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20.08.2024, 17:08

ARTICLES

Letters across borders. Why you should write to Russia's political prisoners. And how to do it

This article originally appeared in **Meduza** on Oct. 30, 2023

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

*OVD-Info, one of Russia's most prominent human rights watchdogs, has launched a **new tool** that allows foreigners to write letters to Russian political prisoners. In this essay,*

Helpdesk Media correspondent Ksenia Mironova and OVD-Info editor Dan Storyev explain why you should use it.

Like the Soviet Union, modern-day Russia has **record numbers** of political prisoners; at this moment, OVD-Info knows of at least 988. As Vladimir Putin's reign intensifies, ever more people are persecuted daily. Repression in Russia takes many forms — **poisonings, fines, beatings, torture, harassment, murders** — but the Kremlin's weapon of choice is prison.

Confinement is so prevalent in Russia that prison slang and traditions have become **a part** of mainstream culture. Anyone can end up in prison, but dissidents are especially vulnerable. In the Kremlin's eyes, anyone can be a dissident, moreover, from **journalists and ecologists to police officers and firefighters**. And the Kremlin is keen to turn them all into political prisoners.

Many are imprisoned for anti-war activism. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine is the outcome of the Kremlin's repressions, and it's made anti-war protests the ultimate challenge to the system. Once imprisoned, dissidents risk being exposed to **torture, hunger, humiliation**, and more. **Repulsive stories** about Russia's prisons surface regularly, but there is still hope.

While activists cannot simply overpower the state and bust the innocent out of lockup, there are still ways to help the Putin regime's prisoners. Even now, Russia has a surprisingly large number of human rights activists working to **provide** legal aid for the persecuted and to **fundraise** for their defense. There are also coordinated campaigns to **send letters** to political prisoners and even to **find gluten-free food** for those who need it. It might seem unremarkable, but it's nothing short of miraculous that activists succeed in this work despite Russia's brutal authoritarianism today.

Outsiders often ask how they can support the Russians who courageously stand up to the Kremlin. You might feel powerless, but there are many ways to help. Of course, donations to rights organizations and independent media outlets help sustain crucial activism and journalism, but there is another way to help that many people don't consider: writing letters to political prisoners.

For those behind bars, letters and postcards become a singular thread connecting them to other people amid the harsh conditions of cold, sleep deprivation, and hunger. In her book «Trauma and Healing, » psychiatrist Judith Herman explains that personal belongings help prisoners maintain contact with the outside world. Even from strangers, letters are one of the few glimmers of hope a prisoner can receive.

Prisoners in Russia live under an information blockade. Their access to the news media is limited to a handful of state-run television channels and a few radio stations. Inmates fortunate enough to meet occasionally with lawyers or loved ones can receive outside news, but time is limited, and most of these moments are devoted to discussing legal matters and detention conditions or simply being with family members.

Letters can be a source of news that lifts the veil of the Kremlin's propaganda. Censorship of correspondence is still a major obstacle, however. Letters containing excerpts from independent media articles may be blocked, and sending them could even lead to the harassment of the intended recipient. To send correspondence safely, it's important to know what kind of information a prisoner seeks.

In some cases, letters help protect an inmate from pressure at the hands of prison administrators. Correspondence tells jailers that a prisoner has not been forgotten and that there's ongoing attention paid to their case. Even as police violence often goes unpunished, demonstrations of outside interest can have an impact.

To send these letters, there are a few simple rules. They must be written in Russian. While writing in other languages is technically legal, censors will likely reject it because they can't read it. Prisoners are not allowed digital devices, so they can't watch a video or listen to a song attached to an email. The letters also can't include anything that might anger the censors, like the incitement of violence.

OVD-Info's Letters Across Borders project makes it possible to write a letter to a Russian political prisoner in a language other than Russian and send it for free. If you don't already have a prisoner in mind, you can consult OVD-Info's Anti-War Infographics for a list of all known anti-war political dissidents in Russia, classified by occupation, prison sentence, and biography.

Political prisoners usually led active social lives before they were locked up, which makes the loss of Internet and telephone access particularly difficult. They can regain some of that interconnectivity, however, through you. Send them memes! Send them tweets! Keep them updated on the world's changing cultural context.

As with the news, you must be careful when sharing memes. For example, don't send anything with topics related to the LGBTQ community. In Russian prisons, this topic is highly stigmatized, and censors might even leak letters to the prison's general population in order to turn the prisoner into an outcast. For example, this is what [happened](#) to the jailed activist Azat Miftakhov.

Correspondence with political prisoners offers support to those suffering for their political views and activism, of course, but it also keeps focus on the topic of imprisonment itself in Russia. Letters to political prisoners are vital to maintaining the country's civil society and reminding the regime's victims that they're not alone.

Dan Storyev is a journalist and editor at OVD-Info. **Ksenia Mironova** is a correspondent at Helpdesk Media and is the partner of jailed journalist **Ivan Safronov**.

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