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ARTICLES

“My heart bleeds every day.” The aftermath of the Moskalevs’ drama that captured the world

The Moskalevs' case has been in the media since February. Since that time Alexei faced court and a failed escape. Masha lived in a shelter and is now with her mother. Yelena Agafonova, a helper of the family, has been ensnared by Russia's foreign agent law. Alexei's appeal was denied on July 3rd. [Spektr](#) and OVD-info explore the aftermath of one of the most infamous cases in contemporary Russia.

Текст на русском

Teenager Masha Moskaleva was taken from her father for anti-war drawings, her dad was beaten and imprisoned. Read

a basic recap of the Moskalevs' case [here](#). The following is the story of the case's aftermath.

Last year on the evening of 30th December Olga Sitchikhina was packing up for the night shift. Together with her husband, they were security guards at the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music. They commuted from Tambov Oblast (a federal subject in the west of Russia, its administrative center is the city of Tambov) to Moscow for shifts. Suddenly the phone rang: their uncle from Efremovo was calling. That was the village where Olga's ex-husband Alexei and their daughter Masha lived.

Masha hadn't been attending school for some months after she had drawn an anti-war picture, then the case for «discrediting» the Russian armed forces against Alexei was opened and Masha was interrogated by the Federal Security Service, FSB.

— My uncle said: «Olya, it's a catastrophe — Masha has been taken to „Yunost“ (*Children's Social Rehabilitation Centre — OVD-Info*), — Olga is recalling. — My uncle told me that Alexei was taken away for interrogation and taken into custody. He asked me to come. I was shocked and anxious, but we had a shift. I couldn't withdraw from work, they just couldn't replace me and would leave me without my wages. However, the problem was solved quickly — I called „Yunost“ and they told me that Alexei was released and he could take Masha back any time. He was warned against posting any... I don't know what he'd posted, something against Russia.»

Olga and Alexei have known each other since childhood. They used to live in the neighboring villages. In the late 80s, Alexei was selling Orenburg down scarves, shawls, mink hats, and coats in the local market. Olga's grandmother, who was raising Olga single-handedly, would buy something from Alexei. Olga has been working since she was fourteen. She sorted grain in the factory, was an assistant cook in a canteen,

then a chef in a local cafe, and after that, she worked as a security guard.

Then Olga and Alexei got married, and their daughter Masha was born. Olga is very reticent about the reasons for their divorce and why their daughter stayed with Alexei: «I am sorry, but this is private», she says.



Olga Sitchikhina with Masha Moskaleva as a little girl / Photo: Olga Sitchikhina's social media

According to Vladimir Bilenko, Moskalev's lawyer, Alexei himself explains the divorce as his initiative, because after their daughter was born they realised that they had «different views on life». According to Alexei, Olga was a party-goer, and he was a family man.

Olga says that Alexei has always been interested in political issues. «Political is political, but why go up against Russia, while you live here? This country is your mother, it feeds you. For example, I personally was grateful to Putin because he was taking care of children during the coronavirus pandemic. Ten thousand rubles (100 US\$), it's always helpful (*Olga is talking about payments for families with children in 2020 — OVD-info*)» she added.

Olga hardly ever communicated with her ex-husband, but she says they corresponded and spoke regularly with her daughter Masha. Olga admitted that Alexei took care of Masha. She always had good clothes and was never deprived of anything. However, according to Olga, Alexei forbade Masha to communicate with her.

«Once I called their landline, Masha answered, he asked her who was calling, and when he heard it was me, he came over and hung up. It happened several times. He is this kind of person: if we separated, it means that the daughter is his, he has no wife, and she has no mom. But we texted each other on „VKontakte“, or I called their landline when he was not there, and Masha and I talked», Sitchikhina recalls.

Masha says that her father did not forbid anything — the girl herself did not want to talk: «Mom occasionally called, about once a year, but otherwise I did not speak to her. My Dad never prohibited me, I had my own phone, I just didn't call her. We lived with my Dad, my Mom didn't bother us, and we didn't bother her».

On 3 February, 2023, Masha turned 13. On 1 March, Alexei was arrested — the girl was again sent to the shelter.

«DADDY, IS THAT YOU KNOCKING?»

«That day, Dad left for work early in the morning, I was still asleep, — Masha recalls. — Then there was a knock on the door. I know how Dad knocks, but that time someone knocked in a different way. I called him, said: „Dad, is it you knocking, are you there?“ He then said, „Open up, please.“ I opened the door and there were OMON officers standing there, holding Dad under his arms. He didn't have time to say anything to me».

The law enforcers informed terrified Masha that they were taking Alexei away, called the commission on juvenile affairs and left the girl alone in an empty apartment. Local activist Elena Agafonova came to support Masha — they waited for the commission together. That day the girl saw her father for the last time. A few hours later she found herself back in «Yunost».

«In the shelter I felt very bad» says Masha. «They called me an ambulance because I was very stressed and got sick. I changed a lot, I cried every day. I had a nervous breakdown».

Masha worked with psychologists to cope with her longing for her father and home. During her time in the rehabilitation center, her phone was confiscated, and visits from volunteers and human rights activists were prohibited. It was during this period that Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, who herself has an International Criminal Court's warrant out on her for crimes against Ukrainian children, reported that Masha's mother had minimal involvement in her daughter's life. According to her statement, the girl was confined to the asylum, and their relationship was strained. Although some relatives on the father's side were located, they have thus far declined to take custody of Masha.

In the Telegram group «Freedom for Masha Moskaleva», it was reported that activists repeatedly asked Olga to either pick up her child or provide a statement against Masha's stay

in the asylum. However, Olga consistently refused. According to these accounts, Masha's mother gave her consent for Masha to be placed in the asylum. Various media outlets reported that Olga requested her daughter to be sent to a social-rehabilitation center and had no intention of removing her from there. However, Olga herself disputes these claims.



On March 15, 2023, activists arrived at the social rehabilitation center in Efremov to submit an application for Masha Moskaleva's release. However, they were denied entry onto the organization's premises, and their application for release was not accepted. The shelter staff notified the police. / Photo: «Freedom for Masha Moskaleva» Telegram group

«I have read all these comments accusing me of abandoning my daughter. It's all a lie!» she exclaims. «It was hurtful and absurd. They labeled me as evil and unstable, yet I had no involvement in any of it. I have never been in prison, nor am I involved in politics. My husband and I lead a simple, ordinary life. When Masha was in the shelter, I was on duty and unable to leave. I reassured her, saying, „I will fulfill my responsibilities and definitely come for my daughter“.

However, upon my return home, both my husband and I fell seriously ill with the flu. Representatives from „Yunost“ visited me and witnessed the state of our health. During this time, Masha became withdrawn, and psychologists worked with her. Therefore, I signed the necessary documents to prevent her placement in an orphanage and to retain my parental rights, which only slightly prolonged her stay in „Yunost“. But I never gave up on her!»

There was **information** in the media, with a reference to Sitchikhina's words, that she allegedly had to «kidnap» her eldest daughter from another marriage from school, and that she tried to do the same with Masha. Olga says that this is not true either:

«I didn't kidnap her. I just came to get her, picked her up from school, warned everyone. She went into the apartment, took her things, and I calmly took her away. He wouldn't let Masha go, she is his only daughter, he has no other relatives, and he really wanted Masha to be with him. I spoke to her on the phone and a year later I asked her if she would come and visit me at least for the summer, to which Masha said: „Mom, if I leave, dad will die without me“. Staying with her father was her conscious decision. And now, if they let him go, she will come to him, because she misses him very much».

«YOU MAY THINK THAT A CRAZY WOMAN IS RUNNING AROUND WITH A CAMERA»

The Moskalevs got to know Elena Agafonova a year ago — after the first «discrediting» protocol, Alexei applied for help to the «Narodniy Control» («*People's Watch*» — *OVD-Info*) organization, which she heads. Elena is often found in government offices and government agencies filming videos for her organization's YouTube channel. When we got

ahold of her, she picked up the phone and quickly said: «I'll call you back, I'm at the Justice Department right now».

Elena is registering a legal entity: it's mandatory for «foreign agents». She was put on the list on May 5th. The reason, according to the Ministry of Justice, was «the distribution of materials created by „foreign agents“ and negative information about the Russian government and the actions of the Russian armed forces». Elena calls herself a «Russian people's foreign agent»: «I chose a legal entity with an unusual type of activity. It's going to be an online farm!»

Elena Agafonova was born in the tiny village of Partizan in Tula Oblast, with a population of only 2038. There she graduated from ninth grade and entered a technical college to become a «cattle milking machine operator».

In 2009 she became the head of the district department of the regional Association of Large Families and began to stand up for the rights of local mothers. People from her region started asking her for help: to get the payments they were entitled to, to write applications to the relevant authorities, to file a complaint. Over time, Agafonova was joined by other activists, with whom she created an association and a YouTube channel with the same name «Narodnyi Control».

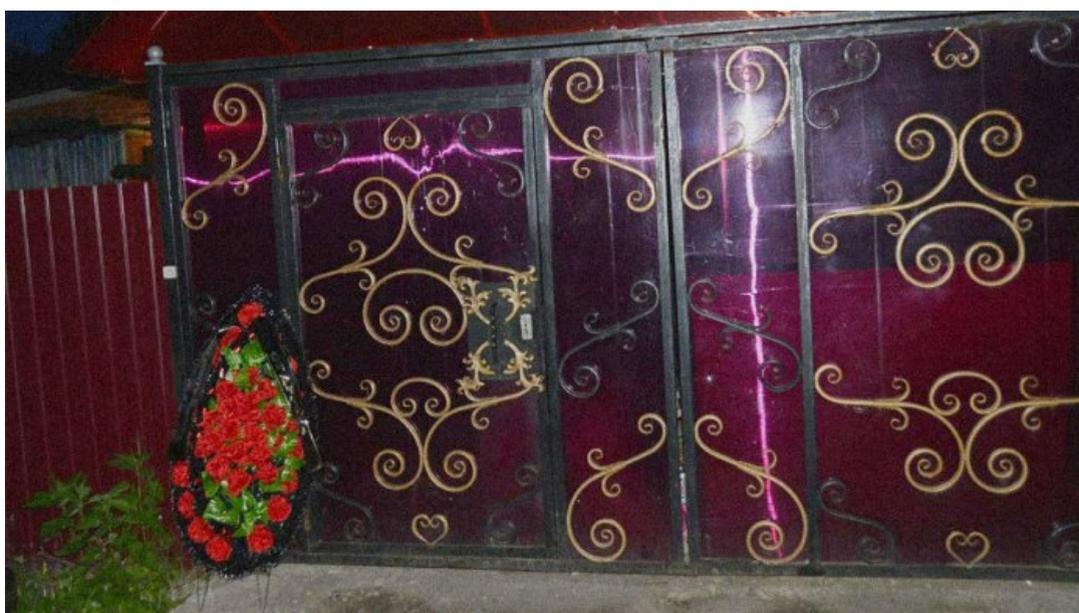
«Now I go around just to show who governs us and how we are governed. How local officials behave, what their level of intelligence and education is. Because often even to me — a milkmaid — they can't answer simple questions, » Agafonova told Kosa.media — «I milk in the morning. At lunchtime I visit officials and ask questions, as I have free time. And then in the evening I milk again. At night we write letters and then get some sleep».

Elena regularly shoots video clips and posts them on her channel. In these videos she argues with local officials, sends inquiries to the Federal Security Service (FSB), regularly

addresses the administration of her native village, and reflects on the future of Russia — one of the videos is called «The Program for the Further Development of the Country».

«Well, dear friends, hello. Our video about the sickened servants of the people has its sequel, — so begins one of Elena's videos. — You can continue to lie on the couch and think that some crazy woman is running around with a video camera and filming something there <...> The people who sit in the administration, who sit there for public money, they have to serve us!»

In the video published on May 19, Elena told how she was calling to the deputy chairman of the Committee for Municipal Control, Urban Improvement, Transportation, and Road Economy Vladislav Podshibyakin to find out when the village road will be repaired. According to her, he answered cuttingly: «What do you need, foreign agent?». Thereupon the letter «Z» and the Russian flag were hung upon her fence, and on her birthday a funeral wreath was delivered with the inscription «Happy birthday, Lenochnka!»



The funeral wreath left by unknown individuals near Elena Agafonova's house. May 25th, 2023 / Photo: Тула Жесть

On June 22, the Uzlovsky District Court in the Tula Region fined Elena 45,000 rubles in a case about the «discrediting» of the Russian army — due to four videos on her YouTube channel. According to Agafonova, witnesses could not explain which particular expressions led to the initiation of the case.

Currently, there are less than two thousand subscribers on the «Narodniy Control» channel, and in the VKontakte group of the association, there are only 267 people. Elena believes that she was recognized as a foreign agent due to her coverage of the Moskalevs' story. She found out about her new status from a publication by OVD-Info.

«At first, I couldn't believe that such a thing is possible», she describes her reaction, «but I think it's because of the high-profile case of Alexei Moskalev, which we told everyone about, and our visits to officials: in the morning we, the activists of the „Narodniy Control“, went to the Minister of Transport, to whom we wanted to ask a number of pressing questions, and in the evening I was recognized as a foreign agent. Some people have stooped so low and will never see it».

Elena continues to record and post videos — since she was recognized as a «foreign agent», she has released 15 of them. She appealed to the Government of the Tula region with a proposal to hold a round table on the topic of «political objectification of children», complained about toll roads, called a couple of official agencies, recorded a video in which she milks a cow and speaks against electronic document flow. However, officials ignore Elena: «They secured the bag and do not want to hear anything» she captions her video from 31 May.

«I realized that the Ministry of Justice is just another shady operation», she says convincingly. «Today I was actually planning to sue them. I'm prepared: I already have three complaints against them submitted to the prosecutor's

office, plus another complaint about the actions of a prosecutor's office employee».

Elena says that her fellow villagers, mostly elderly people, react differently to her vigorous activity: some express support, some are outraged, some ask her to stop. The latter includes, for example, her husband: «My husband supports the state. He is in shock and fear. He doesn't even plan to notice anything. I tell him: 'Look: what you support has fined me!»

When the story about the Moskalevs made national news, the Tula Region's government-controlled media began writing about Agafonova as well. The publications «Tula pryaniki» and «Tula novosti» released materials where it was stated that Elena was allegedly involved in the organization «Citizens of the USSR» (*an association of conspiracy theorists claiming that the USSR has not collapsed and the Russian Federation does not exist, therefore some, for example, refuse to pay for housing and communal services — OVD-Info*).

In one of the videos, Elena, upon arriving at the military recruitment office, claims to be representing the channel «Union of the USSR Citizens of the Hero City of Tula». Nonetheless, she denies any affiliation with the «Citizens of the USSR».

«Clueless media and officials can't grasp it», she says. «The organisation „Citizens of the USSR“ and the YouTube channel named „Union of the USSR Citizens of the Hero City of Tula“ are two different things. The channel isn't mine, but at some point, they started publishing my videos, and I was aware of it. Later, they renamed it „People's Media“. There may be organisations like „Citizens of the USSR“ in Tula, and we may have crossed paths with these people, but I've never been a member there».

At the same time, social media posts began to **emerge** claiming that Agafonova had been persuading her fellow villagers not to pay their utility bills.



Elena Agafonova proving to critics that she is indeed a dairy farmer / Screenshot: «Контроль Народный Тульская область» Youtube channel

«I don't pay some bills myself as I'm not certain that it isn't a fraudulent scheme, » the woman explains. «For instance, our cold water supply network is managed by a private company named „Vodokanal“. I ask them for documents proving that the administration has signed a contract with them, but they can't provide any and just make excuses. That's what I told people at meetings: stop believing the pieces of paper that are handed to us. We've filed complaints to the prosecutor's office and the investigative committee about all these private companies, but nobody wants to deal with it».

Despite her conflicts with the authorities and her status as a «foreign agent», Elena has no intention of leaving the country: «I like our large territory, our great potential. Even though the people may have become more fearful, in the remote areas the true Russian people remain, those who are honest and stand by their words. I love our helpful and easy-going people. Making plans now seems foolish, because the

system works like a combine harvester — it grinds down everyone and everything. We all live day by day».

«WE NEVER EVER DISCUSS POLITICS»

The day after the search and interrogation, on 2 March, Alexei was placed under house arrest for a month, until the criminal trial for the «repeated discreditation of the Russian army». Social services were supposed to bring his daughter to him, but despite the investigator's order, the staff at the rehabilitation centre in Efremov **did not hand** the girl over. According to them, this was the decision of the commission for the Rights of the Child, which had filed a lawsuit to limit Alexei and Olga's parental rights. Later, the commission withdrew the lawsuit, and the case was dismissed on April 21st.

Throughout this time, popular bloggers, prominent activists, journalists, and cultural figures expressed their support for Masha and Alexei. Russian writers and artists read the girl's letter to her arrested father — Tatyana Lazareva, Chulpan Khamatova, Artur Smolyaninov, Dmitry Bykov, and others took part in the **support campaign**. The leader of the famous Russian band «Naiv», Chacha Ivanov, took to the stage at a Moscow concert wearing a T-shirt that read «Masha Moskaleva» and spoke about the persecution of the family.

As Alexei tells it, on the eve of the verdict announcement, 27 March, he realised that this night was his last chance to stay free. He thought that if he was sentenced to prison, Masha would be sent from the shelter to an orphanage, and he would be powerless to do anything for her from prison. The man decided to flee.



Alexei Moskalev in court on March 27, 2023 / Photo: [SOTA](#)

«I don't judge him for escaping», says Masha. «He spent so much time completely alone in an empty flat, I don't know what happened or what could have come to his mind. He was always thinking about me, he didn't communicate with anyone except his lawyer».

On March 28, Alexei was sentenced in absentia to 2 years in prison. It was reported 24 hours later that he had been detained in Minsk, Belarus. After being held at the Belarusian prison Zhodino, he was transferred to the pre-trial detention center in Smolensk, a Russian city which is approximately 400 km from Moscow. From there, he was moved to the Tula Oblast (about 173 km from Moscow), where he currently remains. «As soon as I arrived, I was put in a solitary cell in the basement of the [Tula] pre-trial detention center», Alexei explains. «The cell was sweltering, damp, and full of rats that came in through the window».

On 5 April, Olga Sitchikhina picked up Masha from a rehabilitation center. Since then, they have been living together with Olga's husband and Masha's elderly sister. Olga

expresses gratitude to the local administration for their assistance, particularly mentioning Vice-Governor Alexei Dyumin and his coordination. She also thanks the governors of Tula and Efremov for their mental and financial support.

Earlier, the media outlet «Mozhem obyasnit» («*We can explain*» — *OVD-Info*) suggested that the persecution of Alexei Moskalev may have been initiated by Alexei Dyumin, who is the current governor of Tula Region and former security guard of Vladimir Putin. The «Verstka» («*Layout*» — *OVD-Info*) media, citing its sources, reported that the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation later demanded that Dyumin handle the case as he had «overstepped his authority».

Alexei Moskalev is currently being held in a cell at the Tula pre-trial detention center with other prisoners. According to him, the relationships between them are fine. Lawyer Vladimir Bilienko continues to represent his interests in court.

«It was hard for him not to know anything about his daughter since the end of March when he fled», says Vladimir. «We had a conversation, and I updated him on how she was doing — she is his priority. They haven't seen each other since March 1st».

On July 3, the Tula Municipal Court rejected the appeal and upheld the conviction. In addition to the 2 year prison sentence, Alexei is banned from using the Internet for additional 2 years. Judge Andrei Sikachev added an aggravating circumstance, stating that the crime was committed during an armed conflict.

In his final statement, after reading a letter from his daughter, Alexei said: «I ask you to sentence me to the harshest penalty and carry it out as quickly as possible because my heart bleeds every day».

Masha shares that her father has sent her letters in which he expresses how much he misses her. She reveals that she doesn't communicate with her mother often and that she lives with her as if she were a relative, not a mother. Masha chooses not to burden her friends with her worries, believing that they are «children who should enjoy themselves».

Olga Sitchikhina states that she has a good relationship with her daughter. They have been to Sochi in the spring, and Masha attended a camp in Anapa (*both are popular tourist destinations in the south of Russia — OVD-Info*).



Masha Moskaleva with her mother, Spring 2023 / Photo: Olga Sitchikhina's social media

«Masha is doing well now», explains Olga. «She draws girls, puppies, and kittens. She has returned to her childhood and doesn't need anything else. She eats, goes for walks, and waits for the court proceedings to determine what will happen with her father. She misses him and worries about him. If he were to be released, Masha would go back to him. God willing, it will happen, and I would be overjoyed.

In this case, we will keep in touch, as she herself said, „Mom, I'll visit you in the summers."»

Olga emphasized that she avoids discussing politics with both Masha and her current husband.

«We never ever discuss politics», she asserts.

«We intentionally avoid any mention of it in our household.

Honestly, I have no interest in it whatsoever. I am an apolitical person, and so is my husband. I can assure you that Masha doesn't engage in such discussions either. Perhaps she talks about it on the phone, but I have never heard her mentioning it».

More to read



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