



The GULag is still alive

Olga Romanova
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Russia's penal system has not been reformed since the late-Stalinist period and is essentially managed by the FSB. Alexei Navalny will be sent to one of the many correction colonies that serve as prisons. Conditions in these deeply backward institutions are atrocious, says Olga Romanova, founder of the NGO Russia Behind Bars.

Osteuropa: *What is your opinion of the trial of Alexei Navalny?*

Olga Romanova: The trial was a farce. But Navalny has achieved great things. His courage is as impressive as his ability to demonstrate publicly what goes behind a trial like this. Everyone was able to see how the courts operate in such cases in Russia.

First the completely illegal hearing at the police station, immediately following his detention; then the sentence passed on 2 February 2020, which will see him spend a long time in prison. Parole was revoked in connection with charges and a judgement that date back to 2014 and which the European Court of Human Rights found to be unlawful. The Russian authorities accepted the ECHR decision and even paid Alexei Navalny and his brother Oleg Navalny the compensation that was ordered. In this respect, the judgment is absurd.

Golden toilet brush — the symbol of the protest. Photo by Sergey Korneev, CC BY-SA 4.0 via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Amnesty International has criticised the hearing in the police station as 'making a mockery of justice' and described Navalny's treatment as 'unprecedented'. Do you agree?

Unfortunately not. Neither has there been any special interpretation of the law in Navalny's case, nor would I describe the judicial process as unprecedented. What we have seen is typical of the Russian legal system. If anyone thinks another person would have been treated differently, they're wrong. At most there are variations. If the defendant is close to the court - let's say a policeman who has tortured detainees, or a corrupt official - then the court will behave just as unlawfully. Only, in this case, it will rule in the defendant's interests, and hand down a lighter sentence.



What does that mean for the state of the justice system?

For a long time now, the courts have been nothing more than buildings with a sign outside them reading 'court'. Russia no longer has an independent or fair judiciary.

Navalny was sentenced to two years and eight months' imprisonment. He will probably have to serve his sentence in a normal regimen colony.

It's a mistake to assume that Navalny will serve only two years and eight months. He will be released much later than that, if at all. It depends entirely on the will of just one person: Vladimir Putin. There are all kinds of ways of keeping him in prison for as long as is considered necessary. Officially, of course the reasons will be 'strictly legal'. Next year or the year after, Navalny's prison term may be increased to ten years.

What are the conditions in normal regimen colonies?

Navalny is likely to be sent to a camp around 500 km from Moscow. The camps are generally located in small towns in regions that are difficult to access. The camps themselves are about four hectares in size, with single-storey and two-storey brick buildings. They were built at least fifty years ago and are in a bad state.

View of the maximum security penal colony PKU IK-5, Kokhma, Ivanovo region, September 26, 2019. Photo by Avtoloer, CC BY-SA 4.0, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

They are secured by several rows of concrete walls and barbed wire. At the centre of each camp is a church. Camps generally house around 1000 detainees; prisoners live in barracks of between 100 and 120 people. They sleep on bunk beds in rooms that were originally built to hold 50 to 60. There is one toilet and one washbasin per barrack. During the day you're not allowed to sit on your bed, or you'll be punished. You can only eat in the canteen. There are no knives and forks, only spoons.

Camps are divided into two parts: the accommodation sector, but where prisoners are forbidden to move about freely, and the work sector, where Navalny will presumably work too, sewing police uniforms, for example. Prisoners earn only minimal pay for their work.

Who are the prisoners?

About a third of the inmates of normal regimen colonies have been convicted of drugs offences. But they're not drug bosses. In Russia, those people are sent to prison. We're talking about consumers. Addicts are imprisoned, not treated. In Russia, methadone therapy is forbidden, for example.

Another third are petty criminals: thieves, burglars, hooligans and thugs. And the last third are serious offenders, people serving sentences for child abuse, rape, murder or terrorism. Many inmates end up in these kind of camps by chance, due to the way law is practised in Russia. Only around a third of them are actually criminals.



Navalny will probably be Russia's most famous prisoner. Does fame bring protection? Will international attention ensure his safety?

Fame doesn't hurt. And international attention in particular does bring a certain level of personal safety for Navalny personally. But not total safety.

How is the prison system organised in Russia? Who controls it? What's the difference between a prison and a penal colony?

Prisons are the responsibility of the Federal Penitentiary Service, which is subordinated to the Ministry of Justice. All senior prison officials are recruited from the Federal Security Service, the FSB.

The modern Russian word for 'prison' (*tjurma*) essentially means 'place of detention'. Colloquially, everything is known as a 'prison': pre-trial centres, detention facilities for people accused of minor offences, and all types of colonies (labour camps, correction colonies, re-education colonies, etc.). In legal terms, however, there are very few real prisons in Russia - eight in total. This is a special form of penitentiary that predominantly holds people convicted of capital crimes. Navalny is not in one of these prisons and is unlikely to end up in one.

He was first held in the remand prison in Moscow. This and the Lefortovo remand prison in Moscow, which is used by the FSB, are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice. All other pre-trial prisons are controlled by the regional authorities.

Depending on the sentence, detainees are held in an open colony, a normal regimen colony or a strict regimen colony. These are various forms of so-called 'correction colonies', where prison sentences are combined with compulsory labour. Finally, there are correction colonies for inmates sentenced to life and 'closed prisons'.

Are these camps or penal colonies a reflection of Russian society or more a relic of the Soviet era?

The whole of Russian society is a relic of the Soviet era! In order to understand the prison system in Russia, one has to widen the picture. The first concentration camps were set up in South Africa during the Boer War in the late nineteenth century. It was a cheap and efficient method that was replicated in many countries. In the twentieth century, two countries above all made use of the camp system: Nazi Germany and the USSR. In the Soviet Union, this system was named GULag in 1930, after the responsible authority, the main camp administration (*Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei*).

But the GULags are history...

Let me speak metaphorically. The GULag used to be a bloodthirsty, fire-breathing dragon that ate people alive. Hundreds of years have passed, the dragon has grown old and has no fire left, its claws are blunted and it doesn't have the appetite it used to. It looks more like an elderly caterpillar. But it's still the same dragon. It is still alive.

The current penal system in Russia has never - repeat never - undergone fundamental



reform. The most that was done, under NKVD chief Lavrentiy Beria, was to remove the penal system from the control of the Chekists and the police and to bring it within the Ministry of Justice. That's all. Even today, the penal system is essentially managed by the FSB. Its entire management comes from the domestic security services.

But it's no different on the outside. The whole of Russia is controlled by secret service agents, starting with Putin. Many citizens even like it this way: a firm hand, order, the longing for great power status...

Have prisons and prison conditions changed as a result of Russia's membership of the Council of Europe?

Russian citizens can seek protection of their rights by complaining to the European Court of Human Rights. But prison conditions have remained the same.

Should Russia be expelled from the Council of Europe?

This would without doubt lead to a worsening of the situation for prisoners.

In 2008, you founded the NGO Russia Behind Bars (Rus Sidyashchaya), which campaigns for prisoners' rights, social support for prisoners and their relatives, and better prison conditions. Part of your organization was declared a 'foreign agent' in 2018. You yourself accused of embezzling donations and had to leave Russia. You continue with your work despite this harassment. What have you achieved?

Our efforts at first produced some results. Our campaign for reform of the penal system succeeded in prompting a number of legislative changes. But since the annexation of Crimea that belongs to the past. A few years ago, Russia Behind Bars was commissioned by the state-run Center for Strategic Research to propose reforms of the penal system. None of this would be possible today.

Thanks to our collaboration with the European Commission, we have been able to open six 'legal clinics' in regional detention facilities, providing humanitarian and legal assistance and educational projects. We are not giving up on our attempts to change the law. Currently our most important work is in campaigning against slave labour in prison camps and the more recent practice of revoking the citizenship of people released from prison. And we will continue to work on a concept for reforming the penal system. Sooner or later the need will be recognized.

How do you explain the heavy measures taken by the authorities against people demonstrating against the arrest and conviction of Alexei Navalny, and especially the large number of arrests?

Putin has changed his strategy in his battle against political opponents and discontented citizens. He has shown that, whoever you are, your treatment will be merciless. But that will soon become a problem for him. Talleyrand summed it up: 'You can lean on bayonets, but you can't sit on them.' Putin has seated himself on bayonets. Now the Siloviki, the power apparatus, hold him hostage. He's cut off his own escape route.



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Is there a connection between the developments in Belarus and in Russia?

The protests in Belarus have undoubtedly frightened the powers that be in Moscow, and Putin personally. This goes some way to explaining the brutality of the regime's reaction to the protests. Belarus went through the first stage of protest for us. In Russia it all happened without songs, without any hugs for OMON police. That kind of thing won't happen here.

Has Navalny's conviction strengthened or weakened the Putin regime?

We don't know. The outcome isn't clear yet.

Interview by Manfred Sapper.

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