

Statement by

Yuriy Yatsenko

My name is Yuriy Yatsenko. I am a Ukrainian citizen, who was illegally arrested and detained by the Russian Federation for over a year, for political reasons. Others who have suffered and continue to suffer the same fate are Nadia Savchenko, Oleg Sentsov and others, of whom you probably have never heard.

I was arrested in May 2014 in Kursk region of the Russian Federation, to where I traveled together with my friend on a business trip. I was detained by the police during a routine document check that the Russian police often practices. At the police department, an agent of the FSB (Russian Federal Security Service) showed to me a photograph of myself taken during the Euromaidan protests, which, as I suspect, he had found on social media. The agent demanded that me and my friend provide false testimony about being recruited either by the Right Sector (Ukrainian right-wing party, heavily demonized by the Russian propaganda) or personally by the head of the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine) to commit acts of terrorism in Russia. At the time, I was just an ordinary student from Western Ukraine and simply could not believe that such absurd accusations were being made against me. By the way, my western Ukrainian origin became an additional reason for the Russian law enforcement personnel to harass me.

After we both refused to incriminate ourselves, they began beating us at regular intervals. We were also offered an option of going on Russian TV channels and giving a predetermined speech about being sent to Russia from Ukraine to commit subversive acts, but instead turning to the FSB for protection, to save us from the Ukrainian authorities and their persecution. Once again, we refused to give false testimony, so the harassment continued, turning into both physical and psychological abuse. For example, they threatened to hand me over to the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov. "We'll transfer you to Kadyrov, you'll be his dog," as one FSB official threatened me.

At first, the abuse and the beatings were constant. I remember one particularly brutal instance. Some special forces soldiers, wearing masks and bearing no insignia on their uniforms other than the colors of the Russian flag, put a bag over my head, took me into the woods and tortured me. They hanged me by the handcuffs for hours and beat me in the head, groin and other parts of the body, as well as strangled me. They also simulated an execution, firing a gun next to my head.

The next morning, which was two weeks since my arrest, I used a shaving blade to cut my abdomen and the veins on my arms to stop this abuse. Only then I was taken to the hospital, from where I finally managed to inform my family about my whereabouts.

Despite the court decision about our deportation, both my friend and I were illegally kept at a special detention center for illegal immigrants for three months. During this period, the beatings and the torture was constant. Only three months later, my friend was released and taken to the Ukrainian border, while I was suddenly charged with the crime of possessing explosives.

Despite the absurdity of these accusations and the absence of any evidence, the court found me guilty. At first, I was sentenced to two years of imprisonment, but shortly afterwards, an appeal court reduced the sentence to 9 months. Since by that time I had already spent a year in detention, I was released. Throughout this year, in addition to all the other abuse I've mentioned, I had been regularly placed into the punishment cells and solitary confinement.

The fact that I'm free now is a testament to the efforts of the publicity campaigns, international pressure, and coordinated work of human rights advocates and lawyers. When I was in detention, I was visited by the guards from time to time, informing me that another article about me appeared in the press, or that another press-conference dedicated to my case was held. They seemed to be alarmed by that, and kept saying that this should be stopped, that everything should be "done quietly". That is why all public events in support of the prisoners are extremely important, because they give a clear signal to the repressive regime that it is being watched closely and that none of the prisoners are forgotten.

As of today, at least 13 Ukrainians are detained illegally somewhere in the Russian Federation, and at least 8 such prisoners are being held in occupied Crimea, both Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars. The criminal cases against them are fabricated, most of them have been brutally tortured, some of them have been deprived for over a year of their right to meet with an attorney or a Ukrainian consul. These are people of various ages, professional backgrounds, and political views, but they share one thing - their lives have become an instrument of the Russian state-sponsored propaganda that has created the image of Ukraine as a mortal enemy of Russia. The Kremlin officials constantly look for the means and the reasons to justify their hybrid war against Ukraine. That is why innocent Ukrainian citizens are proclaimed to be terrorists, spies, and fascists.

I am appealing to you on behalf of the campaign #LetMyPeopleGo. There are no independent courts in Russia, that is why politically motivated cases have no chance of being decided fairly. Only international pressure can help achieve the release of those detainees. We are waiting for the return home of Nadia Savchenko, Olexandr Kolchenko, Oleg Sentsov, Gennadiy Afanasiev, Olexii Chirniy, Sergiy Lytvynov, Mykola Karpiuk, Stanislav Klyh, Olexandr Kostenko, Haiser Dzhemilev, Yurii Soloshenko, Valentyn Vyhyvskii, and Viktor Shur. We also demand that Crimea be deoccupied and that everyone be released from the places of detention: Akhtem Chyihoz, Ali Asanov, Mustafa Dehermendzhy, Yuriy Ilchenko, Ruslan Zaytullaev, Nuri Primov, Rustam Vaytov, Ferat Sayfullaev. It is likely that this list is not complete. We may even be unaware of what other prisoners have been illegally detained. Nevertheless, we demand that the Russian Federation release ALL of the prisoners subject to politically motivated persecution.