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Standing Up Against Racist Violence in Russia

By Maria Rozalskaya

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Nearly 500 people attended a pro-tolerance march in Moscow on Monday to commemorate the murders of lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova. Some held signs that said "I am Markelov" and "I am Baburova" — in a nod to the "I am Charlie" campaign. A group of pro-Kremlin, Christian Orthodox activists followed the marchers and tried to provoke them into fighting along the route.

I once asked Stas Markelov how he endured a life of death threats, gory cases and indifferent judges. We had just left the Moscow City Court, where Stas was representing the mother of a murdered anti-fascist activist. I went to the court, along with others, to support the victim's family and cheer for their attorney. But the atmosphere was dominated by a loud and intimidating crowd of the accused murderer's buddies from Moscow's booming neo-Nazi scene.

Afterward, Stas and I clung onto the handrails of our shaky metro carriage. He wore some kind of a cloak and was joking and laughing. It was then that I asked him — but I can't remember

now what he said in response. He probably made a joke instead of answering with something important. I've been trying to remember his words for days, but they won't come.

A year later, on Jan. 19, 2009, Stas was shot on the street, in broad daylight, along with Novaya Gazeta journalist Anastasia Baburova. The neo-Nazis convicted of their murders have been in prison for a while now, with related cases involving new defendants popping up from time to time.

The fact that I can't remember Stas' words is not so important; in the end, we weren't even that close. Eventually I'll forget the image of the slim figure in the cloak. He will be remembered by friends, relatives, and close colleagues. But I will never forget Stas's work, or why he was killed.

Every year since those murders, the January 19 Committee has held an anti-fascist march in Moscow on the anniversary of Stas and Anastasia's death; activists in other cities hold rallies as well. This year, the organizers announced that it would be held not only in memory of Stas and Anastasia and other slain anti-fascist activists, but also in memory of the known and unnamed victims of racist and nationalist violence in Russia.

The committee's agenda is desperately needed, and focusing on eradicating racism and xenophobia is more appropriate for anti-fascists, whether they be youth groups or human rights attorneys, than attempting to save the Khimki forest or joining radical nationalists to elect an Opposition Coordination Council — the most prominent displays of the anti-fascist movement's activity of the past six years.

It's a pity that those high-profile causes have pushed out of the public's eye an array of other critical issues. As a result, victims of racist violence have had even fewer people to turn to for support in our xenophobic society. Hate crimes are terrible not only because good people die as a result. Rather, hate crimes are terrible because they are a kind of terrorism aimed at silencing entire groups.

It is dangerous to impose one's ideological views on the deceased. We are also on thin ice if we appeal to their memory or enlist their influential shadows for a cause.

But I have no doubt Stas would support the initiative, having worked on behalf of several murdered anti-fascists as well as the family of Elza Kungayeva, a woman who was abducted and murdered by a Russian colonel during the second Chechen war.

As the world has recently been covered by the inscription "Je suis Charlie," we must also say: I'm Markelov, the human rights lawyer. I'm Baburova, the brave journalist. I'm Khursheda Sultonova, the blameless 9-year-old Tajik girl stabbed to death. I'm Judge Chuvashov, the fearless judge who worked on hate crime cases, killed in a stairwell. I'm the nameless migrant janitor stabbed to death in a dark corner.

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