

Political Prisoners in Ukraine: A Crisis Ignored by Western Media

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Global Research, July 13, 2016
[Truth Out](#) 1 July 2016

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights, United Nations](#)

In-depth Report: [UKRAINE REPORT](#)

An investigative delegation of the United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture suspended an official visit to Ukraine last month after the Security Service of Ukraine denied the UN officials access to several parts of the country. The suspension of the visit highlights the dire situation of political prisoners in Ukraine.

The regions to which the delegation was denied access are areas where, as Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture [Chair Sir Malcolm Evans stated](#), “We have heard numerous and serious allegations that people have been detained and where torture or ill-treatment may have occurred.”

These regions are located in the front line zones of Donetsk region, controlled by Ukraine. The Security Service has detention facilities in Kramatorsk, Mariupol and Artyomovsk, where it keeps Ukrainians with “pro-Russian” views, according to Larisa Shesler, the head of [the Union of Political Emigrants and Political Prisoners of Ukraine](#).

Shesler is from Mykolaiv in southern Ukraine. At the beginning of 2014, she participated in peaceful protests against the Euromaidan, which, in the perception of protesters, threatened the dismantlement of the Ukrainian state. In May 2014, the Security Service opened a criminal case against her on accusations of “separatism,” and she fled to Moscow.

By the end of 2014, Shesler and her comrades — political exiles like herself from Kherson, Odessa, Mykolaiv, Sumy, Lviv, Ternopil and other cities — organized the Union of Political Emigrants and Political Prisoners of Ukraine. One of the main activities of the Union is human rights advocacy for political prisoners in Ukraine, because the prisoners’ existence is not reported in Western media and not even reported well in Russia. The Union maintains a database of political prisoners and helps prisoners to defend their interests, in part by connecting them to people who can provide legal aid or financial assistance to pay for lawyers and other court-related costs.

Anton Herashchenko, a deputy of Ukrainian parliament and advisor to the minister of interior of Ukraine, [has stated](#) that there are 4,000 open criminal cases in Ukraine against people accused of “separatism.” According to Shesler, there are hundreds of people detained in Kharkiv and around 150-200 in Odessa, while many are imprisoned in territories bordering Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics. They were arrested for organizing referendums in May of 2014 in favor of decentralizing political power in Ukraine, or they were taken randomly at road checkpoints.

In Kyiv, Odessa and Mykolaiv, ordinary citizens were arrested for expressing publicly their political opinions. Larisa Shesler cites one example. In 2014, a group of people was arrested in Kryvyi Rih for distributing the newspaper Novorossiia that was being printed officially in Odessa. They were given five years in prison. The one woman among them was released conditionally and is under house arrest, but the men are still in prison.

Shesler is in contact with the common-law wife of Evgeni Mefedov, a citizen of Russia and taxi driver who is in detention in Odessa. He is accused of taking part in the protest in Odessa on May 2, 2014, that was described by authorities as a “pro-Russian riot.”

On May 27, 2016, [the Odessa court decided to release him under house arrest](#). But “Right Sector” (Pravyi Sektor) extremists stormed the courtroom to prevent his release, searching all the cars that were leaving the premises, including police cars. According to Shesler, the judges in the case were suitably frightened and pronounced a new indictment against Mefedov — accusing him of threatening to kill one of the extremists who had disrupted his planned release — and he was again taken into custody.

Evgeni Mefedov is neither a politician nor an activist, Shesler said, and his detention has caused him deep psychological distress. In December 2015, he cut the veins of his arms trying to commit suicide while in detention. [Mefedov told](#) Russian journalist Illia Filipov that the main reason for his imprisonment was his possession of a Russian passport. Shesler concurred, explaining that when Ukrainian authorities launched their investigation of the May 2 massacre, they sought to present it as the work of Russian provocateurs.

Since the beginning of pro-Russian rallies in South-Eastern Ukraine, central TV stations and mass media, controlled by oligarchs who supported the overthrow of President Yanukovich by Euromaidan, alleged that these mass rallies were spurred by Russian agents. This was contrary to the obvious: Large segments of the population in South-Eastern Ukraine did not approve of the violent change of power in Kyiv, which started as a peaceful protest against Yanukovich decision to postpone the signing of Ukraine’s Association with the European Union. This movement became known as “Euromaidan.” It became radicalized as right-wing nationalist paramilitary groups got actively involved in the protests.

South-Eastern Ukraine has always been close to Russia culturally and economically, so it did not accept Euromaidan. The nationalist government, which came to power on anti-Russian rhetoric, attempted to recast genuine anti-nationalist feelings of pro-Russian Ukrainians as provoked and paid for by Russian “spies” and “terrorists.” For instance, in the aftermath of a May 2 fire at the Trade Union Building in Odessa, in which 48 Odessa residents died, one of the main news services in Ukraine, TSN, which belongs to the supporter of Euromaidan oligarch Igor Kolomoisky, [claimed that among dead were 15 Russians](#). As it turned out, this was incorrect: No citizen of Russia was found among the casualties.

Ukraine’s Secret Prisons

The Union of Political Emigrants and Political Prisoners of Ukraine has been presenting evidence on the existence of secret prisons to various international bodies, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Shesler and her colleagues contacted the International Red Cross, which has offices in Ukraine, and gave them coordinates of the sites that they allege are secret prisons. In February 2016, Shesler said the Red Cross requested that the Security Service of Ukraine

show it these places, but the Security Service refused to do so.

Shesler argues that the Security Service of Ukraine's refusal to grant access to these prisons is compelling evidence that the accusations of secret prisons are true. In its latest report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) acknowledges the gross violations of human rights being perpetrated by the government of Ukraine. Previous reports were mostly focused on the alleged transgression of the DPR and LPR self-defense forces ("armed groups," to use the terminology of the OHCHR. The [14th report states](#) that the Security Service of Ukraine systematically uses torture, ill-treatment and intimidation against critics of the Kyiv government.

The post-Euromaidan regime in Kyiv has come down hard on those who disagree with it. Even those who supported the Euromaidan were not spared, like Ukrainian journalist Ruslan Kotsaba. He is an outspoken opponent of the so-called "anti-terrorist operation" unleashed by Kyiv against Donetsk and Lugansk. Kotsaba was arrested in February 2015 by the Security Service of Ukraine and accused of high treason. [At a trial on May 12, 2016](#), Ivano-Frankivsk city court acquitted him of this accusation, but found him guilty of "obstructing operations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine." Kotsaba was sentenced to three years and six months in prison.

Ruslan Kotsaba is one of the rare Western Ukrainians who publicly voiced their opposition to this war. In Eastern Ukraine, opposition to civil war is widespread, as were protests against Euromaidan, which is why arrests among activists of the anti-Maidan movement number in the thousands. Here are two examples.

Yuri Apukhtin

[Yuri Apukhtin](#) is a 67-year-old retired engineer with two university degrees in economics and technical sciences. He was a deputy of the Kharkiv regional council. In 2009, Apukhtin became the leader of a grassroots organization called "Great Rus." In 2013, he initiated the integration of several dozens of separate social associations under the umbrella of Kharkiv Civic Forum. At the beginning of 2014, he became coordinator of the forum, which served as the basis of the social movement "Yugo-Vostok" (translated as "South-East").

Apukhtin has been active in the public sphere, publishing articles on the internet, as well as participating in television debates on Kharkiv regional channels and Russian channels. In 2011-2013, he coauthored a series of short videos, "[500 Seconds of Truth About Ukraine](#)," which presents Ukrainians and their history in a traditional Soviet-era interpretation as a brotherly nation of Russia.

On April 30, 2014, Apukhtin was arrested in Kharkiv under accusations of organizing mass unrest and illegal acts. The former deputy of the Verkhovna Rada, Oleg Tsarov, who actively opposed Euromaidan and later had to flee Ukraine, bailed Apukhtin out of jail. Apukhtin continued to participate in peaceful protests and organize roundtables and forums, calling for the cessation of fratricidal war in Ukraine.

On December 19, 2014, a district court in Kharkiv changed the restrictive measures invoked earlier against Apukhtin and rearrested him, this time with no right to release on bail. [He was charged](#) with "public calls for a violent change or overthrow of the constitutional order."

The prosecution has resorted to unusual measures in an effort to provide reliable evidence of Apukhtin's guilt. One of Apukhtin's lawyers, [Evgeni Nadolia, told](#) a journalist of Svobodnaia Pressa Andrei Dmitriev that prosecutors have even used what is called in Ukraine "philological expertise" — when a language professional is called to analyze enunciations of the accused. The chair of Russian language at the Karazin National University of Kharkiv, who was called in to play this role, accused Apukhtin of name-calling, demonizing the enemy and portraying authorities negatively, all of which can be interpreted as an indirect "call to overthrow the constitutional order."

During peaceful protest actions in Kharkiv, [Apukhtin had, indeed, talked](#) about the status of the Russian language in Ukraine, as it is a thorny question in Ukraine. One third of Ukrainian citizens consider Russian their mother tongue. The Ukrainian Constitution recognizes only Ukrainian as an official language of Ukraine. Yanukovich came to power thanks to the support of South-Eastern Ukraine, to which he promised to make Russian the second official language of Ukraine, but he betrayed his promise.

However in 2012, Russian and other minority languages were granted the status of regional languages to be used in public administration, educational institutions and cultural institutions in regions where a given ethnic minority constitutes more than 10 percent of local population. The new Euromaidan government, which came to power through a coup d'état as a result of Euromaidan protests, tried to abolish the law on regional languages. This sent a clear signal to South-Eastern Ukraine that the new government is anti-Russian. The acting president of Ukraine, Turchynov, revoked the abolition of the law, but it was too late. This move by Kyiv government sparked protests all throughout South-East, and especially in Donbass.

Apukhtin also talked about a necessity to organize referendums and to reform the Constitution of Ukraine to allow for federalization and decentralization. The Kharkiv Research Institute of Forensic Expertise conducted its own linguistic analysis of Apukhtin's speeches. It found nothing criminal in them.

The court continues to refuse the defense attorneys' motion to allow Apukhtin to be released from jail under house arrest. He has been detained in Kharkiv pre-trial prison since December 2014.

Elena Glishchinskaya

Elena Glishchinskaya-Romanova was editor-in-chief of a TV station in the Odessa region. She was arrested in her house by the Security Service of Ukraine on April 29, 2015. Members of the Security Service's "Alfa" anti-terrorist squad broke into Glishchinskaya's apartment at 5:30 am in search of agitation and propaganda material. According to Glishchinskaya's [post in Facebook](#), they woke up her two children at gunpoint while keeping her at gunpoint the whole time.

According to Glishchinskaya, Alfa officers found in her apartment 20 leaflets, a 2010 calendar of the Party of Regions (the party of the overthrown President Victor Yanukovich), manuals and books on journalism, books on the history of the Odessa region and two computers. Based on this "evidence," the Security Service of Ukraine opened a criminal case accusing Glishchinskaya of being a threat to the territorial integrity of Ukraine. A court sentenced her to [two months of preventive detention](#), which was prolonged several times.

Her case is part of the criminal investigation into the activities of the People’s Council of Bessarabia. The Security Service of Ukraine alleges that Glishchinskaya colluded with representatives of the Russian Federation and created this Council with the goal of separating southern districts of Odessa region, known as Bessarabia, from Ukraine. [According to the indictment by Primorsk district court](#), the materials of the TV station where Glishchinskaya has worked presented opinions on the national-cultural uniqueness of Bessarabia, covered spontaneous protests of local residents against military conscription and raised question of strengthening local self-governance.

While in custody, Glishchinskaya became pregnant. Her physical condition was endangered and she had to be hospitalized several times, but she was not allowed to remain in hospital. She was brought back to prison immediately after receiving treatment and kept in the medical unit of the pretrial detention facility. Thanks to the intervention of the European Court on Human Rights, aided by the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, she was transferred to a maternity hospital where on April 27 [she gave birth to a baby boy](#). Then, on May 14, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko granted a pardon to Glishchinskaya and another political prisoner in Odessa. On June 14, they were flown to Moscow on a special flight, and Glishchinskaya traveled with her 2-month old baby.

The cases of Yuri Apukhtin and Elena Glishchinskaya demonstrate the ways in which the current Ukrainian state is violating the human right to freedom of opinion. Both of them were imprisoned because they dared to speak up, to challenge the official nationalist ideology, which the post-Euromaidan government has imposed on the country. They are both opinion leaders, which is more dangerous than any weapon. People sitting in high offices in Kyiv know that the other, pro-Russian Ukraine has not disappeared. It fell silent, couched under the wave of arrests and intimidations, unleashed by Kyiv. And it waits. If the wind changes, it will re-emerge, as strong as before.

The government that came to power in Ukraine as a result of Euromaidan claims to be democratic and inclusive, but the current reality is quite different. Ukraine cannot hope to build a democracy if its state throws people in jail for dissenting opinions. Democracies do not do that. They are supposed to respect and embrace ideological differences.

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