

Letters From a Russian Political Prisoner

By [Eva Hartog](#)

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Ilya Gushchin, 27, was convicted to more than 2 1/2 years in prison for participating in an anti-Kremlin protest in 2012.

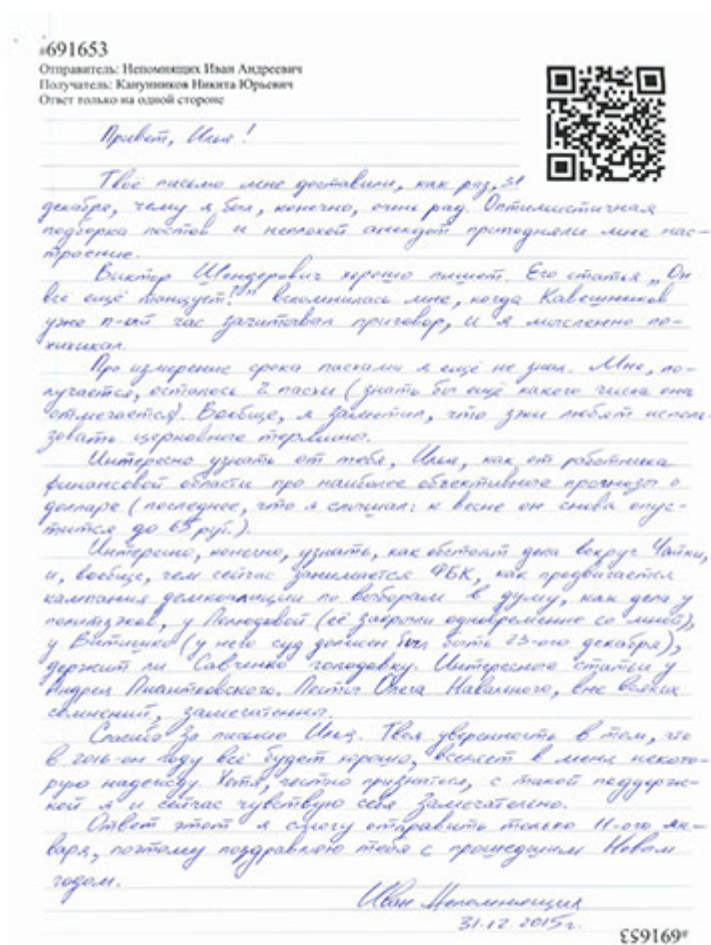
In Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," the main character is allowed to write home to his wife and children twice a year.

It is 1951, two years before Soviet dictator Josef Stalin's death. Solzhenitsyn's character Ivan Sukhov, who is being held in a labor camp for political prisoners, compares writing letters to "throwing stones into a bottomless pool."

"They sank without a trace," wrote Solzhenitsyn, who himself spent eight years in a labor camp for criticizing Stalin in private correspondence.

For those now behind Russian prison bars on politically motivated charges, the Soviet era of repression might not seem so far away. But one thing has indisputably changed: they are allowed to receive letters — in some cases hundreds of them — from total strangers.

While awaiting his trial at a Moscow detention center, Ilya Gushchin, 27, received roughly 60 letters a month, many from total strangers. He told *The Moscow Times* they acted as a lifeline.



One of the letters written by Bolotnoye protester Ivan Nepomnyashchikh. View in higher resolution [here](#).

"A window into a world where there are no bars and barbed wire, cons and cops, or this horrible sound, that you feel in your bones, of a [guard's] key turning twice," said Gushchin, who was convicted to more than 2 1/2 years in prison for participating in an anti-Kremlin protest in 2012.

While Gushchin was released in August 2015, around 50 Russians remain in prison on politically motivated charges, according to the Memorial human rights organization. The letters they receive, some of which are shared online by volunteer organizations, give a rare insight into the minds of those whose trials have dominated headlines and their supporters, even as the official public discourse stresses unwavering enthusiasm for President Vladimir Putin and his policies.

Bolotnoye Fallout

Gushchin was only 24 years old when he was detained along with hundreds of protesters at a mass protest against Putin's re-election on Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploshchad on May 6, 2012. Many of those detained were later convicted on charges of participating in a mass riot or using violence against the police.

The police's heavy-handed response to the Bolotnoye rally, which followed similar protests that began in December 2011, proved a watershed moment and heralded a crackdown

on dissent in Putin's third term as president.

Out of the Bolotnoye case — as the legal persecution of scores of detainees became known — came RosUzник, which was set up as a crowdfunding platform to help cover legal costs. After many of the Bolotnoye suspects' trials resulted in prison sentences — the case is ongoing three years after the rally — RosUzник shifted focus. It now functions mainly as a postal service, allowing Russians to submit letters online and sending them on to political prisoners, including the Bolotnoye convicts, free of charge.



Sergei Karpukhin / Reuters

Alexei Navalny with his brother, Oleg. Both men were charged with embezzlement in what they say is a politically motivated case. Oleg was sentenced to 3 1/2 years in prison.

You've Got Mail

Every day, Nikita Kanunnikov, 28, checks his inbox for new mail submitted through the RosUzник website.

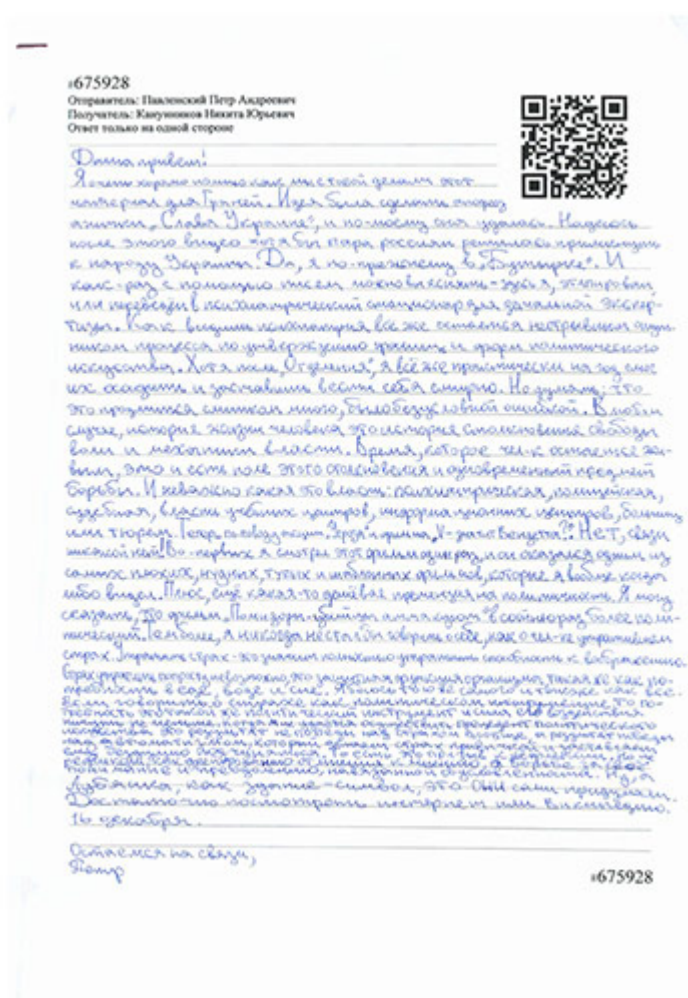
Depending on where the relevant prisoner is being held — some detention centers and prisons accept emails while others only accept physical letters — Kanunnikov plans its delivery. Sometimes he contacts a relative or acquaintance of the inmate and they act as personal couriers.

Those who submit their letters on the RosUzник website can do so anonymously, or allow them to be published on RosUzник's website, where they can be read by anybody. Other prison postal services do exist, but they are paid: the FSIN-Pismo service charges 55 rubles (\$0.70) per page-long letter. More importantly, senders have to know the exact details and location

of the inmate — a requirement that increases the difficulty for ordinary Russians since inmates are often transferred between detention centers and prisons. RosUzник keeps track of the prisoners' whereabouts and figures out how to keep communication lines open.

Some prisoners only receive a handful of letters. Others, like Nadezhda Savchenko — a Ukrainian pilot who has been accused of abetting the killing of two Russian journalists — receive hundreds. "Her case was widely covered in the press. She stands out and always responds, so it's interesting to correspond with her," said Kanunnikov.

In total, RosUzник delivered about 2,000 letters last year.



A letter by political performance artist Pyotr Pavlensky. View in higher resolution [here](#).

Gushchin, the former Bolotnoye suspect, received letters from places as far apart as northwest Russia's Arkhangelsk region and Siberia's Tomsk. He said they included letters from civil rights activists and "softly [politically] engaged" people who often supported the current regime in theory but had come into confrontation with it through their work.

Alexei Polikhovich, 25, another Bolotnoye suspect who was released from prison in October, said it was, paradoxically, the government's draconic response to protesters that pushed some of his letter writers into the camp of the so-called "opposition."

One of those people is Tatyana, 44, who heads a laboratory in Moscow. She regularly writes to Oleg Navalny, the younger brother of opposition leader Alexei Navalny who was sentenced

to 3 1/2 years in prison in an embezzlement case that many see as fabricated. Tatyana's correspondence with Navalny is a family affair — the letters are written in the presence and with the participation of her two children and husband. Replies are also read out loud.

But she is not a political activist, said Tatyana, who asked for her surname not to be included for fear of persecution.

"I am a regular person. I write to someone, whom I knew very little about before the political repression. My motivation is simple — I want them to feel supported and for them to know that I sympathize."

Tatyana also embodies another trend — most of RosUznic's letter writers are women. Kanunnikov, who works as a programmer by day, believes they feel more comfortable about publicly expressing empathy. "I myself really struggle with writing letters," he added.



Moskva News Agency

Opposition activist Ivan Nepomnyashchikh was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison for hitting police officers with an umbrella during the Bolotnoye protests.

Vendetta

The RosUznic platform also provides ordinary Russians with an opportunity to question the prisoners — most of whose cases received wide coverage in the media — about their views. Sometimes, it functions as a simple myth buster. In one of the letters published on RosUznic's website, a writer called Darya asked Pyotr Pavlensky, who set fire to the doors of the Federal Security Service last year, whether his stunt was in any way connected to the Hollywood film "V for Vendetta."

"No, there is no link!" Pavlensky responded. "I saw this film once, and I thought it was one of the worst, boring, dull

and formulaic films that I have ever seen."

The letters also expose a layer of society that is critical of the Kremlin but mostly goes unnoticed. Public protest in Russia is rare due to a culture of political apathy and fear of retribution. The handful of opposition marches that do take place center around Russia's biggest cities and the mainly pro-Kremlin media is careful to portray Putin and his policies as enjoying unwavering support.

It makes the Russians who do not come out to protest invisible — until RosUzник sends on their letters and publishes them online.

"Before these letters I thought that most of my friends and acquaintances didn't understand the motivation behind my actions and generally think I am insane," Ildar Dadin wrote in an open letter to RosUzник. Dadin last year became the first person to be sentenced to prison time under a Russian law that allows people to be imprisoned for protesting several times at unsanctioned rallies.

The letters also provide Russians with a glimpse into the conditions and psychological impact of incarceration — accounts that echo those of dissidents in other ages.

"I am locked in a small cell for three people," Ivan Nepomnyashchikh — who was sentenced to 2 1/2 years for "assaulting police" during the Bolotnoye protest — wrote in one of the letters uploaded online.

"My fellow inmates are my age, we get along well. The food here is quite tolerable. But here's the strange thing: Being here robs you of your identity. You start dissolving between these walls, you forget what kind of person you are. As if I were thrown into the middle of an ocean, where you can't see the shore and it is unclear where to swim because there is no orientation point. Letters like yours, Ilya, serve as orientation points to me. I remember what kind of society I am from, and my two lives — before and after my arrival at Butyrka [prison] — merge into one and everything falls into place."

Gushchin, the former Bolotnoye suspect, said it was the letters describing people's daily routine that helped him most during his time behind bars.

"The main thing that I missed in prison is simple human communication without constant self-censorship," he said. "Just write as if to an old friend that you haven't seen for a long time. Say what is happening around you on a daily level. I study, I work, there's snow, the apple tree is blossoming. These trivial things become very important [in prison]," he said.



Ildar Dadin / Facebook

Ildar Dadin became the first person to be sent to prison for "repeatedly" breaking public assembly rules.

Fairytales

For Yelena Efros, 56, describing reality is not enough — she has set up an initiative to encourage people to submit their own fairytales and stories to a Facebook group so that they can later be sent to the prisoners. She also asks that prisoners send their own fiction in return.

Efros said her project was “humanitarian,” not political. Some of the stories that have been submitted read like fairytales — including the classic “Once upon a time in a land far, far away” opening. Others skillfully veil criticism of life under Putin — one story's characters are conveniently named “Good” and “Evil” — and read more like political allegories.

And at least one prisoner has responded with his own "story." Dmitry Buchenkov — a historian by background and the latest person to be jailed in the Bolotnoye case — sent the group a story about a young officer who feels disillusioned with the Nazi regime and joins the resistance. After he is caught and tortured, a German officer asks him why he would turn against the Nazi regime at the height of its glory and power.

“No power can last forever,” Buchenkov's character says, a comment that is met with laughter by the Gestapo officers. The story symbolically ends with a Soviet bomb shredding the Nazi interrogation building “to pieces.”

"[The censors] would cross out something they didn't understand, like wordplay, or famous names or terms that the person checking associated with something inadmissible or criminal," said Polikhovich, "Like the name RosUznik."

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