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Photo Series Draws Attention to Political Prisoners

By Sergey Chernov

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Yury Shevchuk and Katrin in a photo for the campaign “Children of Political Prisoners of Present-Day Russia.” **Vladimir Telegin**

St. Petersburg — Vladimir Telegin, a local photographer best known for his black-and-white photographs of art group Voina, and Maxim Gromov, founder of the rights group Prisoners Union, have come up with a new series of photographs depicting DDT frontman Yury Shevchuk with the 5-year-old daughter of an imprisoned political activist.

Katrin Fomchenkova was brought to St. Petersburg for the photo session from Smolensk, a city about 700 kilometers from St. Petersburg, where her mother Taisia Osipova has been imprisoned since November, when she was arrested on suspicion of dealing drugs. Her supporters say the charges are fabricated, pointing out that prosecution witnesses have been kept secret, while pro-Kremlin activists acted as witnesses of the search.

Osipova faces eight to 20 years in prison. Her supporters say counter-extremism Center E

agents planted drugs in her apartment because they wanted Osipova to testify against her husband Sergei Fomchenkov, an activist with The Other Russia political party.

The series is part of a charity campaign titled "Children of Political Prisoners of Present-Day Russia," which was launched in February and aims to give publicity to cases of civic and political activists being put in prison on dubious charges across Russia by arranging meetings between their children and celebrities such as Shevchuk, the Voina art group and movie actress Lia Akhedzhakova, who have so far taken part in the campaign.

In the video accompanying the photos, Shevchuk says the public believes that the charges against Osipova have been fabricated.

"How many people who really do steal from and destroy Russia are at large, while Taisia, a wonderful young woman who only wishes well to people, is in prison? It's not fair," he says.

The photo session took place ahead of another hearing into Osipova's case in Smolensk, which was scheduled for Monday, Sept. 26. On that date, however, the court refused to conduct an expert analysis of the fingerprints found on the bag of heroin as Osipova had asked, and prolonged her pretrial detention for another three months. Osipova, who has diabetes, has been repeatedly denied requests to see her daughter.

Prisoners Union founder Gromov, himself a former prisoner, came up with the idea after watching a television documentary about the 1979 miniseries "The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed (The Age of Mercy)" starring Vladimir Vysotsky, an iconic Soviet singer-songwriter and actor.

The documentary told the story of Vladimir Goldman, Vysotsky's manager, who also appeared in the miniseries and was sent to prison two years later for financial violations in connection with Vysotsky's 1978 series of concerts in Kharkiv, Ukraine.

According to the documentary, Goldman's life in the camp changed for the better after his fellow prisoners saw him on screen with Vysotsky.

Vysotsky was once described as the "voice of the silent nation" for his songs, which were loved by very different social groups in the Soviet Union, even if few were officially released. Shevchuk now occupies a similar niche of dissenting singer-songwriter, loved by the nation but mistrusted by the authorities.

"Maxim came up with the idea of taking photographs with people whose moral authority for Russians is unquestionable — people respected by cops and politicians and prisoners, especially prisoners — to help those who are imprisoned," Telegin says.

"Why children? Because many of them have children left outside."

Gromov, chairman of the Prisoners Union rights group that he formed in 2008, spent three years in prisons and a labor camp for taking part in a protest against the monetization of benefits in 2004. He was among a group of National Bolsheviks who occupied several offices in the Health and Social Development Ministry and is featured in a famous photograph in which he is seen throwing a portrait of then-President Vladimir Putin out of the ministry's window. For this, Gromov was sentenced to five years in custody, though the term was later

shortened to three years.

“I fully rely on Maxim in the choice of people for whom he is campaigning. I trust him completely and don’t recheck his choices, because he is a very conscientious man,” Telegin says.

“My job is the aesthetic aspect. That is, I should photograph them in such a way that viewers will stand up for this person unconditionally. If there’s no art, then you won’t incite any compassion from people. I see it as my objective to do it aesthetically flawlessly, as far as I can.

“The documentary format for me is an artistic device. It’s simply a way of presenting the material. The documentary format works best for me. I have no doubt that it’s art. If it weren’t art, people wouldn’t like it. People write that first they are impressed by the photographs, and only then by all the rest.

“A person should be hooked like a fish,” he continues. “If it’s just a photograph of Shevchuk or Akhedzhakova, a person will say, ‘So what?’ The photograph should surprise and impress him or her, so that they stop and take a closer look, otherwise it will be aimless shooting.”

Telegin says his political views differ from those of Gromov. “I am not that radical, but I believe that the authorities should be constrained from making wrong moves. In our last session, Shevchuk said that in the public’s views, Taisia is innocent. So I reflect public opinion to some extent. The authorities should be forced to listen. The more we speak about it, the less lawlessness there will be.”

Telegin says he was a businessman before becoming a photographer.

“Five years ago, I was into totally different things, but when I met [punk band] PTVP, I got interested in the underground,” he says.

“I met them in 2008, but I started taking photos probably a year earlier. Then it became impossible to combine business and photography, so I started doing only photography.”

Telegin says PTVP attracted him with their powerful lyrics and music, and the sheer onslaught of their live performances.

“PTVP are red hot — not only with their topicality and social subjects, but first of all with their aesthetic value,” he says.

Telegin uses Photoshop to work on the photographs in color, before seeing how they look in black and white.

“Color is redundant information in certain things, which prevents you from seeing the very essence,” he says.

“Black and white prevails with me, not only in such sad subjects as children of political prisoners, but in other subjects as well. I take away color to bring something that I want to the viewer. Photography attempts to prove that it’s objective, that it’s reality.

“But in fact, it’s the reality that formed in my head. It shows what was in the frame, of course, but also what I thought, whether I was sad or happy, that’s what a photograph shows. It’s through my eyes. And black-and-white photography often expresses it best.”

Katrin also took part in the campaign’s second session in March with Voina, while the third featured the 2-year-old grandson of the imprisoned Yukos employee Alexei Pichugin, who was taken to meet movie actress Akhedzhakova at her dacha in Domodedovo near Moscow.

Telegin says all four sessions are equally important to him, but he was particularly impressed by the first one, featuring Shevchuk.

In the photograph opening the most recent series, Shevchuk squatted down beside Katrin, who was sitting on a stool.

“He has a flawless aesthetic feel,” Telegin says.

“First he was standing, but then he squatted down to be at the same height as the child. I didn’t ask him to — I generally try not to ask people to do anything for the camera. Later, when I was looking at the photograph, I realized that this squatting pose is a prisoner’s pose. Prisoners squat like that in camps. But it happened purely by accident.”

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