



Collage: OVD-Info, photo courtesy of Maria Malysheva

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ARTICLES

“Don’t cry!” How a Human Rights Defender from Saint Petersburg beat the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs

Soon after Putin’s Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Maria Malysheva — a human rights advocate from Saint Petersburg — was accused of «telephone terrorism» by the Russian authorities. They tried to use her «collection of Soviet Jokes» as evidence. The case was soon dropped, and Malysheva was compensated with 100,000 rubles (~1,080 US\$). She shared her story with OVD-Info.

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

Before leaving Russia, I worked as a lawyer for private companies. Since 2011, I have attended mass protests and since 2017, I have worked in human rights. I helped to defend those who were persecuted during mass protests, including members from the (recently dissolved) Navalny headquarters.

I worked in human rights in my free time, strictly for the public good. I was nevertheless accused of «receiving cookies from the state department». Because many political hearings happened at night or on the weekends, it was possibly to help people and have a day job. It was never easy, though.

Once, after a protest in May of 2018, I left the District Court at 5AM, managed to sleep for a few hours, then went to work. In my free time, I wrote out complaints, pleadings, and other advocacy documents. My colleagues and I were always at a court hearing.

I was also a member of my precinct's election commission. There, I was tasked with rooting out election fraud.

I was detained for protesting nine times, but nothing worse ever happened. They never charged me and my detentions were deemed unlawful by the courts. The police had to apologise to me.

«THESE ARE JOKES ABOUT BREZHNEV, THEY'LL MAKE FUN OF US ON SOCIAL MEDIA»

On February 26, 2022, I accidentally ran into a familiar police officer. He essentially warned me that something was being prepared against me. Before this, this same officer had hinted that I was going to be arrested before the Navalny rally in January 2021. I still don't know why he's helping me.

Even after his warning, I didn't start preparing for the case. On March 5th, I was supposed to fly to London for vacation. I had bought round-trip tickets; I was sure I would return to Russia.

The week leading to my arrest was tense. I was helping defend Andrey Karelin, who was arrested for anti-war protests. At the metro station, the police started shouting at me, calling me a traitor and saying we'd all rot in jail.

The week before my detention was stressful. I was defending activist Andrey Karelin, arrested for an anti-war protest. At the station, the officers berated me, branding me another traitor to motherhood and asserting that our confinement was imminent.



Maria Malysheva with Andrey Karelin, who was sentenced to eight days in jail for displaying a banner criticising Putin on 27 February 2022 / Photo courtesy of Maria Malysheva

The night before the search, I had some friends stay the night. Anya, who's also an activist, didn't stir when they began pounding on the door at 7AM the following morning. I understood exactly what was happening.

On the day of the search, March 5th, I woke up at 7 AM. I was resting in the bed, an undefined anxiety weighed on me. The

night before, I hosted friends, and one of them, Anya, ended up staying overnight.

I saw special forces police through the peephole, all wearing balaclavas. I told them to wait a moment, but they immediately began sawing down the door. I didn't want to lose my door, especially if they arrested me, so I opened it.

Three officers, two state operatives, and an investigator came in. Following them were two civilians, who seemed shocked by what was happening.

Upon my request, they all put on shoe covers. Then they asked if I was expecting them. By the way, I recommend stocking up on extra shoe covers if you expect to be searched. If they haven't already decided to destroy everything, they might put them on.

These were ordinary officers, not some political goons. They admitted they had no idea what they were doing: «They told us to find political evidence, but we have no idea what that means», they said. They ended up finding a collection of Soviet anecdotes from the 1980s. While they searched, they talked among themselves:

— Dim, maybe we shouldn't confiscate this. It's just a bunch of anecdotes about Brezhnev. They'll make fun of us on the internet.

— Well, they're gonna laugh at us anyway.

In addition to the anecdote book, they confiscated all my equipment and a news article about a girl I defended in court. In the photo, she was standing with a poster opposing the war in Ukraine.

While the search was going on, Anya and I comforted each other. She could've been detained too, so she decided

to leave.

«COULDN'T YOU THINK OF ANYTHING BETTER?»

The district office of the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) is around the corner from my house. We walked there and had a sweet chat. I'm sure the passers-by thought we were all friends. They questioned us at the office.

«Are you aware of any calls with false reports of terrorist attacks?»

«Of course not».

After the interrogation, they let me leave. So I left.

As I walked home, I wondered about what to do. I still had my plane tickets, but no phone or computer. There was still the option to change my SIM card and go on holiday. My lawyer and friend, Georgi Melkov, was waiting at the entrance to my building. When I was almost there, the police operatives, Dima and Artem, caught up with me. They told me I had to go back. I was so angry! I told them I was hungry and to leave me alone. Well, they ended up taking me to the café. It was nothing like an arrest.

After we came back to the station, the investigator told me I was a suspect in a criminal case. Because of the whole situation with the café and Brezhnev anecdotes, I couldn't help but laugh. I asked, quite sincerely, if they could've come up with anything better.

There was another officer sitting in the corridor. I couldn't see his face, but he apparently recognised me from the protests. I'm pretty cheerful at the protest, always laughing or joking. When I told the investigator that he could have been better prepared, the officer yelled from the corridor «Well, you're in your usual style». I replied, «Don't cry!»

I sat in the office with my lawyer, the investigator, and the operatives until about 5AM. I spent the first two hours in handcuffs, but that was just for protocol. When I asked what kind of circus this was, the investigator ran off, then came back and offered to tell anecdotes from the seized collection.

They also had to conduct a personal search. For my sake, they brought in two girls from the street as witnesses. I was in an ecstatic state and invited them to a protest on 6 March in front of the operative. They said they'd come, but I don't know if they did.

That evening, Dima (one of the operatives) and I went downstairs to the isolation ward. After they took all my money and valuables, they demanded my gold cross. I was annoyed, but they were just following orders. Items made of precious metals aren't permitted in isolation. To me, it's not just jewellery, but a religious symbol. I ended up arguing with one of the staff, who asked me «where I'd been these eight years». I told him for these eight years I'd been protesting against a criminal regime, which has now unleashed a bloody war.



Maria Malysheva during a protest in Saint Petersburg, Russia. 10 February 2019 / Photo: Elena Lukyanova, Novaya Gazeta

An hour later they took me to an isolation centre on another street. The journey seemed to go on forever, but I spent even more time standing and waiting. I was put in a cell on 6 March, and went to bed immediately. I was released the next day.

“I’D THINK HE’S AN HONEST PERSON»

I finally heard in August that my case was cancelled.

In April 2022, my lawyer and I appealed against the whole thing. The two days I spent in detention were deemed illegal. I think I got lucky. As far as I know, other suspects in similar cases never managed to appeal successfully.

The behaviour of the investigator probably played a role. He refused to come to court for a long time, claiming he was busy. He finally showed up on 5 July. The court resolved the case later that day.

He told them that he only arrested me because he was following orders. He had no evidence of my involvement in any criminal activity. Is his testimony connected with his moral character or did he just mess up? I don't know, but I want people to be good, so I'll say he's an honest person.

On 18 July, the Petersburg District Court ruled that I should be compensated for «moral harm».

In our appeal, we'd claimed the sum of 1,000,000 rubles (~10,800 US\$). The court only granted 100,000 (~1,080 US\$). Whatever. The sum isn't that important, what matters is the compensation in itself. We didn't appeal the lowered sum.

Beyond this, I have other demands for compensation in court. So far, we've claimed 51,802 rubles (~560 US\$), but haven't come to a final decision.

A rehabilitated person also has the right to request to have their fingerprints deleted from the police database a year after the end of the case. They granted my request and apparently deleted my fingerprints, but I have no way to confirm this.

A year ago, I received a formal apology from the public prosecutor's office. Of course, this was only because of my complaints.

In April of 2022, one month after the search, I left Russia. It was a difficult choice between continuing my human rights work (and probably being imprisoned for good) or leaving. I decided to leave, and I'm still not sure if I did the right thing.



Maria Malysheva at a protest near the Russian Embassy in London. 10 December 2022 / Photo courtesy of Maria Malysheva

I don't know what happened to the investigators who were involved. Dima and Artem (the other operative), if you're reading this, my best regards to you. You're just normal people, and it's sad you've wound up in such a situation.

As far as I know, the officer who warned me about the search has been promoted.

Everything they confiscated was returned. One of my friends checked them and found recording devices inside. I was already outside the country when he told me.

The book with the Soviet anecdotes was also returned.

You may have heard the name of a book by Rudolph von Jhering called *The Struggle for Law*. It's difficult to assert your rights in Russia. If we don't try at all, however, there's no point. We have to do all that we can.

Recorded by Galya Sova

ЧТО Я МОГУ С ЭТИМ СДЕЛАТЬ?

Прочитать, рассказать, поддержать. Подпишитесь на регулярные пожертвования ОВД-Инфо, чтобы как можно больше людей узнали о политических репрессиях в России сегодня.

ПОДДЕРЖАТЬ

Ещё почитать

04.07.2025 Вся Россия

Адвоката Николая Полозова, защищавшего участниц Pussy Riot и крымских татар, объявили в розыск



«Они забрали совершенно здорового человека!» Ольга Эськова, арестованная за комментарий, пыталась покончить с собой. Мы поговорили с ее мужем
«Ваша жена арестована»



«Сохраните себя для лучших времен и будьте готовы к их наступлению»: интервью с политзаключенным Дмитрием Ивановым



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