

'Our Country Is Sinking Into Darkness': Oleg Orlov's Final Word in Court

Orlov was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison on Tuesday for his opposition to the war in Ukraine. The Moscow Times has translated and republished his final statement in court given ahead of the verdict.

By [Oleg Orlov](#)

February 27, 2024



Oleg Orlov gestures while standing in a glass cage after he was taken into custody in the courtroom during his new trial on charges of repeated discrediting of the Russian military in Moscow, Feb. 27.

Alexander Zemlianichenko / AP / TASS

On the day this trial began, Russia and the world were shocked by the terrible news of Alexei Navalny's death. I was shocked, too. I even considered not making a final statement at all. What is there to say when we are still reeling from the shock of the news? But then I thought: Actually, these are all links in one chain — the death, or rather the murder, of Alexei Navalny;

judicial reprisals against other critics of the regime, including me; the stifling of freedom in the country; and the deployment of Russian troops in Ukraine. These are all links in the same chain. And so I decided to say my final word after all.

I have not committed a crime. I am being tried for a newspaper article in which I called the political regime in Russia today totalitarian and fascist.

The article was written more than a year ago. At the time, some of my acquaintances thought that I was exaggerating. But now it is quite obvious that I was not exaggerating at all. The government in our country controls not only social, political, and economic life, but it has also taken complete control of culture and scientific thought and it interferes in private life. It — the government — is taking over everything. We see it happening.

In the slightly more than four months since the end of my first hearing in this court, many events have taken place that show how quickly, and how much more deeply, our country is sinking into darkness.

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I will very briefly list a variety of events that differ both in scale and tragedy:

- books by a number of contemporary Russian writers are banned in Russia;
- the non-existent "LGBT movement" has been banned, which in essence means brazen government interference in the private lives of citizens;
- Higher School of Economics applicants are banned from citing "foreign agents." Now applicants and students must study and memorize lists of "foreign agents" before studying their subjects;
- Boris Kagarlitsky, a well-known social scientist and left-wing publicist, was sentenced to five years in prison. For what? For a few words he said about the events of the war in Ukraine that differ from the official position;
- and, finally, when the man whom propagandists call "Russia's national leader" spoke about the outbreak of World War II, he said the following, and I quote: "After all, the Poles forced them. They played around too long and forced Hitler to start World War II with them. Why did the war start with Poland? Poland was uncooperative. Hitler had no choice but to start with Poland in order to carry out his plans." End of quote.

So what should we call a political system where all that I have just listed is happening? I think the answer is clear. Unfortunately, what I wrote in my article was correct.

It is not just public criticism that is banned, but any independent judgment. People are punished for acts that seem to have nothing to do with criticism of the government and politics.

There is no artistic genre where free artistic expression is possible; there are no spheres of academic humanities that are free; there isn't even private life.

Related article: ['Again Totalitarian': Veteran Activist Oleg Orlov Says Soviet-Era Practices Returning in Russia](#)

Let me now say a few words about the nature of the charges brought against me and those made in many similar trials against those who, like me, oppose the war.

At the opening of this trial, I refused to participate in it, and so I had the opportunity to read a book, "The Trial" by Franz Kafka, during the hearings. The current situation in our country and the situation in which the main character finds himself in the book have features in common: absurdity and arbitrariness — arbitrariness that masquerades as formal compliance with pseudo-legal procedures.

For example, here we are accused of discrediting [the military] without explaining what it is and how it differs from legitimate criticism. We are accused of disseminating deliberately false information without bothering to prove that it is false — just as the Soviet regime declared criticism, any criticism, a lie. And our attempts to prove the veracity of this information becomes criminal activity. We are accused of not supporting the system of views and the worldview that have been proclaimed correct by the leadership of our country. And this is happening despite the fact that the Constitution does not permit any state ideology in Russia. We are convicted for doubting that an attack on a neighboring state has the goal of maintaining international peace and security. This is absurd.

Kafka's hero did not know until the end of the novel what he was accused of, but regardless, he was convicted and executed. In Russia we hear the formal announcement of the accusation, but it is impossible to understand it within the framework of law and logic.

Unlike Kafka's hero, however, we understand why we are actually detained, tried, arrested, sentenced and killed. We are being punished for taking it upon ourselves to criticize the authorities. In today's Russia, this is absolutely forbidden. Of course, deputies, investigators, prosecutors and judges never say it openly. They hide it under the absurd and illogical formulations of the so-called new laws, indictments and sentences. But this is the truth.

Now Alexei Gorinov, Alexandra Skochilenko, Igor Baryshnikov, Vladimir Kara-Murza and many others are being slowly killed in prison camps and jails. Why are they being killed? They are being killed because they protested against bloodshed in Ukraine, because they want Russia to become a democratic, prosperous state that does not pose a threat to the outside world.

In recent days, people have been detained, punished and even imprisoned just because they went to monuments to the victims of political repression to honor the memory of the murdered Alexei Navalny. A remarkable man, brave and honest, who under incredibly difficult conditions did not lose his optimism and faith in the future of our country. Of course, it was murder, regardless of the specific circumstances of this death. Now the authorities are even at war with the deceased Navalny. They fear him, even when he is dead. And rightly so. They destroy memorials to his memory that were created spontaneously. They do it in the hope that in this way they will demoralize the part of Russian society that continues to feel responsibility for their country. Their hope is in vain. We remember Alexei's appeal: "Don't give up." I would add to that: Don't lose heart, and do not lose optimism. Truth is on our side.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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