



FSU NEWS September 2016

News and action updates on the Former Soviet Union

Amnesty International UK

WELCOME to this new issue of FSU News, the newsletter from the Country Coordinators Team at AIUK for the Former Soviet Union. We hope you find the newsletter useful. **Feel free to use the links in your tweets, on the Facebook page or website of your group...** And if you have any questions or suggestions, or would like to share a photo of any FSU actions you've taken part in with your group in the next issue, please let us know!

Don't forget to find us on Facebook: [Amnesty International UK Former Soviet Union](#)

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE DISAPPEARED

30 August marked the International Day for Victims of Enforced Disappearance. Disappearances are a feature of Former Soviet Union countries, notably in the North Caucasus but also currently in Ukraine. Authorities rarely investigate alleged disappearances rigorously so perpetrators go unpunished. The European Court of Human Rights has found Russia guilty of violating the right to life of civilians at the hands of Russian soldiers in Chechnya.

We have several casefiles on disappearances in the Chechen war. These are not easy cases to work on, but solidarity work is much appreciated by their families, and pressure must continue to be brought against the State to find and prosecute those responsible for their crimes. A couple of examples:

Zelimkhan Murdalov has not been seen since 2 January 2001, when he was detained in Grozny, the Chechen capital. A court found he was tortured in custody, and the last people to see him were state agents.



Ibragim Gazdiev was reportedly seized by armed men in camouflage in Karabulak, in Ingushetia in August 2007. He has not been seen since and his family believe that he has been, or is being, held in incommunicado detention. Mukhmed, his father, died last year having continuously campaigned for news of his son but never hearing what had happened to him.

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Bolotnaya Protestors still in jail

Four years after the protests about vote-rigging in Russia, on the eve of Vladimir Putin's inauguration, those who took part in the demonstrations, and some who didn't, are still being arrested, tried and given long prison sentences. The laws on protest have been tightened following the demonstrations and are in force for the State Duma (parliamentary) elections on 16 September.



(c) BBC Russia: Crushing Dissent

The Presidential Human Rights Ombudsman, Major General Tatyana Moskalkova, who spent 27 years in the

Interior Ministry and opposed the mass rallies, feels the harsh sentences meted out to the protestors fully justified. Unbelievably, she claims not to have received a single complaint that people can't hold a protest or march.

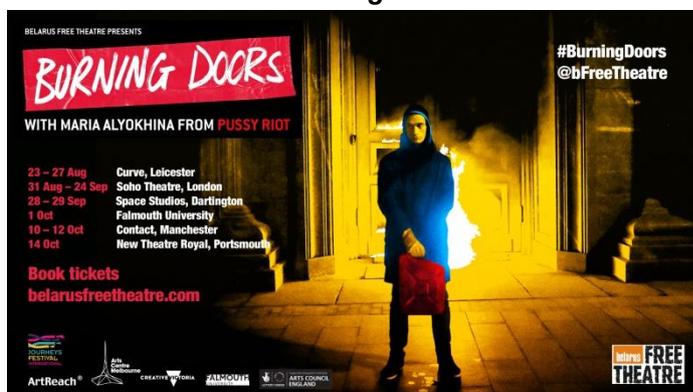
What brought the protests and the protestors to life was a recent BBC News Our World programme: *Russia: Crushing Dissent*. Unfortunately, it was only on iPlayer for 30 days.

Maksim Panfilov, one of the more recent detainees, remains in pre-trial detention until later this month (see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR46/3826/2016/en/>). The programme shows a one-woman demonstrator bundled away by police for demanding his freedom.

The programme showed how ordinary people were tried and convicted on spurious charges. Their continued defiance in the face of overwhelming odds is truly inspiring.

Groups can take on the casefile of the Bolotnaya Protestors. Contact Barrie Hay, Country Coordinator for the Russian Federation, for more details: barrie.hay@amnesty.org.uk.

Belarus Free Theatre *Burning Doors*



The irrepressible **Belarus Free Theatre**, banned on political grounds from performing in Belarus, is staging a play sharing stories of persecuted artists living under dictatorship who won't be silenced. It draws from the real-life stories of Russian performance artist **Pyotr Pavlensky**, incarcerated Ukrainian filmmaker **Oleg Sentsov** and **Maria Alyokhina**, of *Pussy Riot*, who makes her stage debut, and **all of whom have featured in our Urgent Actions**.

There are after show discussions on the *first three Saturday matinee performances in September* about suppressing artistic freedom, the law and incarceration, and campaigning for the release of Oleg Sentsov and other Ukrainian prisoners illegally held in Russian prisons.

Barrie and Pauline (Country Coordinators for the Russian Federation and Ukraine) saw the show on 3 September in London and were impressed by the harrowing representation of what happened and continues to happen to these people. The play was followed by a panel discussion, including the *Russia researcher of Amnesty's International Secretariat*, to help raise awareness of the unfair justice system and Soviet-style 'show trials' in Russia.



Ukrainian film director **Oleg Sentsov**, student **Aleksandr Kolchenko**, a social activist, and photographer and lawyer **Gennady Afanasyev** opposed the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. All three were convicted after grossly unfair trials in Russian military courts. **Aleksandr Kolchenko** was released as part of a 'prisoner exchange' in June.

Oleg Sentsov was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for "setting up a branch of a terrorist group" and "having organized terrorist acts in April 2014", shortly after the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea. **Aleksandr Kolchenko** was also sentenced by the same court to 10 years in a strict regime labour camp for "committing terrorist acts". Their appeals are due to be heard on 24 November.

Oleg Sentsov is on Amnesty Individuals at Risk portfolio and yet another **case that local groups can take on**. If your group is interested, please contact Barrie Hay: barrie.hay@amnesty.org.uk

Recent Campaigning Actions

Seven years on since the murder in Chechnya of courageous human rights defender **Natalia Estemirova** on 15 July 2009 and still no proper investigation into the killing. Her murders still walk free. We asked you to tweet the Investigation Committee and write raising concerns about the ineffective investigation into her murder. If you'd like to work on her case, please contact Barrie.



Natalya Sharina, Director of the state-run Ukrainian Library in Moscow, heard the Moscow prosecutor refused to sign an indictment but sent her case back for further investigation. This doesn't mean the case against her is definitely closed but there is a tiny chance it might collapse. The Amnesty International Secretariat believes your letters to the Prosecutor General might have played a part in this encouraging development even though the District court has extended the investigation into criminal charges against her

and her house arrest to 28 October.

Please continue to send letters demanding **Natalya Sharina's** release to maintain pressure on the authorities. This link tells you how to take action:

https://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/fi26115_2.pdf

UKRAINE

Good news: 13 released from secret detention - Now help to release another five.

As you may remember, we recently asked you to write to obtain the release of Dmytro Koriolov, who was held in secret detention in eastern Ukraine. We received great news: **Dmytro Koroliiov** and 12 others were released on 2 August after spending one year in secret detention in the Security Service of Ukraine compound in Kharkiv, northeast Ukraine. The thirteen were released from Kharkiv following the publication of the joint report by Amnesty and Human Rights Watch [“You Don't Exist.’ Arbitrary Detentions, Enforced Disappearances, and Torture in Eastern Ukraine”](#) on 21 July and Amnesty's Urgent Action.

Dmytro said: *“thank you [Amnesty International] for the work that you are doing. I didn't believe I can get justice in this country. I thought I'll never be free and that one day they will just lead me out and shoot me. It is so great to see my family again.”*

You can read more in this blog post: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/08/released-13-people-freed-from-secret-detention-in-ukraine/>

This proves that together we can make a positive difference and that **urgent actions work**. We now need to keep putting pressure to ensure justice for all the victims and the release of those remaining in secret detention. We know that **at least another five people remain in the compound of the Security Service of Ukraine in Kharkiv**, eastern Ukraine, from which the 13 others were recently released.

This is a **new Urgent Action** about these five people. Please follow the link to the action and you will find the points to include in your letters, and the addresses of the authorities. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/ua20016.pdf>

In the next few months **we will campaign further on secret detentions and torture in eastern Ukraine, including a postcard action**. More details will follow soon. **If your group is interested in a talk on Ukraine**, please do not hesitate to contact Pauline Uyterwijk-Crosfield, Country Coordinator for Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova: pauline.uyterwijk@amnesty.org.uk.

BELARUS

Earlier this year, in June, **Amnesty called on the UN Human Rights Council to renew the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur for Belarus**. This is Amnesty's statement: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur49/4290/2016/en/>

Ihar Tsikhanyuk's casefile now closed – Thanks to all of you who worked on his case.

Ihar's casefile is now closed. He is doing well and continues to campaign for LGBTI rights, but it was decided together with Ihar that his case would not benefit from further casefile campaigning. However, Ihar remains in close contact with Amnesty and knows we are there to support him should the need arise. A very Big Thanks to all of you who worked on his case, together we have helped to make a positive impact.

SOUTH CAUCASUS

Azerbaijan



One of the positive tendencies noticed in Azerbaijan was the conditional release of investigative journalist **Khadija Ismayilova** on 25 May. It was possible due to our joint effort. Though her release, AI will continue to campaign until her final acquittal. On Khadija's birthday (27 May) there were multiple demonstrations in front of Azerbaijani embassies all over the world and AIUK also participated in demonstrations in London.

The Formula 1 Europe Grand Prix held in Azerbaijan was used for urging the release of political prisoners and improving the level of freedom of expression there. Even the released human rights defenders, journalists and other activists remain effectively oppressed – their bank accounts frozen and their office's sealed. According to the public statement of the AI, for the beginning of June there are six new prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan, bringing the total number to 14.

On 10 May youth activists Bayram Mammadov and Giyas Ibrahimov were detained on spurious drug-related charges the day after posting a photo showing the statue of former president Heydar Aliyev on which they had painted a political protest message. They told their lawyer that the drugs had been planted on them by police. If convicted, the activists face up to 12 years in prison.

Georgia

The bill which would amend the Constitution of Georgia introducing a definition of marriage as a union exclusively between a man and a woman, received further endorsement of the Parliament's Human Rights and Civil Integration Committee on 5 May. Now the bill has to go through other committee hearings after which it will be voted by the parliament.

The First Vice Speaker of the parliament told Georgian media on 5 May that should the bill not receive enough support among parliamentarians, a referendum on the banning of same-sex marriage in the Constitution might be organised.

If you would like further information, please contact Varduhi Avanesyan, Country Coordinator for South Caucasus, at varduhi.avanesyan@amnesty.org.uk

CENTRAL ASIA

Turkmenistan

July 7th 2016 marks the one year anniversary of the disappearance and subsequent imprisonment of freelance journalist **Saparmamed Nepeskuliev**. In reaction to this year of disappearance, Amnesty International has signed a joint letter with other human rights groups and media organisations calling for his immediate release.

A copy of the letter is available here: <http://www.rferl.org/content/media-human-rights-groups-call-on-turkmenistan-to-free-nepeskuliev/27831044.html>

Tajikistan

In June, **Amnesty International released a public statement** concerning the **imprisonment of 14 high-ranking members of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) after an unfair trial**. Not only was the trial held behind closed doors, but the defence lawyers had to sign agreements not to disclose any information on the legal proceedings and made limited or no contact with international organizations and media. During the trials, relatives had limited access to the accused, and were only allowed to see them once. Relatives then reported that some of the defendants had been tortured to obtain 'confessions'.

You can read the public statement here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur60/4214/2016/en/>

Uzbekistan



The recently announced death of President Karimov is unlikely to improve human rights in the country (see <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/uzbekistan-president-karimovs-death-unlikely-improve-human-rights>). Please continue to use the torture postcards at events and post them to the three torture centres identified by Amnesty.

If you would like any further information, please contact the Country Coordinator for Central Asia, jemma.allen@amnesty.org.uk.

OUR TEAM

If there is **anything you would like to ask** about AI work and the human rights situation in any of the FSU countries, or if you would like any of us to come and **give a talk to your group**, let us know. Pick up the phone and give us a call, or send us an e-mail.

This is the current FSU Country Coordinators team:

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After a short leave of absence, Ade Couper ade.couper@amnesty.org.uk will concentrate on social media and developing our training materials.