



Dmitry Ivanov via video link from the pre-trial detention center in the Moscow City Court, October 24, 2023 / Collage: OVD-Info, photo: Alexandra Astakhova, Mediazona

11.12.2025, 15:29 Moscow

INTERVIEW

## “Save yourselves for better times and be ready for them to come”: An interview with political prisoner Dmitry Ivanov

ENGLISH

**Dmitry Ivanov, creator of the Telegram channel “Moscow State University is protesting, » is one of the people who were **sentenced** to imprisonment under the new law on spreading ‘knowingly false information’ about the Russian army. Along with lawyers from OVD-Info, he and three others who had been prosecuted for making anti-war statements on the Internet appealed to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.**

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Since Russia's exclusion from the Council of Europe, turning to the UN Working Group is one of the few remaining ways to achieve reconsideration of a criminal case. This working group examines complaints about arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and other violations of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#).

Apart from Dmitry, the complaint submitted to the UN Working Group included three other applicants: Andrey Balin, a former member of the People's Freedom Party from Tolyatti who was sentenced to [7 years in prison](#) for anti-war posts on VKontakte, Igor Baryshnikov, activist from Kaliningrad who was sentenced to [7.5 years in prison](#) for posts on Facebook discussing the shelling of a maternity hospital in Mariupol and murders in Bucha, and Alexander Bakhtin, eco-activist from near Moscow who was sentenced [6 years in prison](#) for posts on VKontakte about the war in Ukraine.

We call for recognition that the detention and deprivation of freedom in these cases were arbitrary and illegal. We demand the release of Ivanov, Balin, Baryshnikov, and Bakhtin, as well as the complete repeal of Article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code.

In 2022, the Working Group [considered](#) the complaint of former municipal deputy Alexey Gorin, who had been [convicted](#) under the same article, and demanded his immediate release. Earlier, in 2015, the Russian Constitutional Court [stated](#) that an opinion of the Working

Group could be a basis for reconsideration of a case. Unfortunately, this decision has still not been enforced, and Gorin remains in custody.

Since October, Dmitry Ivanov **has been** in Moscow's pre-trial detention centre No. 5 "Vodnik." He was placed there to await an appeal against his sentence. The sentence was eventually **upheld**. During his time in detention, he repeatedly faced pressure: the correctional services **destroyed** his letters and **prohibited** him from seeing his mother.

We asked Dmitry about his life in detention and whether he sees any point in appealing to international organisations today.

**—You were sentenced to an enormous term, 8.5 years in prison. Please tell us how you handled the news then and how you feel now. Has it become easier or more challenging since the verdict?**

—I wasn't surprised by the term requested by the prosecution and then repeated in the court's verdict. That was roughly what we had been expecting from the beginning. In June 2022, when a criminal case was initiated against me, I joked: Now, if anyone asks me what I've been up to for the past 8 years, I'll have the best answer. (hereinafter, the text retains author's spelling and punctuation—OVD-Info)

I do think it's important to realise that these numbers are arbitrary. Some people got 8 years in prison, while others got 19 or even 25, but you and I understand that we will be out much sooner. My prison sentence depends on changes in the political situation and may be extended or shortened arbitrarily until I'm suddenly free.

As for how other people perceive my sentence, many fellow prisoners showed me sympathy and respect for my willingness to bear such responsibility for my words and beliefs. I also received a lot of support from outside: when

I received my sentence, so many people wrote to me. Not only friends and colleagues but also people who I had not been in touch with for years and a huge number of people I had never met.

**—You are one of the claimants of the complaint to the UN Working Group. Do you think there is a point in filing a complaint to international organisations even though Russia won't enforce their decisions?**

—Absolutely. It is essential to draw the attention of the international community to civil rights violations inside Russia. It is more important now than ever because foreign politicians and ordinary people need to understand that there is a difference between the actions of the Russian government and the will of the Russian people. “Putin is not Russia. We did not elect him, and he didn't ask our permission before starting the war.” That's what I said to foreign journalists in the courtroom on the day I was found guilty. The sentence of 8,5 years that I got that day is clear evidence that what I said is true. These words should be spoken in European parliaments and from UN tribunes as well. Unfortunately, in some countries, a Russian passport or a Russian licence plate automatically makes a person an accomplice of the aggressor in the eyes of the local authorities. In reality, the opposite may be true: a person with a Russian passport may have suffered at the hands of the oppressive government and may be fleeing from it. That's something that is very important to convey to the international community.

**—What is the most difficult thing about being in prison? What gives you strength and helps you keep going?**

—The most difficult thing about being in prison is definitely being away from the people I love, from family and friends. Everything else is basically just everyday discomfort, which I adapted to quite quickly. I also get a lot of support from

my friends. For the past year and a half, they have been not only staying in touch with me and supporting me in tough situations but also continuing to draw public attention to my case. Also, it is much easier to endure imprisonment if you know that you are right and that you ended up behind bars not because of something you did wrong and not by mistake but because you did everything right.

**—What do you read these days? What books did you particularly like and what might you want to recommend?**

—I mostly read what I can get from the prison library because having books transferred from outside takes a lot of time and involves certain difficulties. In general, many things that would normally be very simple here turn into a long and tedious quest. Fortunately, there are a lot of books to choose from here: classic anti-war prose (I love Remarque's novels), memoirs of camp prisoners (from Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn to Viktor Frankl), and fiction about the strength of spirit in captivity ("The Shawshank Redemption," "Papillon," "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and others). And, as Grigory Melkonyants noted when we recently met, there's a large number of "foreign agents" (mainly Boris Akunin but there are many others as well). So there is always something to read. I never get bored.

**—You mentioned prisoner solidarity when you talked about getting beaten up by the guard in court. Are such manifestations of solidarity common among prisoners?**

—Collectivism is both a strength and a weakness of the prison world. On the one hand, the prison administration very often resorts to collective responsibility, like punishing the entire cell for the actions of one person. And not necessarily for real violations, but also, for example, for filing a complaint. On the other hand, prisoners often resort to collective action to protect common interests or support those who face injustice. "A person should not be left alone with the system"

is one of the mottos of OVD-Info, and in prison everyone understands it like no other place.

Everyone helps each other in any way they can: by giving legal advice, sharing experiences, passing on information through lawyers and relatives. And, of course, by providing financial support. Most cells maintain a shared household, into which everyone contributes as much as possible and uses as needed so that no one is left hungry, without warm clothes or without cigarettes. And in extreme cases, when faced with blatant injustice, prisoners sometimes decide to take the most desperate collective actions, which I hope I will never get to witness.

**—Do you ever think about what you will do once you are free?**

—This is a difficult question, because I have little idea what kind of world I will find myself in once I'm free. Will it be the world we knew before February 24, 2022, the one we see around us now, or, most likely, a completely different world? In any case, I'm not used to wasting time, so immediately after release I intend to get involved in active work. If I were released now, I would most likely start helping other political prisoners, using all the experience I acquired in captivity. But I want to believe that when I am released, there will be no political prisoners left in Russia. But new institutions will need to be built so there will be plenty to do.

**—Christmas and New Year's are coming soon. How will you celebrate given the current circumstances? What would you like to wish your readers?**

—A year ago, welcoming 2023 within the confines of a Moscow pre-trial detention centre, I was sure that by the end of it I would be in a different place—ideally, of course, free, but if not, then probably in a labour camp. However, as the year draws to a close, I've been transferred across Russia only to return to the same pre-trial detention centre

where my journey began. So, apparently, contrary to what I had expected, I will celebrate the new year the same way as the last: in a cramped and modest space but in a friendly, noisy and cheerful company, in a 10-bed cell with bunk beds and double bars on the windows, with reflections of the city's New Year's garlands flickering behind them.

As for what I want to wish the readers, it may sound trite but I wish everyone good health and patience, and for peace and freedom for us all to come as soon as possible—what else could you wish in these times.

When they tell you that everything is lost and nothing will work out, don't listen. Believe in yourselves, do not give in to despair. Keep yourselves safe for better times and be ready for them to come—nothing lasts forever. I am not afraid, and you should not be afraid either.

*You can write to Dmitry through the services [“RosUzник”](#), [“FSIN-letter”](#) and [“Zonatelecom”](#)*

**RUS:** 125130, г. Москва, Выборгская ул., д. 20, ФКУ СИЗО-5 ФСИН России, Иванов Дмитрий Александрович  
05.08.1999 г. р.

**ENG:** 125130, Moscow, Vyborgskaya ul. 20, FKU SIZO-5 FSIN of Russia, Dmitry Alexandrovich Ivanov, born on August 5, 1999.

*Or through the [Telegram channel](#) “Prison Moscow State University” created in support of Dmitry.*

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