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‘Human Rights Defender, Artist, Political Prisoner’: Exhibition Honors Jailed Russian Activist Orlov

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Anastasia Tenisheva / MT

PARIS — An exhibition dedicated to the veteran Russian human rights activist Oleg Orlov went on display in the French capital this June.

Orlov, 71, is serving a two-and-a-half-year prison term for criticizing the full-scale invasion of Ukraine after he was sentenced this year for “discrediting” the Russian Armed Forces.

“Oleg Orlov: Human Rights Defender, Artist, Political Prisoner,” organized by the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Memorial human rights group that Orlov co-founded, features his graphic works from his time as an amateur artist as well as illustrations by contemporary artists depicting scenes from his trial.

Orlov is one of the few prominent anti-war activists who have remained in Russia since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which sparked a sweeping crackdown on dissent that forced many

other critics to leave the country.

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One of the works at the exhibition depicts one of Orlov’s court hearings for charges of “discrediting” the army.

The charges stemmed from Orlov's November 2022 article titled: “They Wanted Fascism. They Got It,” in which he called the war against Kyiv “a severe blow to Russia’s future.”

In an interview with The Moscow Times ahead of his sentencing in February, Orlov said he “understood the threats” he faced for opposing the invasion but added he “believes in a better future” for Russia.

The exhibition also includes “Oleg Orlov’s Budyonnovsk Diary,” a comic that recounts Orlov’s experience as part of a group of rights activists who exchanged themselves for some of the 1,500 hostages taken by Chechen fighters during a 1995 terrorist attack in southern Russia.

Orlov kept a detailed diary describing his four-day journey to the Stavropol region town of Budyonnovsk and the negotiations with the terrorists. Artist Lyuba Yaseneva created a comic based on this diary that is featured in the exhibition.

Orlov, who has been designated as a “foreign agent” by Russia, has been an outspoken critic of the war since it began.

He was detained twice in 2022 for protesting the invasion, including for a picket on Red Square where he held a sign saying: “Our unwillingness to know the truth and our silence makes us accomplices to this crime.”

The United Nations and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) have repeatedly called on Moscow to free Orlov.

International rights organizations have raised concerns over his deteriorating health while in prison.

“Oleg Orlov’s health has been deteriorating since his imprisonment and Russian authorities must ensure he has adequate access to medical care,” Mariana Katzarova, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Russia, said in April.

“In keeping Oleg Orlov behind bars, on charges that have no grounds in international law, the Russian authorities show everyone in Russia the instruments they are willing to use to silence peaceful dissenters and independent voices and demonstrate the ruthlessness with which the State authorities can retaliate,” Katzarova said.

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