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Russia

What Victory Means: Release All Political Prisoners

- IV Online magazine - 2026 - IVP620 - September 2026 -



Publication date: Thursday 3 September 2026

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AGAINST THE CURRENT spoke with Kseniia Kagarlitskaya at the international anti-fascist conference in Brazil, in March 2026, where she was attending as part of a small group from Russia and Ukraine.

Ivan Drury Zarin conducted this Interview with Kagarlitskaya about Putin's incarceration of her father Boris Kagarlitsky, and her group Freedom Zone. Visit their [website](#) for updates and information on how to donate.

After her father, the Marxist philosopher and political activist Boris Kagarlitsky, was arrested and sentenced to five years in a Russian penal colony for making a political joke, Kseniia Kagarlitskaya founded the Russian political prisoner support organization, [Freedom Zone](#). [1]

Freedom Zone's work goes far beyond her father's case, to organizing letter writing, collecting donations and publicity campaigns for dozens of the approximately 2000 political prisoners currently incarcerated in Russia. At the time of this interview, Freedom Zone has collected more than 25,000 Euros for Russian political prisoners and their families.

Against the Current: Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Kseniia. Can you begin by explaining your campaign for Boris Kagarlitsky's freedom?

Kseniia Kagarlitskaya: I'm from Russia but I can't live in Russia anymore because of everything I do in defense of my father. My father's name is Boris Kagarlitsky. He is a well-known sociologist and Marxist politician. And now he's a political prisoner.

My father was imprisoned and sentenced to five years in a penal colony for making a video on YouTube. It was an analysis of the explosion of the Crimean bridge in 2022 and why it happened. And the title of the video was "Explosive Congratulations of the cat Mostik," a reference to the Russian name of the bridge.

The government classified the explosion of the Crimean bridge as an act of terrorism. If you say "explosive congratulations," the authorities conclude you think the explosion was something good, so you are justifying terrorism. This is the logic of the government's whole case. It's absolutely absurd. He was locked away in prison for five years for those two words: "explosive congratulations."

ATC: Could you say something about your father's political background? He's not an ordinary person putting up a video. Like you said, they were looking for a reason to put him in prison because he's a leftist activist and Marxist writer. Can you say something about his history?

KK: My father has been a political activist his whole life. He is a political scientist, a political activist, and a politician. This is his second time in prison. His first was in the days of the Soviet Union.

He spent 13 months in prison under Brezhnev, and now he is imprisoned by Putin's government. It doesn't matter which government is in power, he always tells the truth.

He's well known all around the world, including the United States. He has written 18 books, which have been translated into several languages. People study his books in the universities, whether in departments of politics or economics.

When the war started, my father kept producing on his YouTube channel; he kept writing articles; he kept doing everything he did before the war. But times changed after the war started.

Remember, Russia is a dictatorship. For the Russian government, it is not okay for someone to criticize them loudly. And he kept speaking. The main idea of our government was to silence him. They needed to shut him up so they found a reason.

Although this video was published in 2022, he was not arrested and sentenced until 2023. A year passed between the video and his arrest. They decided to use the video and accuse him of saying "explosive congratulations." It was the only thing they could come up with.

ATC: What is the significance of his incarceration for the left?

KK: From my point of view, my father is the most well-known left-wing activist in Russia. His arrest should be a sign for all left-wing activists all around the world to see how the Russian government treats left-wing activists.

Maybe many people think that only liberals could be imprisoned in Russia, or that Putin is anti-imperialist because he's against Trump or America, therefore if you are leftwing you cannot get imprisoned. That is not true.

ATC: You were saying that people in Brazil you've met are surprised that a leftwing activist could be in prison.

KK: They thought it's impossible! But everyone is facing repression right now. You could be an activist, or not, and still be put in prison for any reason.

Fear in Putin's Russia

ATC: I wanted to ask you about this dynamic. You said in your talk that your father is a political prisoner but it feels wrong to use the word political prisoner because Putin is locking up people who are doing the most minor things like making a comment on a Facebook post. What is the role of repression in Putin's Russia, and in his mode of governance? What function does it play?

KK: The main idea of Putin's government is to make people fear so that they self-censor. People will think twice before writing a comment. This is how people remain silent.

People don't share their oppositional opinions. Everybody outside Russia thinks oh, everybody supports Putin! Nobody says a word against Putin! But you get you can get 15 to 20 years in prison just for writing a Facebook comment.

At this moment we have more than 2000 political prisoners in Russia. Although this is an enormous number, for a country of more than 140 million people, it's a small percentage of the whole population. But you have to understand that in imprisoning 2000 people for minor cases, people think before doing, saying or writing something. Everybody

fears being put in prison.

ATC: It sounds like there's two functions to this sort of repression. One is targeting activist leaders like your father with strong sentences for doing his political work. That has a chilling effect on the left. But if people hear that others are being locked up for a Facebook post or a small donation then they become hesitant about doing ordinary things.

It reminds me of Trump's strategy of deportations, that ICE makes so much noise about deportations mostly for the effect of convincing people to self-deport. It's a strategy of terror to intimidate people so that they will leave on their own. It saves money and the hassle of having the state do it.

KK: A good example of this is the case of Nadezhda Buyanova. She's a doctor. She said something against the war in front of her patient; the patient went to the police. This doctor was imprisoned. It was a warning doctors not to say anything to their patients.

We don't know: did she even say these words? But it doesn't matter. She's still a political prisoner.

And we have a case of Antonina Favorskaya, a journalist imprisoned for her articles. Her arrest was a sign to all journalists not to write the "wrong" things in articles.

They pick a person from different social groups to set an example for everyone.

ATC: So your father is not imprisoned because of an individual act. He's in prison because of a social campaign that is attacking him. This is a structural problem. It's interesting that he is stating his refusal of any personalized or individualized route out of prison. Why is that?

KK: We had a giant political prisoner exchange in 2024 when Putin released 26 political prisoners in exchange for European prisoners. My father stated that he doesn't want to be included in any exchange list, which seemed really weird because prisoner exchange was a ray of hope for all political prisoners. Everyone wants to be included in those lists because this is the route to freedom.

He was saying that we don't want an exchange, and we don't want to have political prisoners. We have to fight the system but when we exchange prisoners, people become a resource for these states, an incentive for all countries to have their own political prisoners.

The idea is that if you kidnap your own citizens, you can then trade them for prisoners in other countries.

Our goal is to fight the system. We don't want to have political prisoners anywhere in the world. This is why my father said he would not participate in a prisoner exchange. Further, if he was exchanged he would have gone into exile. He believes exile is also a form of repression, even if a softer version.

My father says if you are doing politics, being imprisoned is your professional risk. It's similar to being a firefighter who dies on the job. If you are a firefighter, you know the risk, but you still do your work as a firefighter.

The same here. You understand that you could get sent to prison because of your activities, but still, you know, you keep doing it.

Freedom for All!

ATC: It sounds like your father has made his incarceration a field of struggle against the system of incarceration. What would victory mean for Boris Kagarlitsky?

KK: We are fighting for the release of all political prisoners. We think that every peace negotiation between Ukraine and Russia should include a point for the release of all political prisoners, on both sides. In Ukraine there are also political prisoners, so victory would mean the release of everybody.

ATC: My last question is how can people outside of Russia help political prisoners in Russia?

KK: The first thing you can do is to write letters to political prisoners. The website “Prison Mail” lets you send letters to prisoners in Russia. The only rule is that the letters must be in Russian; you can use ChatGPT or Google Translate or whatever to translate.

Imagine being in prison in Russia and getting a letter from Brazil. It could change everything for a person. Every political prisoner who has been released repeats the same thing: receiving letters is a ray of hope. It's their window to freedom. If you don't know what to write, just write about yourself: how you live and what you like.

In Freedom Zone, we have a webpage with pictures of prisoners, and where we describe what each prisoner likes, including their favorite books. You can start the conversation about those books or about the topics which are interesting for that particular political prisoner. Writing letters is really important.

The second thing is to donate. It's a really expensive to be a political prisoner. You need lawyers. You need parcels. Your family needs funds for living because most political prisoners are the main breadwinner in their family. Once the breadwinner has become a political prisoner it is a disaster for the family.

I made some calculations: we need 10 million euros per year to cover the expenses of all political prisoners. All human rights organizations together don't collect this amount of money.

The third thing is to follow Freedom Zone on social media because we distribute different stories of political prisoners. I think it is important for people abroad to understand what is happening inside Russia.

There are many political prisoners who are not famous. We don't know their names — I want people to know their names. I want people to discuss their stories. That's why I hope that people from America and other countries will follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

We just launched English language media especially for this conference, so we can distribute those stories in English.

ATC: Thank you very much Kseniia, and solidarity for you and your work.

Source: September-October 2026, [ATC 244](#)

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[1] Photo: Kseniia Kagarlitskaya with her father, Boris Kagarlitsky.