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Jailed Anti-War Politician Yashin Responds to Czech President's Call to Monitor Russian Exiles

By Ilya Yashin

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A replica of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's prison cell installed in Prague. **Team Navalny**

Ilya Yashin, a Moscow opposition politician now serving an eight-and-a-half-year prison sentence for his criticism of the invasion of Ukraine, on Monday published an appeal to Czech President Petr Pavel, who has said that Russians in the West should be monitored by their host countries.

The Moscow Times has translated his message and published it below.

To Petr Pavel, President of the Czech Republic

Dear Mr. President:

My name is Ilya Yashin, an opposition politician in Russia. I am writing you from prison,

where I have been confined for the last year. Putin's court sentenced me to eight-and-a-half years in prison for my statements against the war. This has become a common practice in our country: hundreds of students, workers, journalists, teachers and other citizens who speak out against the war on Ukraine have been put behind bars.

The other day, Mr. President, you became an unwitting participant in a discussion I had with my cellmates. They are different people, of different ages, with different experiences. My life choices, my openness and my refusal to emigrate surprise many of them. We often argue. Sometimes our conversations remind me of the meetings with voters I used to hold regularly when I headed a Moscow district.

I have always tried to get one simple message across to both my voters and my cellmates: Russia can be different. We are not doomed to live under a dictatorship. We can live in dignity and peace, and European values are in the interests of the Russian people. I tell them how Germany went from the darkness of Nazism to democracy, and Hitler was replaced by the anti-fascist Konrad Adenauer. I give many historical examples, including the example of the Czech Republic and its first post-Soviet president, Václav Havel, a man I highly respect, whom I consider to be a great humanist.

Some may say that there is no point to these conversations. I disagree. For example, among my fellow inmates was an army petty officer who had recently fought in Ukraine. When he first found himself behind bars, all he wanted to do was go back to the front. But after a couple of months, he promised me he would never take up arms again. I don't know if he'll keep his word. But I think the fact that he reflected on it and made a promise matters.

Now imagine this: As we were having another of our discussions, you, Mr. President, appeared on the television screen. Kremlin propagandists relish your statement that all Russians living in Western countries should be placed under the strict control of the local secret services. You cite the experience of the U.S. during World War II, where 120,000 people of Japanese descent were interned, which you called "simply the price of war."

Related article: Czech Leader Says Russians Abroad Should Be Monitored

My cellmates listened intently to your speech.

"Is this your Havel?" one of them asked me.

"No," I say. "That's Petr Pavel."

"Havel or Pavel — it doesn't matter," another man said. "What Putin says is right — that we are all second-class people to the West. Both you and me. It doesn't matter."

I tried to protest, but my oldest cellmate interrupted me. "You're not a good politician, Ilya," he sighs. "Because you are a romantic."

You know, Mr. President... Maybe I am a romantic, but I truly believe in European values. I believe that people are equal and that everyone deserves fair treatment. That everyone should be judged by their actions, not "for the company they keep." I believe that in a free society where the security services won't keep someone in their sights because of his nationality. I

believe that my country can get rid of the oppression of dictatorship, as yours and many other European countries of the free world once did. I believe that Russia and Europe can live in peace and good neighborly relations.

I'm in Putin's prison for these beliefs. Putin is drumming it into the heads of my fellow citizens that Europe is the enemy and its leaders are Russophobes. Please don't help Putin convince Russians of this, and treat my people fairly.

Believe me — we are not a country of murderers. We are a country where murderers have seized power.

Best wishes,

Ilya Yashin

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