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Journalist Ponomarenko's Last Word in Court: 'I've Never Seen as Much Violence as I Have in Jail'

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Maria Ponomarenko during a court hearing. **@sotavisionmedia**

Jailed Russian journalist Maria Ponomarenko delivered her final word in court on Monday, accusing the penitentiary system of abuse and violence as prosecutors seek to sentence her for allegedly assaulting prison guards.

Ponomarenko, 46, was sentenced to six years in prison in February 2023 for publishing information about the Russian bombing of a theater in Mariupol, Ukraine.

Authorities charged her with assaulting prison guards later that year.

Ponomarenko, who has been diagnosed with histrionic personality disorder, slit her wrists in pre-trial detention in September 2022, claiming mistreatment. The RusNews media outlet, where Ponomarenko worked as a correspondent, reported this month that she was on the verge of suicide and had gone on hunger strike to demand better living conditions.

The court will deliver its verdict in her second criminal case on Thursday, where she faces a two-year sentence. Ahead of that, Ponomarenko read the following statement to the court:

The speech has been edited for length and clarity.

“Time has hardened me. I want to thank everyone who finds the courage to write, to visit, to support those convicted under political charges.

I used to have 1% of doubt, but now I am certain that the Mariupol theater was bombed by Russia. You always want to absolve your homeland, but that 1% has died.

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I admire young people who already have a humanist stance, but I didn't come to it right away. It took work on myself, pushing aside selfish interests. Our notions have become twisted... I don’t want to say too much so I don’t end up with another charge, but patriotism here means changing the best into the worst. I'm often in solitary confinement (SHIZO). There are pros and cons. At least I don’t have to see the endless stream of lies on television when I’m there. I just want to say: ‘Stop the world, I want to get off.’

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I have dissociative disorder and claustrophobia. This is my 13th [stint in] SHIZO. It’s easy to see that I got all of them for simply having my condition.

I was beaten there. I had bruises, but they refused to document them in pre-trial detention.

We have so many untouchable officials. You steal? So what. You beat someone? So what — it’s not a serious crime for them. We have the tsar, and you can’t remove him. People say the tsar is good and the boyars are bad — but the tsar can do anything, he can dismiss them all. Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin], why are sick children begging in our country? I've been hearing about the ‘decaying West’ since the 90s, but what I actually see is how we are decaying. Prison staff cling to lawlessness, to this cesspool, and they take pride in it.

They keep telling us: ‘Give birth, give birth.’ But how about learning to preserve what already exists? Hundreds of thousands of children are killed, and in 90% of cases, by their own relatives. Prison and colony staff see themselves as gods. We never think about removing the root cause of why this is happening. People are broken in childhood, then crushed even further in prison and then they are released into society. And why did they become like this?

Related article: Russian Prosecutors Seek New Sentence for Imprisoned Journalist Ponomarenko

I've never seen as much violence as I have in jail. The worst of it happens in psychiatric hospitals...I was sitting on my heels, crying. Huge orderlies burst in and throw me onto a table chest-down. I bite my tongue so hard it bleeds. They twist my arms behind my back and tie them so tightly that I have scars. I stumble, they punch me in the stomach, kick me, slam me against walls. These are the paramedics of the psychiatric ambulance. They shove me into the ambulance. I accidentally step on the stretcher and they curse at me with the filthiest

language. They throw me onto a bench and sit on top of me. And I'm claustrophobic. At some point, I just black out. This was in Biysk Psychiatric Clinic. Even elderly women are beaten there...Maybe I really have become hysterical, because everything affects me. They beat me there... I have faced violence many times. The first time was in a psychiatric hospital in Barnaul. They even took my sanitary pad away — 'What if you eat it?' I said, well, if [you think] I eat pads, what's stopping me from eating the bedsheet? For that, they started injecting me with haloperidol... At first I was shocked, but later I realized that much worse can happen.

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We need to humanize our penal system. Ordinary people should not be allowed to torment other ordinary people. Punishment should be isolation or [doing mandatory] work you don't like... I fought so hard for my right not to squat with my buttocks spread apart [for searches]... No one has the right to degrade human dignity like this.

Evil will continue to multiply until we stop sowing it.

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There are tens of thousands of innocent people in prisons! I appeal to everyone—just because you are apolitical does not guarantee your safety. In fact, there are far fewer politically active citizens in prison. At least they get support. Believe me, every letter you send is felt. I love children very much. People send me photos. I often press letters to my chest.

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The worst abuse happens in winter and spring. Because of the lawlessness, I slit my veins. Before solitary, they took me to the shower. No hot water, only ice-cold. An officer said, 'Let her wait for it to heat up.' Four hours of waiting. There are no windows in the shower. I started panicking, gasping for air. I laid a plastic bag on the floor and started washing clothes. Then I lost consciousness. When I came to, a crowd had entered, screaming at me to get dressed. I asked for 10 minutes — I was having a panic attack. They shouted back: 'You've already been sitting here for two hours.' Then I heard the order to use force. There were men, and I was standing there in just a towel. One woman grabbed my arm, right where my stitches were fresh. The thread tore. Even the fast-acting injection didn't help right away.

And the cherry on top: after all this mistreatment, I was given another 15 days in solitary confinement.

That's how they treat me. Now imagine an ordinary prisoner, someone with no outside support, trying to say a word. That's why everyone stays silent...

Now that's really all. I apologize — this was my chance to speak. Now I will be silent for a long three years.

I want each of you, when you're about to argue, to remember my words. And think — why argue? We must not fight each other. The main thing is, we are for peace. Everything else is nonsense, trivialities.

I apologize to everyone I may have hurt. And to my brother — I'm sorry. He knows why.

Stop seeing enemies in everyone. Maybe then, enemies will cease to exist.

Life is beautiful, despite everything. I love life, even though I sometimes stand on the edge.

Everything will be fine, no matter what."

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