

I Am Wanted by Russia. The Consequences Follow Me Everywhere.

By [Olga Borisova](#)

July 20, 2026



The author, Olga Borisova, photographed for a project about migrants. **Courtesy photo/Sergei Novikov**

A recent application I made for an administrative job in Britain asked whether I had any unspent criminal convictions. I ticked “yes.”

In September 2025, a Russian court sentenced me in absentia to eight years in a penal colony over an anti-war song by the performance art group I used to be part of, Pussy Riot. I was convicted of spreading “false information” about the Russian armed forces while it was flattening Ukrainian cities.

The form did not ask which country had convicted me, whether the case was political or whether the court was independent. It asked a simple yes-or-no question and answering it honestly meant putting the Kremlin’s verdict in front of a British hiring manager.

From Britain, the conviction and arrest warrant issued in Moscow can seem remote. I live

here, I have built a home here and most of the time the sentence seems to belong to another country and another part of my life. In practice, they continue to shape my life no matter where I am.

It appears when I apply for an ordinary job and have to tell a stranger that I have a criminal conviction. It appears when a friend from Russia suggests meeting in a third country and I have to work out whether I could be detained at the airport. It appears when I am offered work abroad and my first thought is whether I will come back safely.

I am not comparing my situation with that of people still inside Russia. They face violence and years taken from them in prison. I am one of many Russians who opposed the war. I am safe and I have no reason to believe that I am likely to be targeted in the way some prominent Kremlin opponents have been attacked abroad.

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But Russia can still take things from me. It can take away the freedom to travel, work and spend time with people I love. It can make my world smaller.

Travel is where I feel this most often. Before any trip, I have to consider the country's relationship with Russia and whether I could be detained before anyone could examine the political motivation behind my case. Even a short detention could become dangerous. What if the Russian authorities negotiate for my extradition. Parts of the former U.S.S.R. whose governments remain close to the Kremlin, along with other countries with strong ties to Moscow, have effectively disappeared from my map.

The sentence has also changed the work I can do. I left Pussy Riot and stopped touring around six months before I was sentenced. Now I work in human rights campaigning and have built an audience on Instagram, where I make videos about politics and history from a feminist perspective.

Any conference, project or job involving travel has to be assessed as a security risk first before I can decide whether an opportunity is worthwhile. Sometimes that means turning down work I would otherwise have accepted.

The hardest part is being separated from loved ones. Many of them cannot get visas to Britain or the European Union, while some of the countries they can reach are unsafe for me. We can spend months trying to find somewhere we are both allowed to be. Sometimes, we cannot find anywhere.

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Exile already means losing your home. The conviction makes that loss affect the most personal parts of my life. It means missing birthdays, conversations and ordinary time together. It means knowing that people you love are still in Russia while the number of places where you can see them keeps shrinking.

The pressure often reaches our families as well. Relatives of people facing political charges in

Russia may be questioned despite or face their [home being searched](#) despite having no involvement in the case or even sympathizing with their convicted family member's views, in some cases. The authorities put pressure on families to isolate the person they are pursuing and frighten others who might speak out.

Political persecution is usually visible at its most dramatic and public moments: the raid, the arrest, the courtroom and the sentence. Its lasting effects take the shape of forms, cancelled plans, carefully chosen routes and explanations repeated to strangers. It brings the most frightening part of your life into ordinary situations that should have nothing to do with politics.

I am safe in Britain because its laws and institutions do not automatically accept the Kremlin's account. They recognise that a foreign conviction may be political persecution. Interpol rejected Russia's request for a Red Notice against me after examination.

Someone raised in a liberal democracy may take the political tradition that makes this protection possible for granted. They shouldn't. The independent courts and asylum law capable of distinguishing prosecution from persecution follow the same principle that protected Soviet dissidents during the Cold War.

These systems and institutions do not always live up to their own principles. But they preserve the essential right of a person pursued by an authoritarian state to be heard rather than automatically treated as the criminal their government claims them to be. That protection is a hard-won achievement meaning authoritarian governments do not always get the final word over the people they pursue.

Most of my life here is ordinary. I work, renovate our house and make plans with my husband. Sometimes, I forget that Russia considers me a fugitive at all.

Then a form asks me whether I have any criminal convictions, or a friend suggests meeting in a country I cannot safely visit, and the life I left behind suddenly returns.

Freedom outside Russia is still not the same as freedom from Russia. The warrant for my arrest follows me wherever I go, even when the prison cannot reach me.

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