

Collage by OVD-info from photos provided by Damir Khisyametdinov

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ARTICLES

## **Journalism or snitching? Reported to authorities by interviewer**

**It's sometimes hard to understand just how limited Russians' freedom of speech is. This is the story of a journalist ratting out her interviewee to the police for «discrediting the Russian army». During the presidential elections in the city of Balakovo, located in southwestern Russia along the left bank of the Volga River, an election observer representing the Communist Party of the Russian Federation was escorted directly from the polling station to the criminal investigation department. There, he faced a fine for allegedly discrediting the Russian army. Following a conversation with the**

**observer at the polling station, a local journalist immediately filed a denunciation report against him. OVD-Info recounts how a dubious QR code and a video message from a local deputy in Saratov led to a legal case on charges of «discrediting the Russian army».**

### **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*

On Saturday, March 16, around 4:30 p.m., Damir Khisyametdinov, who was appointed by the Communist Party to monitor the presidential elections at the polling station No. 510 in Balakovo, an industrial town in southwestern Russia, had already said goodbye to a local journalist Inna Chumichkina when she asked for his thoughts on the **video message** from Alexander Anidalov, a Saratov local deputy from the Communist Party.

Speaking about voter fraud the day before the presidential election, Anidalov said, «We are not urging you [to throw yourselves] under tanks or to the barricades, at least not yet». The phrase caught Chumichkina's attention, and she even dedicated an **article** to it.

«I asked [Khisyametdinov], could it really get to the point that the Communists would do this, send people under tanks?», the journalist **quotes** her question on her own website ProBalakovo (an OVD-Info correspondent managed to reach Chumichkina by phone, but she promptly hung up upon

hearing Damir's name). According to Chumichkina, Khisyametdinov «grinned and said that this [throwing people under tanks] was possible, because „Putin throws people under tanks for 250 thousand rubles (~2,700 US\$) a month“».

«I thought she was one of us, an oppositioist. For some reason, it appeared that way to me. I thought she was trying to bring order to the election process. It seemed so because the chairman of the commission was reporting to her as if he spoke to the president. And I just started talking to her like to any ordinary person. And then she said, „Are you discrediting the special military operation?“ Well, I kind of got it right away and said I wouldn't talk to her anymore».

The journalist **called** the police officers that were on duty at the station, «turned on the video recording and asked him [Damir] to repeat his statements and voice his position on the special military operation». Damir refused, citing Article 51 of the Constitution (stipulating that nobody is obliged to testify against themselves).

Then Chumichkina filed a report to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (seen by OVD-Info) stating: «I request measures to be taken against Khisyametdinov, who ...> made statements against the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the policies of the President of the Russian Federation. His actions thus discredited the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation aimed at defending the interests of the Russian Federation to protect its borders».

## **NOT A COMMUNIST**

How did IT specialist Damir Khisyametdinov, who does not adhere to communist ideology, became an observer for the Russian Communist Party in the presidential elections?

In 2011, during the State Duma elections when official figures **indicated** a comically fraudulent turnout of 146% in the Rostov region and independent observers **documented** numerous violations nationwide, Damir helped the local branch of the Russian Communist Party to broadcast a protest **rally**.

«The backstory is that Alexander Anidalov (a deputy of the Saratov Regional Duma and the author of the phrase about tanks and barricades — *OVD-Info*) and I have shared history. We grew up together, lived in neighboring houses, and went to the same school. Now I feel somewhat uncomfortable to contact him, because he is now the regional head of the Russian Communist Party», says Damir.

In addition, Khisyametdinov adds that in Balakovo «the Communist Party has significant presence, because there have been practically no other parties here» — except for United Russia and the neo-Nazi Russian National Unity. So he already took part in the presidential elections in 2012 as an observer for the Communist Party.

After moving to Moscow, Damir served as an observer again in 2019, once again for the Communist Party, at the elections to the Moscow City Duma. When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, he returned to Balakovo and met Kirill Rumyantsev, a young activist and future deputy chairman of the Saratov Yabloko party. Damir observed for this party on voting days in 2021 and 2022.





*Damir Khisyametdinov during the municipal elections in May 2022 / Photo courtesy of Damir Khisyametdinov*

In 2021, during the State Duma and local elections there were first serious fraud incidents at the polling station where Damir served as an observer. «The registry for home-based voting was filled incorrectly, leading to a conflict situation. Suddenly, some strange-looking journalists appeared, trying to provoke a scandal and shouting something, but I remained calm. They even called the police claiming that it was me who had caused the scandal at the station. However, the police officer at the polling station recognized that the situation was misrepresented and informed his team accordingly. Nevertheless, the chairman of the polling station's commission filed a court report against me», Damir recalls.

It all ended without further proceedings though. The Yabloko party members relocated their election observer to another polling station, and 15 minutes later, the chairman withdrew the court filing.

In January 2024, Khisyametdinov was collecting signatures qualifying Boris Nadezhdin's (an anti-war candidate) presidential run. «I worked during the day and spent my evenings at a cafe. Overall, I spent a week and a half there. I thought that I might collect 50 or so signatures, but I ended up gathering 300, which was good. People were asking how

they could help. In the end, there were four of us [collecting signatures]».

Since Nadezhdin was not allowed to run in the elections and the liberal Yabloko party didn't nominate its own presidential candidate, on March 15, Damir came to observe at polling station № 510 representing the Communist Party, as he had done before.

## QR CODES

Situated within the premises of the Balakovo Institute of Engineering and Technology on Chapaev Street, this polling station serves as a pivotal site for civic engagement. Affiliated with the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute, it stands as a gateway for aspiring graduates bound for the nuclear power plant operating eight kilometers from the city. On March 15, starting at 8 a.m., students from the institute began lining up to vote there. «An entire group, along with their teacher, showed up to vote, apparently skipping a class», Damir describes the scene.

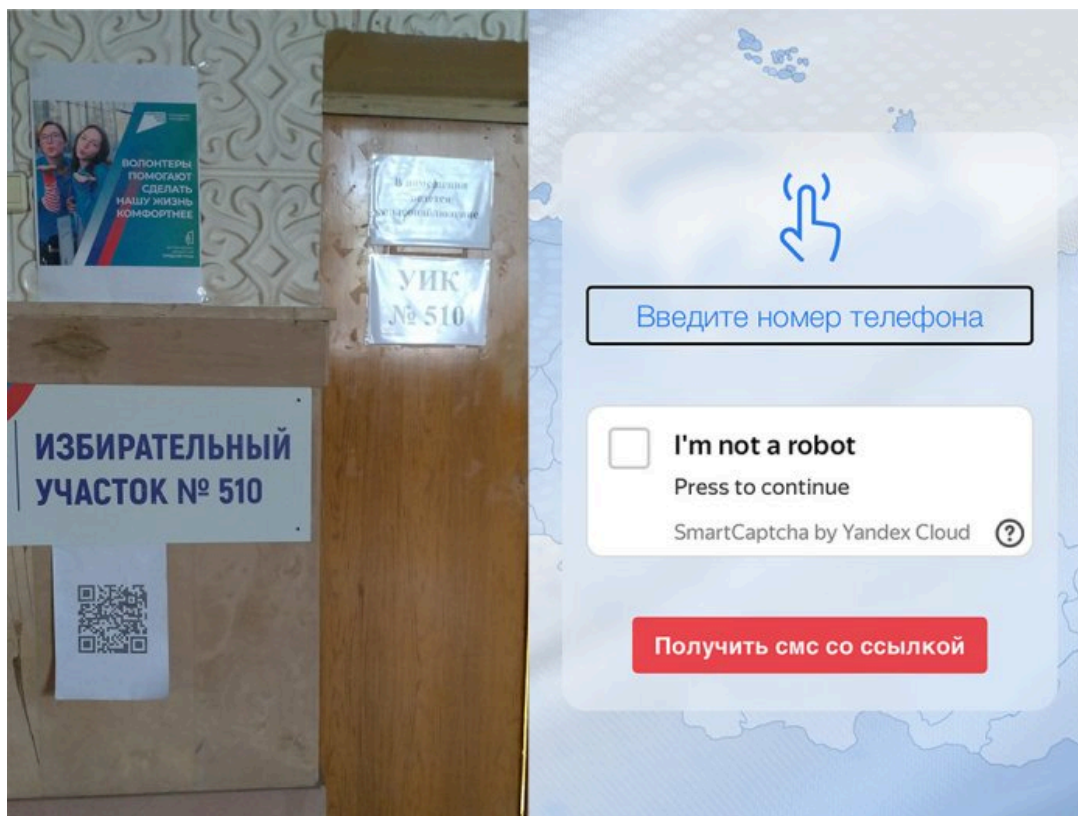
As soon as the first day of voting, Khisyametdinov noticed a strange A4-sized QR code attached to the wall. He sent an image of the code to Yabloko party activist Kirill Rumyantsev, who suspected it was used for geolocation tracking of voters. He also **informed** Svobodnye Novosti, an independent Saratov-based news outlet.

Lyubov Nedokhlebova, the chair of the Balakovo district's territorial election commission, immediately **refuted** these claims through Inna Chumichkina's media outlet, stating that «such materials have not been placed at polling stations». She suggested that the QR codes were «probably used» by volunteers who were offering voters passing by to choose areas to be improved in Balakovo under the federal program titled «Formation of a Comfortable Urban Environment».

Following the publication, on March 16, Chumichkina personally visited the polling station «to find out what was happening there on the spot.» She began to question Damir, as well as the chairman of the precinct commission (and the head of a Balakovo kindergarten) Natalya Chernova. The latter, according to Damir, also said that she did not know anything about the strange QR code.

After that the observer and the journalist went out to the hallway, where they did indeed find two volunteers offering to choose places for improvement in Balakovo. On the wall next to them hung two QR codes: one for the urban improvements and the other one that had aroused Khisyametdinov's suspicions.

«And so, I said to the journalist, „Let's check it out now“. Using the code that was hanging under the polling station sign, we opened a link about the elections. The link asked to enter a [phone] number. I entered mine, and a message popped up saying that the number was not in the database. Then we checked the other QR code, and a website about improving the landscape loaded right away. And [Chumichkina] was filming this on a camera and recording it with a voice recorder. I thought that everything was obvious to her», Damir says.



*The QR code at the polling station that caused controversy, along with a screenshot of the corresponding web page prompting voters to enter their phone numbers to receive a message containing a link / Photo courtesy of Damir Khisyametdinov*

He said that at this time the commission chairman came out to the hallway and began to demonstratively reprimand the volunteers: «She said: „I told you to tear down this code, go remove it immediately“. In general, they staged a small show there in front of me and in front of this journalist».

However, Damir ended up not complaining about the possible legal violation. Soon thereafter, a conversation about the communists and barricades took place, culminating in a suit against Khisyametdinov, while no one cared about the QR codes any longer. Law enforcement officers came to the polling station the following morning, March 17, to take the observer with them.

**«IT WILL BE BEST IF YOU PLEAD GUILTY»**



Damir already knew the Balakovo police branch's criminal investigation department where the police brought him at 11:15 a.m. that day. He had already been there in April 2021 after he was detained at a rally in support of Alexei Navalny. «Back then the guys from the criminal investigation department detained the head of Navalny's Balakovo headquarters, Danil Buzanov, and two girls. Danil was taken to a car, and the girls were being taken somewhere else. And the worker of the criminal investigation department was without a uniform, dressed like a civilian. Two strong-looking men were taking the girls somewhere... And my instinct kicked in, like I needed to protect them. I followed them and asked, „Guys, who are you? Where are you taking the girls?“ At that moment, one of them showed me his police ID and said, „Well, come along, and you will find out where [we're going]“. So I just „joined the club“». Then the court made Damir pay a fine of 20 thousand rubles, in accordance with Article 20.2 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (the article regulating meetings and demonstrations).

This time Damir discovered at the criminal investigation department that on March 16, at 8:25 p.m., lieutenant colonel Fyodor Fadeev examined his VKontakte page (Russian social media platform), deleted shortly after, and found there a «photo image containing the words „NO TO WAR“» (as noted in the document submitted to court, which was accessed by OVD-Info). As a result, the police drew up two police reports on Khisyametdinov under Article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (public actions aimed at discrediting the Russian Armed Forces).

The lieutenant colonel of the criminal investigation department began threatening Damir to force him to plead guilty. «He said, „This is your second time committing this offense, so it can be treated as either an administrative case or a criminal one. That depends on the way I submit it to court. I suggest that you take that into consideration“.

I asked him, „What am I required to do?“ He replied, „It will be best if you plead guilty“».

Khisyametdinov spent around three hours in the criminal investigation department and police officers then took him across the street to the building of Balakovo's district court, where the first hearing of the [army] discreditation case was scheduled for that very day. Upon learning that Damir didn't have an attorney, the judge gave him an hour to find one.

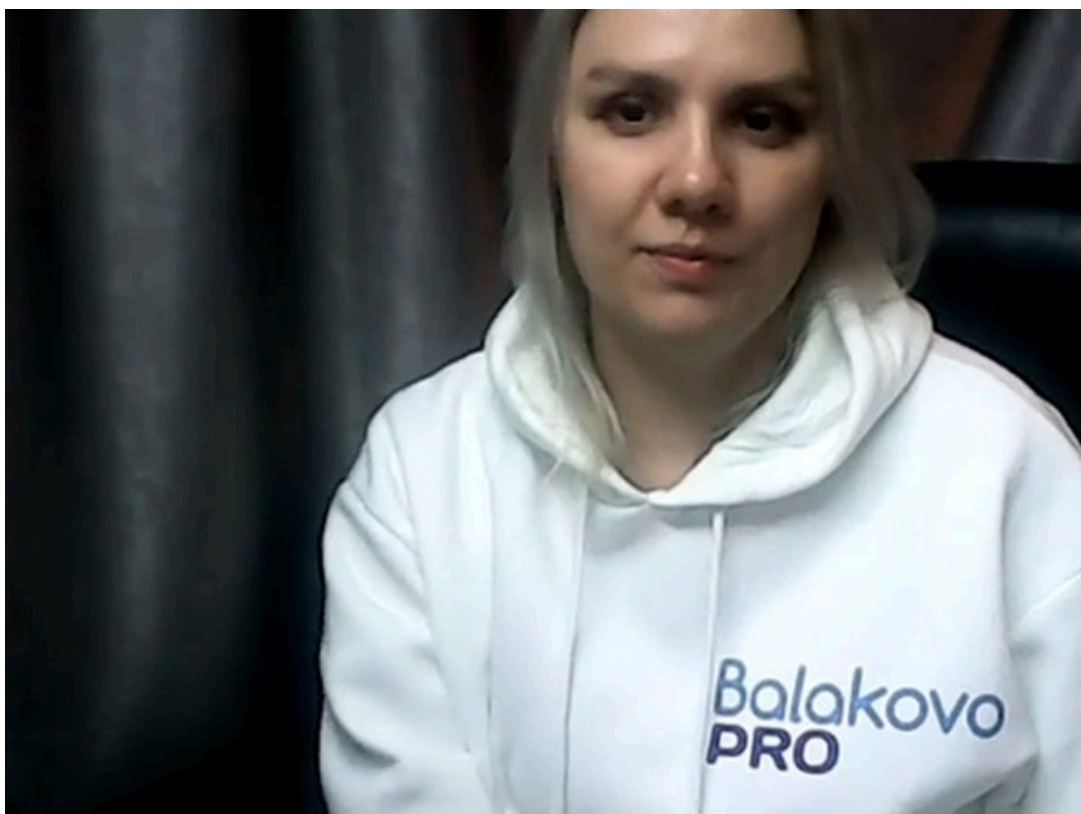
«I entered the premises of a legal council not far from the court but [the office] was closed. I went back home and started searching on Yandex who was working [in Balakovo]. I called the first number I found. A man answered. When I said the word „discreditation“, he hung up on me», Damir recalls. The second attorney he managed to reach, Olga Shumova, agreed to take his case. So he came back to the court together with her.

## **«THIS IS OUTRAGEOUS»**

On the way to the hearing room, Khisyametdinov called [Kirill] Razumov, a member of the Yabloko party, and put him on loudspeaker. They had a debate over the strategy they were going to follow in court. Razumov opposed pleading guilty, while the attorney insisted it would be right, as «the evidence was compelling». Damir decided to plead Article 51 of the Constitution. The attorney supported him.

«But when I was listening to her [Inna Tchumichkina, the journalist, who was called to the hearing as a witness], it was really difficult to hold back from saying anything because I had an urge to correct her every time. What I mean is that people remember things the way they saw them, not the way those things actually happened. Maybe I too lack objectivity», says Damir.

At the trial, Chumichkina described what followed Damir's phrase about Putin and tanks on March 16 at the polling station No. 510 (OVD-Info obtained the audio recording): «I was stunned by that statement. Well, what do you mean? „Are you talking about the special military operation?“ „Yes, about the special military operation, why?“ ...> He said that Putin was doing all this, attacking Ukraine. Even a member of the commission, who was sitting next to us ...>, said: „You stop the political agitation altogether“. ...> I didn't have my voice recorder on at that moment, but when I was already listening to some statements, I turned the voice recorder on. ...> [I said]: „Well, these are different things; the special military operation is a military action, it's a defense of the country, of its citizens. And that [Alexander Anidalov's video message] was hinting at calls for unrest inside the country“».



*Inna Chumichkina / Screenshot from Inna Chumichkina's YouTube channel*

«And what's the big deal here, Russia imposes its opinion, its position by violence, and what's the difference?» (says Chumichkina, mockingly repeating Damir's words — OVD-

*Info*) ...> I didn't even listen to those outrageous claims, I came up to the police officers ...> and told them that illegal actions were taking place».

The judge fined Damir Khisyametdinov 45 thousand rubles and stipulated payment within two years, which Damir viewed positively.

He discovered that his second case for «discrediting» — regarding a photo on VKontakte — would be heard in court on March 22.

Inna Chumichkina does not consider her report a Soviet-style denunciation. «A denunciation is an anonymous report, a false report of a crime. I have expressed my opinion openly in the presence of witnesses and Damir himself», she **wrote** on her website. She calls Khisyametdinov a «provocateur» in the title of her essay.

*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**



**«Что-то не так с Горецкой»: история ростовской провокаторки и свидетельницы обвинения в двух политических делах**

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