



Illustration: OVD-Info / Photo provided by Alexander Gorelov

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ARTICLES

“I am a lonely spikelet in the field.” One man’s struggle with Russian authorities

Since the beginning of Putin’s full-scale invasion Alexander Gorelov, a resident of Reshetikha settlement in the northwestern Nizhny Novgorod region, has been expressing his anti-war position. He wrote «No to war» on his car door and then painted his roof in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. In August 2023, while Alexander was being questioned after a search under a fake terrorism report, strangers came and repainted Alexander’s roof.

ОБ ЭТОМ НИКТО НЕ УЗНАЕТ

Если об этом никто не напишет. Подпишитесь на регулярные пожертвования ОВД-Инфо, чтобы плохие дела не оставались в тишине.

ПОДПИСАТЬСЯ

Текст на русском

I was born in Reshetikha (a small town in northwest Russia) and have lived here all my life, it is a settlement in the Nizhny Novgorod region. When I finished school in 2001 and had no idea what education to choose, my father advised me to become an economic manager. I haven't been working in my field: first I assembled furniture and now I repair flats.

As for politics, for a long time, I used to be a «vatnik», so to speak: I even supported pension reform like a fool. But in 2019 I faced law enforcement myself.

Everyone here, even the police, parked their cars on the pavement, and I got fed up with it at one point. I went to the police station asking to re-park their car and solve the problem. The officer and I were bickering for a very long time, so I decided to record a video of our discussion. He started waving his hands and shouting: «So you're a blogger! You cannot act this way here». He did remove the car in the end.

Three days later I had to go to the police station on my own business and the officer who called me a blogger recognised me and fabricated a case against me for disobedience to police (part 1 of article 19.3 of the Code of Administrative Offences). I came there on my own business and got locked up in a bug-ridden hellhole for a day. It is not even a figure of speech, I literally brought bed bugs home after a night in the cell. I was charged a fine of 1000 rubles (~US\$ 10) then. I just wanted to improve my town but was met with

indifference and even aggression. Since then, I started following opposition politicians.

When Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, I wanted to express my position — with a can of black paint, I wrote «No to War» on the door of my red car. On 6 March 2022, there was an all-Russian anti-war action in which I decided to take part. In addition to the inscription on the door, I attached an image of Putin with crossbones to the rear window and added „Putin is a murderer“.



Inscription on Alexander's car / Photo provided by Alexander Gorelov

In fact, my car became my anti-war statement, I stood next to it in the square. I didn't expect to make a difference, but it was important for me to fulfil my inner duty. After standing there for about an hour, I decided to buy some bread near the square and then drive home. I returned to the car and there were 8-10 policemen crowding around it.

They were not even interested in the inscription «Putin is a murderer» on the rear window, but they were, particularly, in «No to war» on the door. The head of the police station, Chitalin, who also came to see the car, decided to tow

it as evidence. The traffic police took the car to the impound lot, and, as I now realize, they began to stall.

On 4 June, two days before the statute of limitations expired for the article on discrediting (part 1 of article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offences), I was summoned to the police station. I decided to go on 8 June so that the statute of limitations would expire, but the case had already been fabricated. Actually, only «No to War» was recognized as discrediting, while the phrase «Putin is a murderer», seemed to them to be within the law. Nevertheless, the court returned the case to the police because the statute of limitations had expired.

A month later, I was called to pick up my car, but in fact, the police came up with a new case against me — organizing a rally (part 2 of article 20.2 of the Code of Administrative Offences). Again I was detained overnight, and the next day the court **fined** me 20,000 roubles (~US\$ 211). I thought that was the end of the case.

In the spring of 2022, I decided to paint my roof, so I bought blue and yellow paint. First I painted the top part of the [roof] blue, and at the end of the summer, I painted the bottom yellow. The roof stayed that way all winter and the following spring.

A policeman came once and started pestering me with questions: «Why did you paint the roof? Why did you choose blue and yellow?» I replied that I wasn't open for inquiries, I painted it the way I wanted, and he just left.



Painted roof of Alexander's house / Photo provided by Alexander Gorelov

It feels like they have nothing better to do than to try and come up with something — first with my car, and then with the roof. The police showed up at my neighbours' house with questions, and they ratted me out. Called me «a vandal who could not let things be». Still, I found out later that they were not the ones to have reported me to the police, it was the head of the settlement — Churilov, a former police officer.

On the evening of August 2 2023, I was at home when a group of strangers paid me a visit: an investigative officer, two women in police uniform and two men in civilian clothes. The officer said that they had a search warrant. I had just enough time to inform [Zabralo](#), a local human rights organization in Nizhny Novgorod, about the situation, and their lawyer immediately called me back.

While we were waiting for the lawyer, I looked over the warrant. It said that in December of 2022, the administration of Reshetikha received an email about some planted bombs. Obviously, they were never found. On July 11 2023, the police chief (of the Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs) wrote a report where I was alleged to have been involved

in that incident. That report was enough of a reason for the court to issue a search warrant. The chief was among the people who conducted the search.

As soon as they took my phone, they started throwing my things around, tearing off the covers, purposefully stepping on everything. My neighbours — the ones who had spoken to the police earlier — were invited to be the witnesses, and they were pretty shaken up by what was unfolding in front of them. They still kept blaming me, though, stating that «it was my fault because I shouldn't have spoken out against the war». The police took all my old mobile phones — even those that didn't work, — hard drives and CCTV footage.

After the search was finished, the police sealed off my house and decided to take me for an interrogation. I asked them: «Will I get to come back?». They told me they had no intention of arresting me and suggested I drive there myself.

At the police station, they asked me to write an addendum to the search report. My lawyer Kristina from Zabralo arrived fifteen minutes later, and the first thing she asked me was who was repainting my roof. I was quite bewildered after the search so at first I didn't even understand what she was talking about. It turned out that as soon as we left, some unidentified people came to my house and started to repaint the blue and yellow roof.



Unknown people repainting Alexander's roof / Photo: Zabralo project

After I gave my testimony, I found out that apart from the search on the grounds of deliberately false information about a terror attack (part 2 of article 207 of the Criminal Code) I was also under administrative prosecution for discrediting the army (part 1 of article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offenses). The record was exactly the same as last year — the police officer literally copied statements from a piece of paper. I asked him if he always does his job that way, and he responded: «What's the difference?»

I began to argue that there had already been a trial under article 20.3.3, and I had even paid a fine. «You were convicted for having a car with a „No War“ sign that was in the square, and now you've parked the same car near your house. If you take it anywhere else, we'll also trump up a criminal charge against you», the policeman began to threaten me.

The chief attempted to engage me in a heart-to-heart conversation, asking: «Why are you doing this? Our soldiers are dying there — there are Nazis there, after all». I replied that I was in Ukraine and hadn't seen any Nazis. How can I perceive the war differently if my grandparents grew

up in hunger after World War II? They always told me that any war is always just famine and death.

We were about to leave with the lawyer when I was asked to undergo fingerprinting once more. This wasn't a new experience for me: I had already gone through it in 2019 when I was detained for disobedience to the police (part 1 of article 19.3 of Code of Administrative Offenses), and in 2022, when I was charged with organizing a rally (part 2 of article 20.2 of Code of Administrative Offences).

My photographs and fingerprints were already in their database, so there was absolutely no need for these procedures to be repeated. However, they began to threaten me, suggesting that they might keep me overnight. I thought to myself: «Well, if they want to take a third photo of me, that's their choice!»

Several of my friends suggested emigrating, but I have a firm stance on this matter: if everyone leaves, then who will remain here? This is my home; I was born and have lived here, and my father is buried here. Why should I suddenly leave? Of course, after the search, a certain amount of fear appeared.

At the same time, I am overwhelmed with a sense of pride in how I was able to strike a chord with all these officers. I am just an ordinary person, a furniture assembler. I hold no position of power, have no rank, and wield no authority; in reality, I am just a spikelet in the field. All these policemen were so offended by my blue and yellow roof and the inscription on my car that it was even funny.

Now I'm contemplating how to stand my ground and ensure they don't harass me. I will certainly repaint the roof again — first yellow, and then we'll see. Moreover, I intend to seek justice regarding how someone managed to enter my house and make changes without my permission.

On 20 September Alexander was fined again for his anti-war sentiment — the fine was 40,000 rubles (~US\$ 440).

ЧТО Я МОГУ С ЭТИМ СДЕЛАТЬ?

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ПОДДЕРЖАТЬ

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