because there was something wrong with her passport. The border official insisted to inspect her luggage and found \$12,000 in one of her bags, which is \$2,000 more than the allowed amount of undeclared cash a person can carry. Then Bayramli was charged with smuggling for failing to declare the money. She has maintained her innocence, claiming that the border police planted the money in her bag. She also said that the charges against her had been fabricated.

In January 2018 she was sentenced to three years in prison. Her lawyer, Elcin Sadiqo, called the ruling “illegal” and said he would appeal it, Radio Free Europe’s Azerbaijani service reported. Bayramli described the verdict as “a black stain on a judicial system that executes a political order from the authoritarian regime” Sadiqov was quoted saying.

Dozens of APFP members have also been arrested and some imprisoned in the last several years on what some

have called trumped-up charges, according to Radio Free Europe.

In recent years Azerbaijan has been widely criticized for trying to repress investigative journalists, opposition leaders, critics of President Ilham Aliyev and his government by jailing them on what international human rights watchdogs see as trumped-up accusations. Aliyev has been in power since 2003, when he took over shortly before his father Heydar Aliyev passed away who had ruled the former Soviet republic for decades.

“I believe that people of Azerbaijan who managed to prevail during the 70-year-long [Soviet] empire are capable of prevailing over the corrupt regime of [President Ilham] Aliyev. Aliyev’s rule is today the major barbaric impediment for freedom....” Bayramli was quoted as saying by Radio Free Europe’s Azerbaijani service.

In March, 2019 Bayramli, who had spent two years in prison, was freed along with other 400 prisoners by a presidential pardon ahead of Nowruz, Azerbaijan’s New Year. While pardoning of inmates is common around that time of the year, her release is seen by some as unusual.



Disclaimer: As of 10th December 2019, research shows that Gozel Bayramli has been freed following a presidential pardon.

ELCHIN ISMAYILLI

AZERBAIJAN



In March 2021, thanks to a presidential pardon, more than 30 secular and religious opposition figures, have been released from prison in Azerbaijan. Among them are as well the journalist Elchin Ismayilli* and many other individuals unjustly incarcerated after the 2015 Nardaran events. The tradition of a broad presidential pardon of prisoners right before the Novruz holiday has led to the release of many high-profile prisoners in the past.

In mid-February 2017, police arrested Azerbaijani journalist Elchin Ismayilli and later charged him with bribery, extortion, and abuse of power.

He is a founder and editor of a news platform called Kend, a local website, which investigates corruption and human rights abuses in the Ismayilli region of Azerbaijan. The journalist has also worked for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service and for the independent newspaper Azadliq.

Authorities accused the reporter of trying to blackmail an official from the state tourism agency by threatening to publish a critical article unless he was paid off. Ismayilli denied the charges and said he never covered tourism issues.

In September of the same year, an Azerbaijani court sentenced Ismayilli to nine years in jail. The court found him guilty of extortion, abuse of office, and bribery. A year later, the Supreme Court reduced his sentence to seven years.

Following Ismayilli's detention and sentence, a number of international rights organizations and media watchdogs called on the Azerbaijani government to release him.

This was not the first time Ismayilli has faced pressure because of his work. In 2014, he was attacked while investigating allegations that local restaurants were illegally tapping the water supply system, leaving villagers without water. A year earlier, local media reported that he had been threatened for covering protests that had erupted in the Ismayilli region. He was one of the very few journalists filming these demonstrations and authorities tried to prevent him from reporting and even offered him bribes. When these tactics to silence him did not work, his brother was arrested on charges of instigating public disorder.

Ismayilli is just one of many journalists, bloggers, and activists who have been unjustly jailed in the past few years in Azerbaijan, a country that has become notorious for its attempts to silence those who criticize the government. In 2019, Ismayilli and four other political prisoners signed an open letter of support for Mehman Huseynov, a prominent blogger, who had been sentenced to two years in jail for what is believed to be trumped-up charges of defamation. That same year, the Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatovic, expressed regret that the country had failed to make any progress when it comes to protecting the free press.

Since Ismayilli can no longer appeal his sentence in Azerbaijan, he has submitted his case to the European Court of Human Rights. He is still awaiting the court's decision on his appeal.

Note: Ismayilli is both the name of a region in Azerbaijan and the family name of the journalist.

Disclaimer: As of 31st March 2021, research shows that Elchin Ismayilli is released from prison.



MARFA RABKOVA

BELARUS

On September 17, officers from the Interior Ministry detained a Belarusian human rights advocate, Marfa Rabkova, and her husband. Later, officers searched their home in Belarus' capital, Minsk, and confiscated some personal property, including their laptops and cell phones.

A week later, Rabkova was charged with planning to incite riots, an accusation which both Belarusian and international human rights advocates see as unjust and fabricated. If convicted, she faces up to three years in jail.

Rabkova coordinates the Volunteer Service of Viasna, a Minsk-based human rights organization which also monitors elections and protests. Ales Bialiatski, Viasna's chairman and a former prisoner of conscience, thinks Rabkova's detention is politically motivated. As part of her job, Rabkova monitored peaceful gatherings during the recent national election campaign, tracking cases of the torture and abuse of arrested demonstrators.

Mass protests erupted in this former soviet republic following an election on August 9. Alexander Lukashenko, a strongman who has ruled the country for 26 years, declared a landslide victory. His claim of getting 80 percent is considered dishonest by most independent Belarusian and international observers. The main opposition candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya (BY: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya), disputed these results and was forced to flee the country. She currently lives in exile in neighbouring Lithuania.

Since the summer, thousands of protesters, including human rights advocates and journalists, have been arrested; many have been beaten or harassed. Security forces used tear gas, rubber bullets, and stun grenades during rallies that

were predominantly peaceful. Some people are now missing, others have been found dead.

In October, Amnesty International expressed concern about the criminal persecution of Rabkova and called for her immediate release. In the meantime, Viasna announced that other members of the organization had also been detained.

"Marfa Rabkova has committed no crime and there are no grounds for her prosecution," reads the statement. "Her arrest, detention, and prosecution are retaliation for her human rights work, and constitute a major breach of Belarus' obligations under international human rights law."

In November, the European Parliament passed a resolution on Belarus, criticizing "continuous violations of human rights" in the country, including the murder of Raman Bandarenka, a 31-year old teacher who was beaten to death on November 11 by a group of masked men thought to be close to Lukashenko. The statement, adopted by 613 votes in favour, refuses to recognize him as the president of Belarus and calls for new and fair elections.

Members of the European Parliament condemned the Belarussian authorities, saying they had met the peaceful rallies "with violence, repression, systematic intimidation, harassment, restrictions on fundamental freedoms, and inhumane treatment, including torture and sexual violence against people detained during protests, human rights defenders included". European Union also agreed to impose sanctions on the Belarusian leader and a number of Belarusian officials, which include banning visas and freezing assets.



Disclaimer: As of 31st March 2021, Marfa Rabkova is still in custody.

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YURY DMITRIEV

RUSSIA

In 1997 historian and researcher Yury Dmitriev made a gruesome discovery in the Sandarmokh forest of Karelia, a Russian region close to the border with Finland. He found the burial grounds of thousands of political prisoners massacred there under Stalin's regime. The woods are considered the region's largest site where executions took place of the communist party's political rivals during the so-called Great Terror. Between 1936 and 1938, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin killed hundreds of thousands of Russians seen as a threat to his regime and sent many more to labour camps known as Gulags.

Since the 1980s, Dmitriev had been studying mass graves in Karelia and trying to shed light on its Stalin-era atrocities. However, his pursuit of truth about Russia's past has cost him dear. He was initially arrested in 2016 when police raided his home, found naked photos of his adopted daughter on his computer, and charged him with producing pornographic photos, sexual abuse of a child, and possession of a firearm. Dmitriev, a representative of the rights organization Memorial, explained that the photos had been taken to monitor the girl's growth and health, as she was suffering from a chronic disease at the time. His arrest came shortly after state media started criticizing Memorial of aiding "those who aim to destroy the Russian state", the Moscow Times reported.

In 2018 the Petrozavodsk City Court acquitted Dmitriev of two charges but sentenced him to three and a half years in prison for illegally possessing a firearm. A few months later, a higher court overturned the sentence and returned the case for retrial. As a result, Dmitriev was detained again. In July 2020 the Petrozavodsk City Court sentenced the historian to three and a half years in prison and he was expected to be released in November due to time served. In September, however, the Karelia Supreme Court overturned the earlier verdict and sentenced him to 13 years in prison.

A few days prior to the court's decision, close to 250 Russian human rights advocates, academics, journalists, politicians, and writers sent a letter, asking the trial to be transferred to another region and expressing doubt about the objectivity of the court.

Local and international human rights organizations see the sentence as an attempt to silence the researcher for his work with Memorial which has been investigating Stalin-era crimes. Moreover, Dmitriev's case is an example of the increased state repression of human rights advocates and organizations in Russia, which oftentimes include prosecution, smear campaigns, and bogus charges. Memorial and its supporters see Dmitriev as a political prisoner and say that the trial against him was based on fabricated evidence. In the meantime, pro-Kremlin media and different nationalistic organizations in Russia launched a campaign to challenge Dmitriev's findings in Karelia by claiming that some of the corpses found at Sandarmokh belong to Soviet soldiers killed by the Finnish Army during World War II.

Russian authorities have long targeted Memorial for its efforts to commemorate victims of the Stalinist regime and list it as a "foreign agent". In October 2019, special forces raided the offices of the organization and the home of its director in the Ural city of Perm. The search was part of an investigation into "illegal logging" allegedly done by the organization's activists a year earlier. Memorial's team told Human Rights Watch their alleged crime constituted of removing old branches and a fence from a cemetery where some Lithuanians and Poles displaced under Stalin's regime were buried. A month later, a Moscow court fined the organization for failing to add "foreign agent" tags to their social media and YouTube posts.

Note: Some Western publications refer to him as Yuri Dmitriev.

Disclaimer: As of 31st March 2021, research shows that Yury Dmitriev is still in prison, serving the remaining of his sentence.

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AZAT MIFTAKHOV

RUSSIA

In February 2019 police searched the dorm room of Azat Miftakhov, a Russian mathematics student and anarchist activist.

Initially he faced charges on assisting to make an improvised explosive found a month earlier in Balashikha, a town near the Russian capital Moscow. Later the student told his lawyer that security agents had beaten and tortured him with a screwdriver to confess to a crime he said he did not commit. Human rights advocates also saw and documented marks of torture on his body.

A few days after his arrest, Miftakhov was released due to lack of evidence, only to be detained again a few hours later in connection with another incident. This time police claimed that Miftakhov had been involved in an attack on an office of United Russia, the country's ruling party. In January 2018, unknown perpetrators broke a window and threw a smoke grenade inside the party's office in Moscow. While police detained several suspects, some of whom pleaded guilty, they were later released and the investigation was suspended. The case was reopened following Miftakhov's

arrest and he was charged with hooliganism. If convicted, Miftakhov faces up to five years in jail. According to investigators, a secret witness confirmed that the student was present at the night of the incident. Curiously, in October 2020 the witness could not testify in court because he had died, said prosecutors, quoted by local media.

Miftakhov denies all the charges and says that he has been prosecuted because of the anarchist views.

Since Miftakhov's arrest, a wave of rallies took place in Moscow to protest his detention. In July 2019 graduates and students of Moscow State University, where they young man studies, staged a rally in his support and called for his release. They also placed a huge sign that read "Free Azat" in front of the university building. Russian human rights center Memorial has recognized Miftakhov as a political prisoner.

In January 2021 a Moscow court sentenced Miftakhov to six years in prison. The verdict could be appealed.



Disclaimer: As of 31st March 2021, research shows that Azat Miftakhov has been sentenced to six years in jail.

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ZARIFA SAUTIEVA

RUSSIA (INGUSHETIA)

In September 2018 border posts along the Ingushetia-Chechnya border mysteriously began to move. Later, it turned out that presidents of the two Russian republics in North Caucasus – Ingushetia’s Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and Chechnya’s Ramzan Kadyrov had struck a closed-doors deal. The secret trade of territory, which some Ingush see as unfavourable to their country, sparked a wave of protests, calling for a halt of the land transfer. The tensions ultimately led to the resignation of Yevkurov who had ruled the region for more than a decade.

While the wave of rallies in the republic’s capital Magas also spread to other Russian cities, Ingush authorities tried to crack down on protests. Police arrested dozens of demonstrators, including activists and journalists, accusing them of provoking civil unrest and violence towards law enforcement. Among those prosecuted is Zarifa Sautieva, an activist and former deputy director of the Museum of Victims of Political Repression in Ingushetia.

She was detained in July 2019 for allegedly attacking a police officer and was placed under pre-trial detention. Sautieva, the only female protester arrested, has been a regular at the demonstrations and often times broadcasted the rallies live on social media.

In September 2020 a court in Stavropol ruled that Sautieva’s detention between September and December 2019 was illegal, her lawyer Bilan Dzugayev told local media. He also said the case against her is politically motivated and based on trumped-up charges.

Sautieva believes her participation in the rallies cost her the job in a museum. In November 2018, a month after the start of the protest, she learned that she would be dismissed from her position as deputy director starting January. She challenged the sacking in court and was reinstated back in March 2020. Two months later, however, the museum’s new director fired her again.

Despite many calls to release Sautieva as well as petitions in her support, the activist is under house arrest since March 2021 awaiting her trial. In the meantime, Russian human rights center Memorial has recognized her as a political prisoner.

Note: Some Western publications refer to her as Zarifa Sautiyeva.

Disclaimer: As of 31st March 2021, research shows that Zarifa Sautieva is still under house arrest, awaiting her trial.

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ANASTASIA SHEVCHENKO

RUSSIA

In January 2019 Anastasia Shevchenko, a Russian activist, was put under house arrest, the first person to face criminal prosecution under the so-called “undesirable organizations” law. The legislation was adopted in 2015 as part of a series of legislative amendments, which was designed to reduce, and to outlaw altogether the work of foreign-funded nonprofit organizations.

In 2017 Russian authorities labelled Open Russia movement, a pro-democracy nonprofit organization, as “undesirable” and banned it along with some other organizations, established by the Russian businessman and former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky. He is currently living in exile and is known as a fierce critic of the Kremlin and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

If convicted, Shevchenko, the Open Russia movement’s former coordinator in Rostov-on-Don, a city in southern Russia, could face up to six years in jail. And remand is proving tough.

Shortly after she was arrested, her oldest daughter fell ill and authorities allowed the activist to visit her in the hospital just hours before she died. The news about the death of Shevchenko’s daughter prompted a wave of protests in

several Russian cities in support of the activist, including Moscow, St. Petersburg, Rostov-on-Don, and Yekaterinburg. Local media reported that at least nine demonstrators had been arrested during the marches in solidarity with the activist.

Both Russian and international human rights organizations have condemned the arrest. Amnesty International declared Shevchenko a prisoner of conscience. “The criminal case against Anastasia Shevchenko is profoundly flawed, and by forging ahead with it regardless, the Russian authorities are creating an abhorrent precedent,” said Marie Struthers, the organization’s director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, in a statement, released in March 2019.

Prior to Shevchenko’s arrest, the police raided the homes of six people associated with the movement in Rostov-on-Don, including hers. Other Open Russia activists were also targeted. Also in January Open Russia coordinator in Pskov Liya Milushkina and her husband Artyom Milushkin were arrested and accused of selling drugs, a charge that was deemed to be fake. The home of Maksim Vernikov, another activist of the movement, was searched in March. Then he was also charged and placed under travel restrictions.



Disclaimer: As of 10th December 2019, research shows that Anastasia Shevchenko is still under house arrest.

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NEDIM TÜRFENT

TURKEY

Because authoritarianism in Turkey has yet to peak, it is now more crucial that writers fulfil their responsibility to promote peace and freedom in our everyday lives,” said the imprisoned Turkish journalist, writer, and poet Nedim Türfent. He sent this plea to support peace and freedom from prison after learning that English PEN had granted him an honorary membership in September.

This prominent global writers’ association referred to him as “one of many writers currently imprisoned in Turkey” and sentenced on trumped-up charges. Previously, the organization had launched a solidarity campaign in his support, translated some of his poems, and called for his release.

Türfent was arrested in the spring of 2016 while covering a story in southeast Turkey for the pro-Kurdish Dicle News Agency. A few months later, this media outlet was shut down by a special decree from the Turkish government. Most of Türfent’s work deals with Kurdish-related issues. He was in the region to document the alleged abuse of Turkish and Kurdish workers by Turkish forces. Once his story was published, Türfent became a target of online harassment and received death threats.

A day after he was detained, he was charged with “membership in a terrorist organization” and “making terrorist propaganda”. He was only indicted more than one year later and his first hearing was delayed to June 2017. During his trial, a majority of the witnesses against him admitted that their statements were obtained through torture. In December

2017, a Turkish court sentenced Türfent to jail for eight years and nine months. A year later, Turkey’s Court of Cassation upheld the sentence.

PEN International condemned this decision. “We deplore the decision of Turkey’s Court of Cassation to uphold Nedim Türfent’s lengthy and unfair prison sentence, despite blatant violations of his right to a fair trial,” said Salil Tripathi, Chair of PEN International’s Writers in Prison Committee, in a statement. “It is another dark day in Nedim’s ongoing miscarriage of justice. The Turkish authorities must release him immediately and unconditionally, and urgently overturn his conviction.”

Other international organizations and human rights defenders also criticized the court’s decision as a miscarriage of justice.

In June 2020, several international organizations issued a statement marking the 1,500th day of the journalist’s imprisonment and again called for “his immediate and unconditional release”.

“For the “crime” of doing journalism, Nedim Türfent has now spent 1,500 days in prison. He has been harassed, targeted, threatened, and deprived of his freedom. Turkey must end this injustice and immediately release Nedim and all other journalists in Turkey jailed for doing their jobs,” said Scott Griffen, Deputy Director of the International Press Institute, in a statement.

Disclaimer: As of 31st March 2021, Nedim Türfent is still in prison, serving the remainder of his sentence.

#FreeThemAll



OSMAN KAVALA

TURKEY

Osman Kavala is a prominent Turkish entrepreneur and philanthropist. Since his arrest in 2017 he has additionally become one of Turkey's most prominent political prisoners.

He took over the family business, Kavala Group, after the death of his father in the 1980s. He co-founded the Iletisim Publishing Company, which gave a platform to democratic voices in the country at a time when it was experiencing another period of repression after the military coup in 1980. Kavala also set up a number of civil organizations, which promote ethnic diversity and human rights causes. One of them is Anadolu Kultur, a non-profit organisation that supports art and culture projects. In the aftermath of the 1999 earthquake, which killed tens of thousands of people, Kavala aided disaster relief efforts by building temporary housing.

In 2017 Kavala was arrested and accused of "attempting to overthrow the government" and "attempting to overthrow the constitutional order". In February 2020 a Turkish court acquitted him on the former charges for his alleged involvement in the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul. Before he could walk free, however, just hours after his release, he was re-arrested and charged for his alleged role in the attempted coup in 2016. The failed uprising triggered a massive crackdown on political opponents, media, judges, academics, and anyone with links with Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen who Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan sees as the mastermind behind the failed operation.

In March 2020 a Turkish court acquitted Kavala on charges of "attempting to overthrow the constitutional order" but the businessman was kept in custody on the charge of "political

or military espionage". While Kavala was never convicted of a crime, on December 18 another court ruled to keep the philanthropist in remand. Moreover, he is held behind bars despite a decision of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, ECHR. In December 2019 the judges ruled that Kavala's detention is based on political motives and ordered Turkish authorities to free him. The court also stated that his arrest "pursued an ulterior purpose" of "reducing Mr Kavala, and with him all human-rights defenders, to silence".

Since Kavala's detention, a number of international human rights organizations and governments called for his release.

"We call upon Turkey to comply with its own commitment to justice and rule of law and to release Osman Kavala from detention, while pursuing a just, transparent, and speedy resolution to his case," reads a statement in support of the Turkish businessman issued by the US State Department.

In December the Council of Europe issued an interim resolution, demanding his immediate release and urging Turkish authorities to ensure that Turkey's Constitutional Court hears Kavala's case without any further delay.

Rights organization Amnesty International also urged Turkey to end his detention right away. "Almost a year to the day after the European Court for Human Rights issued a binding judgment finding that the detention of Osman Kavala is politically motivated, today's resolution demanding his immediate release sends a clear message to the Turkish authorities that his continued imprisonment cannot and will not be tolerated," said in a statement Nils Muiznieks, the organization's Europe Director.



Disclaimer: As of 31st March 2021, research shows that Osman Kavala is still in custody, awaiting trial on different charges.

#FreeThemAll

AHMET ALTAN

TURKEY

"I will never see the world again. I will never see a sky unframed by the walls of a courtyard," writes Ahmet Altan, a journalist and best-selling novelist from Turkey, in his latest book, which he has written while in jail. Altan's memoir is made up of a series of essays reflecting on his arrest and his experiences on the inside. The book, called "I Will Never See the World Again", was put together thanks to notes the writer managed to smuggle to his lawyers.

Altan was arrested in September 2016, along with his brother, in the aftermath of the attempted coup in Turkey. They were accused of helping the network of Fethullah Gulen. The Altan brothers were among the thousands of Turkish judges, politicians, university professors, and journalists who had been arrested following the failed coup, as the Turkish government launched a massive crackdown on alleged links to Gulen and his movement, whom the Turkish authorities claim to be the mastermind behind the coup.

Altan was on trial along other journalists, including Nazli Ilıcak. In 2018 a Turkish court found the novelist guilty of "attempting to overthrow the Turkish constitutional order" and sentenced him to life without parole. In the summer of 2019 Turkey's Supreme Court quashed the 2018 verdict.

On 4th November 2019, however, Altan was sentenced to ten-and-a-half years in prison for "aiding a terrorist group without being a member of it". Ilıcak received nearly nine years for the same charge. They were released pending appeal and subject to a travel ban. On 6th November 2019

the prosecutor appealed against the court decision to release Ahmet Altan on the grounds that he was a flight risk. A week later, Altan was detained again.

Altan has found himself in the center of controversy, according to a recent story by The Economist. At the time when he was an editor of the Taraf newspaper, the publication circulated a series of stories implicating the army of conspiracies against the government of the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the late 2000s, theories that later turned out to be based on forged documents, supplied by Gulen supporters. However, even Altan's toughest critics agree that the charges against him are trumped up.

Prison literature seems to be running in the family. His father, Cetin Altan, also a prominent writer, a journalist, and a politician, wrote one of his most popular novels while in jail. When police officers came to arrest him following the 1971 military coup, he offered them coffee. More than 25 years later, his son followed his father's example and also treated the police to coffee when they came to detain him.

In a recent piece for the Guardian Ahmet Altan writes: "I am out of the Turkish prison but thousands of innocent people are still there. For over three years, I lived in a small cell with two other inmates who had committed no crime. Nobody listened to what they said. Despite pleading innocence again and again they were condemned to prison by judges not unlike those in 'A Farewell to Arms'."

Disclaimer: As of 10th December 2019, research shows that Ahmet Altan is still in detention.

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NAZLI ILCAK

TURKEY



Nazli Ilicak, a veteran Turkish journalist, writer, and politician, has been behind bars since 2016. Along with Ahmet Altan and other Turkish journalists, they were accused of aiding the movement of Fethullah Gulen. His organization as deemed by the government as a terrorist group and the organizer of the 2016 failed coup.

At the time, Ilicak was the head of the “Özgür Düşünce” newspaper. The Turkish government, however, shut down the publication in the summer of 2016, as part of its efforts to crackdown on media that it regards as affiliated with the Gulenist movement.

Ilicak is a prominent Turkish journalist with decades-long experience in print, television, and publishing. Besides journalism, she also pursued a career in politics and was elected as a Member of Parliament in the late 90s from the Virtue Party. Later, however, Turkey’s Constitutional Court ordered the party to be dissolved, stating that the party’s activities were contrary to the principle of secularism. As a result, Ilicak lost her seat and was banned from founding or being an officer of another political party for five years. The European Court of Human Rights, however, decided that this was a violation of her right to freedom of expression.

In February 2018, along with Altan, she was sentenced to life in prison for attempting to overthrow the constitutional order. A number of international human rights organizations

condemned the verdict, citing violations of their right to a fair trial and access to proper defense.

In July 2019, the Supreme Court of Appeal overturned her life sentence and cleared her of charges related to violating the constitution. However, the judges left her in jail, as she was facing other charges.

Ahead of a second hearing in November more than a dozen advocacy and media organizations called for the immediate release of Ilicak, Altan, and other jailed journalists, stating that the charges against them “are politically motivated and the case should never have gone to trial.” “We believe that the new charges are also bogus, as no credible evidence has been presented linking the defendants to terrorism,” their statement reads.

A Turkish court sentenced her to eight years and nine months in prison but decided to release her, as she - had already spent three years in prison. Under the conditions of her release Ilicak has to regularly report to a local police station and is banned to leave the country.

“I welcome this long-awaited decision to release the Altan brothers and Nazli Ilicak from prison,” said Harlem Désir, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, in a statement. “I hope that this ruling will trigger change when it comes to the situation of journalists in the country and the unjustified criminal prosecution faced by many of them.”



Disclaimer: As of 10th December 2019, research shows that Nazli Ilicak has been released but banned from leaving the country. She is also awaiting retrial on different charges.

EMIR-HUSSEIN KUKU

UKRAINE

In February 2016 Russian security forces raided the house of Emir- Hussein Kuku, a Crimean Tatar human rights activist, searched his home for five hours, and arrested him. Later Kuku was charged with being a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir party that is banned as a terrorist organization in Russia, but legal in Ukraine. Kuku denied any involvement with the movement.

The 2016 raid was not activist's first encounter with Russian Federal Security Service, FSB. In the spring of 2015, FSB agents attacked him on his way to work, severely beat him, and then took him for interrogation to the FSB headquarters. In fact the security agents tried to recruit him as an informant on multiple occasions.

In 2014 Russia sent troops to Crimea and later annexed the peninsula in a breach of international law. Shortly after Moscow invaded Crimea, local activists started disappearing. Many of them were Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of Crimea that makes up to 13 percent of the population. Witnessing the injustice carried against his people, Kuku was inspired to join Contact Group on Human Rights, an organization which documents such enforced disappearances and monitors violations of human rights in general.

At the end of 2017, Kuku was transferred to Rostov-on-Don, a city in the South-West of Russia, around 700 km away from Yalta. In February 2018 a military court in Rostov-on-Don started the trial proceedings against Kuku and five other Crimean Tartars charged with membership in the local branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir. The case became known as the "Yalta Six".

"The charges are absurd in their very essence: how can six people who neither possess vast financial resources, nor enjoy the support of the top brass of Russia's Armed Forces possibly seize power in a powerful nuclear-armed state with a million-strong army?!", said Kuku in an open letter from May 2018, as quoted by online publication Open Democracy. "Yet the FSB continues to paint us as terrorists, falsifying 'evidence' for our 'guilt' in a fashion consistent with most dismal traditions of the NKVD – and thereby demonstrating that little has changed in Russia since Stalin's time."

In the summer of 2018 Kuku went on a hunger strike for 23 days and lost 13 kilograms, calling for the release of all Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia.

Amnesty International, a human rights organization, named Kuku a prisoner of conscience, and called multiple times for his release along with his fellow co-defendants from the "Yalta Six".

In November 2019, almost four years after his initial arrest, the Southern District Military Court in Rostov-on-Don sentenced Kuku to twelve years in a high-security prison. In the summer of 2020, a higher military court upheld the sentence.

Currently Moscow holds around 120 Ukrainians who are considered by Kiev to be political prisoners. In September 2019, in a historic prisoner swap, Ukraine and Russia exchanged dozens of prisoners, the first such move since the relations between the two countries soured following the annexation of Crimea five years earlier. Two more swaps followed and a total of 130 inmates had been freed, according to data, provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.



Disclaimer: As of 31st March 2021, research shows that Emir-Hussein Kuku is still in jail, serving the remaining of his sentence.

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ROMAN SUSHCHENKO

UKRAINE



In 2016 Ukrainian journalist Roman Sushchenko travelled from Paris to Moscow on a private visit. However, Russian authorities arrested him on suspicion of espionage. They did not inform Sushchenko's family, his employer, or the Ukrainian government of his arrest in violation of international law.

Sushchenko, who had been working with Ukrinform, the state news service, since 2002, was sent to Paris as their French correspondent nine years ago. During his time in Paris he has covered politics, business, and current affairs. However, he has also been critical of alleged instances of Russian propaganda in French media.

Later Russia's Federal Security Service, FSB, claimed that Sushchenko was "a member of the principal intelligence services of Ukraine's Ministry of Defense". Ukrainian government subsequently denied the allegations.

In the summer of 2018 a Russian court sentenced Sushchenko to twelve years in jail for spying.

"We consider Roman Sushchenko innocent, but in such cases only political results are possible," said Mark Feygin, a lawyer for Sushchenko, following the verdict, according to Reuters. He also added that the trial against him was politically motivated and based on bogus charges.

In September 2019, after spending three years in a Russian prison, Sushchenko was released as part of a historic

prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine. The two countries exchanged dozens of prisoners in a first such move in recent years. The relations between Kyiv and Moscow have deteriorated following the 2014 conflict in Crimea and its annexation by Russia.

"Russia's security services falsely painted Sushchenko as an intelligence plant, a spurious accusation they have repeatedly lodged against reporters who refuse to accept the Kremlin's party line," said Polina Kovaleva, Eurasia project director at PEN America, a media watchdog. "There's no doubt this is part of a larger worldwide phenomenon of authoritarian leaders — not just in Russia — tarring journalists as enemies of the people. Sushchenko has escaped further persecution, but other writers, journalists, and activists continue to be unjustly punished for exercising the universal right to free expression."

Shortly after Sushchenko's release he expressed plans to organize an auction to sell pictures he drew and painted during his detention. "Regarding the further fate of these works, I have an idea to hold a charity auction and use the funds accordingly to support our political prisoners and their families, their children," said the journalist at a press conference in Kyiv, quoted by Radio Free Europe's Ukrainian service.

Sushchenko said he planned to continue working as a journalist.

Disclaimer: As of 10th December 2019, research shows that Roman Sushchenko has been freed following a historic prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine.



