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She Was a Leading Arctic Ornithologist. Now She's Imprisoned for $25 in Donations.

By Maria Ivkina

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Sofya Rozenfeld. **savesofia.ru**

Sofya Rozenfeld dedicated her life to following Arctic birds across the tundra, counting flocks from a small seaplane and advocating for the species she studied.

When her colleagues urged her to leave Russia as she faced criminal investigation for donating to Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), she struggled to imagine a life away from that work.

"For Sofya, leaving her geese would have been like abandoning her children," Alexandra Panyutina, who studied with Rozenfeld at Moscow State University and later worked alongside her, told the independent media project Veter.

Even as she awaited sentencing, Rozenfeld continued her fieldwork, securing court

permission for a 10-day expedition to the Russian Arctic.

“The first piece of advice [from her colleagues] was to leave Russia,” her friend Artur Ryabitsev said. “But she was against it: ‘No, I live here; I work here; everything I have is here. What would I do outside Russia?’”

On Oct. 7, a Moscow court sentenced the ornithologist to 3.5 years in a penal colony for making two donations totaling 2,000 rubles ($25) to the FBK.

Rozenfeld, 50, is now the third woman in Russia to be imprisoned for donating to the late Kremlin critic’s organization, which was banned as “extremist” in 2021. The Nobel Peace Prize-winning rights organization Memorial has designated her a political prisoner.

The sentence has stunned friends and colleagues, who describe a scientist devoted to studying and protecting Arctic waterfowl.

By spring 2026, authorities had opened more than 200 criminal cases over donations to the FBK, the exiled news outlet Mediazona reported. The average donation amounted to just 400 rubles ($5).

For Rozenfeld, a researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Ecology and Evolution, the case threatened to sever a passion for the Arctic that stretched back to her time as a student.

After her family emigrated to Israel in the late 1980s, she returned to Moscow at 15, finished school and enrolled in Moscow State University’s biology faculty. She holds dual Russian-Israeli citizenship.

Panyutina recalled witnessing Rozenfeld’s determination early on.

“Imagine a second-year student organizing her own expedition to Wrangel Island to study snow geese,” she told Veter. “You could say that was the start of her fieldwork. And it continued right up until she was handcuffed.”

Rozenfeld chose to focus her research on the Arctic, particularly geese, swans and related waterfowl that breed in the Far North before migrating thousands of kilometers south.

To track those journeys, one must determine where the birds nest, where they stop during migration and where they spend their winters. But the real challenge lies in determining how many birds there actually are.

Previously, such counts often relied on rough estimates that varied wildly among researchers. Colleagues describe Rozenfeld as one of the few specialists capable of producing more reliable population counts across vast, remote territories.

“She could say: This is how many birds of a particular species we have, this is where they live, and this is where they go for the winter,” Mikhail Kalyakin, director of Moscow State University’s Zoological Museum, told Veter. “To do that, she had to fly over the tundra.”

Working with colleagues, Rozenfeld developed a survey method in which the team would take

detailed photos of birds while flying an ultralight seaplane built by a fellow researcher at low altitudes and speeds. These photos would then be used to count populations.

She also got involved with conservation policy, serving on a commission assessing birds for Russia's Red Data Book of threatened species and helping inform decisions about their protection.

"She fought for their conservation, for their survival, so that we could learn more about them and protect them," Panyutina said. "She felt responsible for them."

That sense of responsibility helped keep Rozenfeld from leaving Russia after investigators raided her Moscow apartment and interrogated her in December 2025.

"The first advice she received was to leave Russia," her friend Artur Ryabitsev told Veter. "But she was against it: 'No, I live here, I work here, everything I have is here. What would I do outside Russia?'"

Relatives said she could not imagine how she would continue her profession from another country.

She continued her work as the criminal case progressed, including on the court-approved expedition to the Yamalo-Nenets autonomous district shortly before her final hearing.

According to her colleagues, Rozenfeld feared going to prison but remained hopeful that she would receive a lighter punishment.

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In court, she explained that she had signed up for recurring donations to FBK "out of a desire to fight corruption."

"Don't we have law enforcement agencies for that?" the judge interrupted.

"I believe that any public help is needed here," she replied. "Because I have seen the horrific forms this evil can take in my own work related to scientific research and environmental protection. It seemed to me that any help in combating corruption would be a good thing."

While the verdict shocked her friends and family, Panyutina recalled that Rozenfeld herself appeared composed and focused in court — "like someone in an extraordinarily difficult situation trying with all her strength to keep composure and maintain dignity."

As soon as the sentence was announced, uniformed officers approached Rozenfeld to take her into custody.

"They handcuffed Sofya and pushed her into the cage," Ryabitsev recalled. "The judge finished reading the verdict, and then they took her away."

Her relatives have since set up a support website and appealed to the Israeli authorities for

assistance. Israel's Foreign Ministry told Newsru.co.il that it was in contact with her family, but did not say whether a consular official had visited her.

Rozenfeld is one of a growing number of Russian academics, scientists and engineers who have been prosecuted for donating to FBK.

Andrei Dymov, an associate professor at the Higher School of Economics and senior researcher at the Steklov Mathematical Institute, are among those who have been prosecuted. Physicist Yevgeny Onishchenko, a former researcher at the Lebedev Physical Institute, received 18 months of compulsory labor for a 5,000 ruble ($60) donation.

"I think, until the very last second, none of us could really take in the possibility that she would actually go to prison," Panyutina said. "Including Sofya herself."

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