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At 15, He Became One of Russia's Youngest Political Prisoners. He Now Faces New Charges.

By Moscow Times Reporter

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Arseny Turbin. **@free_arseny / Telegram**

Arseny Turbin became one of the youngest political prisoners in Russia when he was arrested at age 15 in 2023.

Described by his teachers as "intelligent, thoughtful and fair," he is currently serving a five-year sentence on terrorism-related charges that he denies.

Earlier this year, investigators opened a new criminal case that could extend the 17-year-old's term by several more years.

The Nobel Peace Prize-winning rights group Memorial has designated Turbin a political prisoner, as part of what activists say is a growing trend of minors being targeted in politically motivated cases since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

More than 100 teenagers are currently facing prosecution in such cases, Memorial told The Moscow Times.

'I'm afraid for my child's life'

As a teenager from Livny, a town in the Oryol region of western Russia, Turbin dreamed of studying political science at the the prestigious Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO).

Born in Dubai to a Russian mother and a father who was a UAE citizen, he was raised in Russia by his mother, Irina Turbina, after his parents separated.

Turbin faced bullying because of his skin color at his Russian school, his mother told the exiled news outlet Mediazona. This led him to reflect on social injustice and follow opposition politicians, including the late Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

He became increasingly outspoken about politics on social media, commenting on the Wagner mercenary mutiny and former presidential candidate Yekaterina Duntsova.

His legal troubles began after he contacted the Freedom of Russia Legion, a unit of Russian volunteers fighting alongside Ukraine's army that Moscow designates as a terrorist organization, in 2023.

That August, security forces searched the apartment where he lived with his mother and grandparents and Turbin was arrested on terrorism charges.

He was added to the federal list of "terrorists and extremists" soon after, becoming the youngest person on the register at the time.

He described conditions in pre-trial detention as "very harsh" and said he was beaten by fellow inmates. He lost 17 kilograms (37.5 pounds), dropping to 52 kilograms (114.5 pounds).

After receiving a five-year sentence, Turbin was transferred to a juvenile penal colony and was later hit with a second criminal charge for allegedly taking part in a protest in jail.

"He was convicted the first time for nothing, and now they're slapping him with another case. Do they want to push him to the brink, to suicide?" his mother wrote. "I'm afraid for my child's life. It seems to me that the situation is becoming so cruel that I fear for his safety."

'Terrorism charges'

Investigators based their case in part on Turbin's correspondence with an alleged Freedom of Russia Legion recruiter in 2023, which they classified as "participation in a terrorist organization."

Russian authorities have imposed harsh punishments for any support for Ukraine, especially cooperation with military units fighting on Kyiv's side.

Related article: Silence or Jail: Teens Targeted in Russia's Wartime Political Crackdown

Authorities claimed that Turbin submitted an application to join the Freedom of Russia Legion by email, thereby joining a terrorist organization and later acting in its interests, Mediazona cited his case files as saying.

In court, Turbin admitted filling out an application but said he later "got scared" and only sent his messaging app contact details. He said he never received a response.

His mother has said she believes the Federal Security Service (FSB) fabricated parts of her son's interrogation transcript to make it look like he planned to join the unit.

Russian media have reported the existence of fake Telegram bots posing as Ukrainian army recruiters that are allegedly used to entrap Russians willing to support Kyiv.

Authorities also allege that Turbin distributed leaflets criticizing President Vladimir Putin, posted images featuring the white-blue-white opposition flag and ran a small Telegram channel with five subscribers.

Classmates told BBC Russian that Turbin had publicly criticized Putin, the ruling United Russia party and the invasion of Ukraine, but said they were unaware of any intention on his part to join the Freedom of Russia Legion.

Memorial said that the case materials it reviewed contained no evidence that Turbin intended to travel to Ukraine, assist the unit or carry out "sabotage on military or railway facilities."

"When we recognize people as political prisoners, we are telling the world that the state has committed a crime against them," Tatiana Ivanova, an expert at Memorial, told The Moscow Times. "In a democratic state, such people should not be in prison."

After reviewing the case documents, Memorial said it "considers the very fact that a 14-year-old boy joined and participated in the Freedom of Russia Legion to be unproven."

"The participation of foreign nationals, including Russians, in hostilities on Ukraine's side and in its defense against aggression should not be considered a crime," Memorial said.

Second criminal case

In February 2026, authorities opened a new criminal case against Turbin on the grounds that he allegedly took part in a riot at his juvenile penal colony in January.

Turbin denied involvement, saying he hid in a recreation room during the incident. Supporters say the new charges are politically motivated and intended to pressure him.

People close to Turbin said he had already come under pressure in jail. In 2024, he reported being beaten by his cellmates.

"This evening, after 6 p.m., I was struck twice in the head while lying on my bed," he wrote to his mother at that time. "The situation is very difficult, critical...But I will hang in there."

Former political prisoner Kevin Lik, who was imprisoned at age 18 and later released in the

August 2024 prisoner swap between Russia and the West, said he faced similar treatment.

"There were situations when I was placed in a prison cell with two other minors who wanted to deliberately provoke a conflict," Lik, a Russian-German dual citizen, told The Moscow Times.

Turbin's mother said she believed a notebook containing references to the A.U.E. ("Prisoner's Criminal Unity"), a banned prison subculture, had been planted in his belongings in an attempt to bring new charges against him.

Experts said this tactic has been used to target other young political prisoners.

Nikita Uvarov, who was sentenced to five years in prison at age 16 for activities including plotting to blow up a virtual FSB building in the popular online game Minecraft, also faced new criminal charges linked to A.U.E. The criminal case was opened a week before he was due to go free.

After the new criminal case was opened, Turbin was transferred to a pre-trial detention center and placed in solitary confinement.

His mother has since moved closer to the penal colony in the Perm region to visit her son more often.

"Arseny knows he has me — his protection and support," she told Russian journalists, adding that she will follow her son to wherever he is transferred once he is moved to an adult penal colony.

"He knows how deeply I love him and that love gives him strength," she said.

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