The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Sentsov Case Highlights Plight of Ukrainian Prisoners in Russian Jails

By Howard Amos

August 24, 2015



Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov

Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian film director accused of masterminding terrorist attacks in Crimea, is expected to be sentenced to a long prison term Tuesday after a high-profile and controversial trial — but the case has focused attention on an entire group of Ukrainians languishing in Russian prisons.

Alongside Sentsov, at least 12 other Ukrainians have been detained in Russia — on charges ranging from terrorism to espionage — since street demonstrations toppled Ukraine's pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych last year, sparking a standoff between Kiev and Moscow.

Ukraine has said it has difficulty obtaining access to its imprisoned citizens, who include an eastern Ukrainian cowherd, an antique coin collector and 23-year old amateur photographer.

Most are facing sentences of more than 20 years, and many claim to have been tortured. Public details on several of the cases are very sparse because they involve espionage charges.

The number of such prisoners is impossible to know but could run into dozens, according to Mark Feigin, a lawyer representing Nadezhda Savchenko, a Ukrainian pilot facing murder charges. "It's certain that they exist but to give an exact figure is difficult," he said.

Savchenko's case, like that of Sentsov, has garnered international attention but most of the other names are relatively unknown — even inside of Russian human rights and legal circles.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavel Klimkin said on Aug. 4 that there were 11 Ukrainians in Russian jails that Kiev considers to be "political prisoners," according to the Ukrainian UNIAN news agency.

Most of the prisoners have been held in Moscow, often in the Lefortovo prison run by Russia's Federal Security Service, or FSB, but are facing trials in different regions across the country — a move that lawyer Feigin said was designed to reduce public attention.

Savchenko will face trial in the small town of Donetsk, in Russia's Rostov region near the Ukrainian border — where investigators allege she illegally crossed into Russia. Other cases are expected to take place in the North Caucasus republic of Chechnya and the Russian cities of Bryansk and Yekaterinburg.

Sentsov and others being tried as part of cases against a group of alleged terrorists in the Black Sea region of Crimea, annexed by Russia last year, have appeared before a military court in the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don. New legislation means that terrorism charges in Russia are tried in military courts of which there are two: in Moscow or Rostov-on-Don..

Many relatives of the Ukrainians in Russian detention fear that they could be arrested if they visit their loved ones, according to Zoya Svetova, a journalist and human rights activist who has tracked many of the cases and met with most of the jailed Ukrainians.

"They were all tortured apart from Savchenko and [Yuri] Soloshenko," Svetova told The Moscow Times. Many are cooperating with investigators in the hope of getting lighter sentences, she added.

The Kremlin denies Russia has political prisoners. Vladimir Markin, a spokesperson for Russia's powerful Investigative Committee, told Izvestia newspaper Monday that neither the Savchenko nor Sentsov cases were political and labelled such accusations as "propaganda" peddled by the United States.

Russian courts very rarely give non-guilty verdicts, and experts suggest the only chance that many of the Ukrainians have of freedom is being swapped for Russian citizens captured by troops loyal to Kiev while fighting for Moscow-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The imprisonment of Ukrainians, and their treatment, is linked to the deterioration in relations between Moscow and Kiev, according to Svetova. "There is a hunt on at the moment for Ukrainians," she said.

The Moscow Times has used open source information and interviews to compile a list of 13

Ukrainians held in Russian prisons since Yanukovych's fall. One man, Yury Yatsenko, is now free — but all the others remain behind bars.

They are grouped according to the type of charges they face.

'War Crimes'

Sergei Litvinov

Arrested: August 2014

Stage: Pre-trial detention

Accusations: Murder, war crimes

Russian investigators allege that Sergei Litvinov, 32, a cowherd from Ukraine's Luhansk region who left school at the age of 14 and has difficulty reading and writing, is accused of raping several women and killing 37 Ukrainian civilians when he was a member of a far-right Ukrainian militia unit. Litvinov, currently in a Moscow prison, initially cooperated with investigators, but now denies his guilt, Kommersant newspaper reported last week. Litvinov, who has a wife and a teenage daughter, maintained he was seized by Russian security officials from a hospital in Rostov-on-Don after an operation for a badly infected tooth. During initial questioning, Litvinov said he badly beaten by men in black masks, given electric shocks and had a pistol fired by his head, according to testimony he gave to Novaya Gazeta newspaper earlier this year. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry has denied that Litvinov ever served in the Ukrainian military.

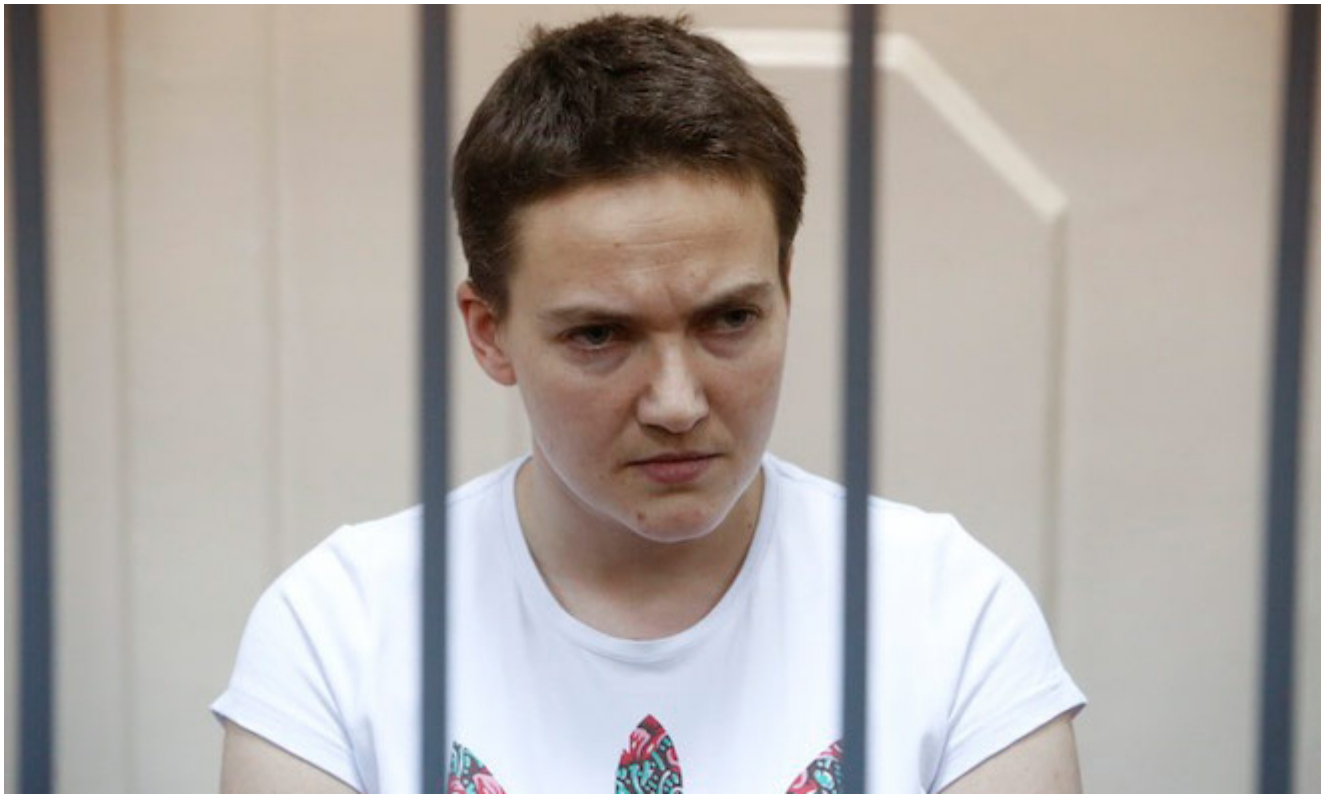
Nadezhda Savchenko

Arrested: July 2014

Stage: Preliminary hearings

Accusations: Murder

Perhaps Russia's most famous prisoner, Nadezhda Savchenko, 34, has become a hero in Ukraine after she alleged she was kidnapped, taken to Russia and accused of murder. Since her arrest, she has spent a total of 83 days on hunger strike. Russian investigators have said Savchenko was detained after she illegally crossed the border, while she claims she was abducted inside Ukraine and spirited across the border under the personal supervision of top rebels in the self-declared separatist governments of eastern Ukraine. Accused of spotting for a Ukrainian mortar crew that allegedly killed two Russian journalists, Savchenko faces a sentence of up to 25 years behind bars. A date for the start of her trial is likely to be fixed within days.



Sergei Karpukhin / Reuters

Nadezhda Savchenko

'Crimean Terrorists'

Gennady Afanasiev

Arrested: May 2014

Stage: Serving 7 year sentence

Accusations: Terrorism

Gennady Afanasiev, 23, was sentenced to seven years in prison in December by a Moscow court for carrying out terrorist attacks in Crimea under Sentsov's leadership. Afanasiev, a pro-Ukraine activist and keen photographer, cooperated with Russian investigators after his arrest on May 9 and admitted his guilt, providing much of the evidence on which Sentsov and his co-defendant Alexander Kolchenko were tried. But, in a dramatic twist, on Aug. 5 he told his lawyer that he wished to withdraw his testimony because it was given under torture. His lawyer, Alexander Popkov, told radio station Ekho Moskvy on Aug. 8 that Afanasiev said he was severely beaten by Russian FSB officers during questioning, drugged, forced to wear a gas mask that was pumped full of smoke, stripped naked, deprived of sleep and threatened with rape.


VK

Gennady Afanasiev

Alexei Chirny

Arrested: May 2014

Stage: Serving 7 year sentence

Accusations: Terrorism

Detained on May 9 like Afanasiev, Crimean historian Alexei Chirny was also accused of belonging to a terrorist cell led by Sentsov and carrying out attacks on the Black Sea peninsula. After admitting his guilt and cooperating with investigators, he was sentenced in April to seven years in prison by a military court in Rostov-on-Don. Evidence provided by Chirny was used extensively by prosecutors against Sentsov and Kolchenko. Chirny said in court that his testimony was given voluntarily but one of his lawyers, Ilya Novikov, maintained his client was tortured.

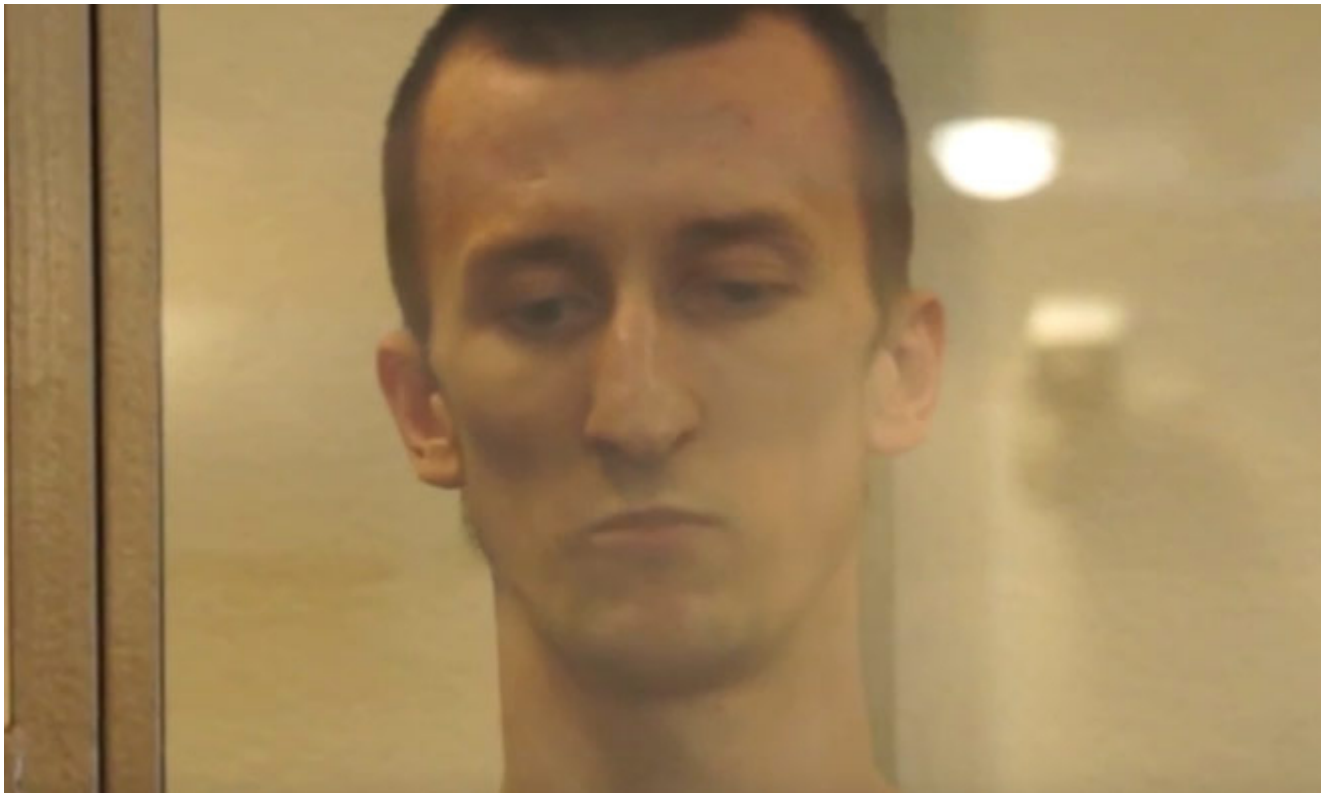
Alexander Kolchenko

Arrested: May 2014

Stage: On trial

Accusations: Terrorism

Alexander Kolchenko, 26, is accused of carrying out terrorist attacks in Crimea as part of an organization headed by Sentsov shortly after the Black Sea region was seized by Russia. Kolchenko, a left-wing activist, admitted setting fire to the offices of the ruling United Russia in early 2014 but rejected terrorism charges. Prosecutors have requested 12 years in prison for the activist, who will be sentenced Tuesday alongside Sentsov. In his closing words last week, Kolchenko denied being involved in terrorism, telling the court his case was "fabricated and politically motivated."



krymr.org / YouTube

Alexander Kolchenko

Oleg Sentsov

Arrested: May 2014

Stage: On trial

Accusations: Terrorism

Film director and Ukrainian activist, Oleg Sentsov, 39, is accused of being the mastermind behind a terrorist cell linked to Ukrainian nationalist organization Right Sector and organizing the fire-bombing of several pro-Russian organizations in Crimea last year. Despite dozens of European and Russian film directors calling for his release, prosecutors have requested a 23-year jail term. In a move that caused widespread disbelief, prosecutors dismissed Sentsov's claims of torture, alleging that his injuries — that they did not deny — were the result of a masochistic sexual game prior to his arrest. In his closing words last week,

Sentsov, who denies all the charges against him, dismissed the court as a "court of occupiers" and urged Russians "not to be afraid."

'Spies and Saboteurs'

Viktor Shur

Arrested: December 2014

Stage: Pre-trial detention

Accusations: Espionage

The nature of the charges mean that little is known about Viktor Shur, 58, an amateur coin collector and former oil worker, reportedly accused of spying. A Russian citizen, Shur had a Ukrainian residence permit and lived in the northeastern Ukrainian region of Chernigov. He was detained during a trip to the western Russian city of Bryansk, according to Svetova, and is likely to be tried there in closed proceedings. It is unclear of what exactly he is accused. Shur's son, Valery Shur, has said that his father is not a spy and is cooperating with Russian investigators in a bid to avoid a longer sentence, according to Ukrainian media reports.

Sergei Skirda

Arrested: February 2015

Stage: Pre-trial detention

Accusations: Revealing commercial secrets

Little information is also available about Sergei Skirda, a Ukrainian citizen arrested by the FSB earlier this year near the Urals city of Yekaterinburg. Skirda was reportedly an employee of a turbine factory owned by Ukraine's UkrRosMetall. Russian security services told news agency TASS in March that Skirda was detained as he was handing over cash in exchange for secret technical information.

Yury Soloshenko

Arrested: August 2014

Stage: Pre-trial detention

Accusations: Espionage

Pensioner Yury Soloshenko has been held in Moscow's Lefortovo prison for over a year after his arrest on suspicion of spying while on a trip to the Russian capital. Court hearings involving Soloshenko are closed because of the nature of the charges, but state-owned RIA Novosti news agency reported earlier this month that his pre-trial detention had been extended to Oct. 5. Svetova, who has spoken with Soloshenko, said a trial could begin as soon as next month. Soloshenko was the director of the Ukrainian Znamya factory, making parts

for the Russian missile industry, for about 20 years before retiring in 2010. His son, Alexander Soloshenko, told Russian news agency Interfax earlier this year he was on a business trip when he was arrested. "If he is [sentenced] on espionage charges then it's practically a death penalty. He's 72. He will never get out," Soloshenko said.

Valentin Vygovsky

Arrested: Fall 2014

Stage: Pre-trial detention

Accusations: Illegal banking activity/espionage

There are few details about the case of Ukrainian Valentin Vygovsky, 32, who is reportedly being held in Moscow's Lefortovo prison. According to a Facebook post by Pavel Shelkoviy, a Ukrainian activist in Moscow, Vygovsky, who is from Kiev, was arrested in Crimea and "was re-directed to Rostov-on-Don with a bag on his head and then to Moscow." Human rights activist and journalist Zoya Svetova said, after a meeting with him in January, that he was very frightened and that his case was set to be re-qualified from illegal banking activity to espionage.

Yury Yatsenko

Arrested: May 2014

Stage: Freed in May 2015

Accusation: Smuggling explosives

Ukrainian law student Yury Yatsenko was arrested in his hotel room in the Russian town of Oboyan in the southwestern Kursk region while on a trip selling electrical goods. After a year in different Russian jails, Yatsenko was convicted of smuggling 40 grams of hunting gunpowder but was let out on appeal for time served, and returned to his hometown of Lviv in western Ukraine. In an interview with Open Russia after his release, Yatsenko said Russian security services officers tried to force him to appear on television and say he was in the country to carry out "anti-Russian activities." He said he was also beaten up by FSB officers and ended up slashing his wrists and stomach with prison-issue razors to avoid being subjected to further physical abuse.



Ukraine Crisis Media Center / YouTube

Yury Yatsenko

'Chechen Separatist Backers'

Nikolai Karpyukh

Arrested: March, 2014

Stage: Pre-trial detention

Accusations: Unknown

Neither lawyers nor Ukrainian diplomats in Russia have been allowed to see Nikolai Karpyukh since he was arrested almost 18 months ago and it unclear what accusations he is facing. Nobody knows where he is being held, said Svetova, who added that he will likely face charges over allegedly fighting alongside Chechen rebels against Russian forces in 1994. In May, lawyer Ilya Novikov, who tried and failed to gain access to Karpyukh in prison, wrote on Facebook that he might be dead. Ukrainian media has reported that Karpyukh was kidnapped by Russian security forces from the country's northeastern Chernigov region. In March, Russian tabloid Moskovsky Komsomolets wrote that Karpyukh was a member of Ukraine's nationalist Right Sector group and commanded a group of Ukrainian mercenaries fighting with Georgian troops against Russian-backed Abkhaz separatists in the early 1990s.

Stanislav Krikh

Arrested: August 2014

Stage: Pre-trial detention

Accusations: Unknown

Lawyers and Ukrainian diplomats have also had difficulty obtaining access to Stanislav Krikh, 40, a Kiev-based journalist and historian whose mother told Ukrainian media he was detained last year during a trip to see his pregnant girlfriend in the Russian city of Oryol, to the south of Moscow. Earlier this month, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official protest at the decision of a court in the town of Yessentuki, in Russia's southern Stavropol region just outside the city of Pyatigorsk, to extend Krikh's detention to Oct. 21. It is not clear what accusations Krikh is facing, but Svetova said that he could be charged with fighting with Chechen separatists in the 1990s and tried in Chechnya itself — alongside Nikolai Karpyukh.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/08/24/sentsov-case-highlights-plight-of-ukrainian-prisoners-in-russian-jails-a49146