



Kremlin Prisoners: How to Write a Letter to a Political Prisoner

A political prisoner refers to an individual imprisoned or otherwise restricted in their rights and freedoms on account of their views or actions that are deemed political. Such individuals get arrested on criminal charges, and partly on charges of being involved in political activities. Russia has been arresting Ukrainians since the beginning of its aggression in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

The list of political
prisoners



In the Russian-occupied territories, Ukrainian citizens are being persecuted, in particular, for participating in political protests, criticizing the occupation regime, expressing religious views or views that run counter to the position of the occupying country. Some of the well-known political prisoners include Oleg Sentsov, Volodymyr Balukh, Ilmi Umerov, Akhtem Chygoz, Roman Sushchenko and other Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars whom Ukraine has succeeded in releasing.

Since the outbreak of a full-scale war, Russia has ramped up its repression against Ukrainian citizens. Russian authorities are continuing to illegally detain Ukrainians and file politically motivated charges against them in order to get Ukraine to make concessions.

According to the latest data from the Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Russia is illegally holding 209 Crimean political prisoners, including 126 Crimean Tatars. The Russian Federation is persecuting Ukrainian citizens for religious reasons (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses and Cases of Crimean Muslims), journalistic and human rights activities, and anti-war protests. It is also fabricating sabotage, terrorism, extremism and espionage cases.

Currently, 16 journalists from Crimea, including Nariman Dzhelial, Deputy Chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people, are being held in Russian detention centers.



Please take part in our initiative! Choose a Kremlin prisoner and send him or her a letter or postcard from February 19 to May 19.

Please, send your letters or postcards to our physical address or e-mail:

Kyiv, 01001, P.O. Box B-539, Human Rights Information Center

Free.CrimeaUA@gmail.com.

Why is Writing Letters to Political Prisoners Important?

Our fellow citizens languishing in the Russian prisons or detention centers in the occupied Crimea are increasingly facing problems with their psychological health.

They are psychologically and physically abused by the prison administrations and their cellmates on account of their nationality and political views. A number of political prisoners have serious illnesses and disabilities. They are not provided with proper medical care even after being tortured.

Previously, we shared with you information on the deaths of Dzhemil Gafarov and Konstantin Shiring.

Prison sentences meted out by Russian courts to elderly Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars tend to be too long; hence, they run the risk of not making it out alive.

A letter is a sign that a political prisoner is remembered and cared for. It sends a signal not only to your addressee but also to the prison administration. Your letter will have a human rights effect, too. For the prison administrations, this is an important message that a political prisoner is still in the public eye and that their human rights cannot be violated. And if they are, human rights activists and journalists will immediately report it.

What Should You Write About in Your Letter?

Begin your letter by providing some information about yourself: where you work or study and what you do in your free time. Write about what motivated you to reach out to this particular person. If you have read any interesting facts about the political prisoner or you share some common interests with them, you can write about that, too. Do not write anonymously. If you don't want to reveal your real identity, you should choose an alias. Political prisoners get a lot of letters and they may not remember getting one from you when they read your next letter.

- ▶ You can write about whatever you feel like sharing. For example, what's happening around you and in the world, about movies, books, travel, nature, or work. You can share some emotional/funny stories or your impressions of them. When you are in prison, everything is gray and monotonous; hence, prisoners need to get some vivid images and feelings.
- ▶ Ask questions. This will provide your penpal with an opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings, and views or to speak out on certain issues. Many political prisoners are educated people and they will definitely have some interesting information to share with you.
- ▶ You can send them news articles, stories, or excerpts from someone's memoirs. You can even share posts written by some famous people (except for ones that will definitely get censored, such as posts of Ukrainian politicians). It'll also be nice for the political prisoners to receive postcards from places far away.
- ▶ You can share news or interviews with interesting people, provide tips on improving health indoors, cite poems, or tell short stories. Your children can draw pictures, too.
- ▶ You can send educational materials, such as drawing or board game instructions, math problems, tests, etc. It would also be a good idea to congratulate a political prisoner on his or her birthday.
- ▶ Make sure your handwriting is legible: use a nice pen and white paper. Indicate the date of writing and number the letters (if there's more than one of them). That will help your penpal keep your correspondence in chronological order.
- ▶ If you send emails, the history of your correspondence will always be 'at your fingertips'. If you use postal mail, you should make brief copies of your letters or take pictures of them. Postal letters arrive at long intervals, so you may forget what you wrote about in your previous ones. And you will definitely get confused if you correspond with several political prisoners.

» If you are not in Ukraine, you can also send board games, such as chess or checkers. However, you need to make sure that the pieces are made of plastic and have no magnets inside. Please, keep in mind that Russian prison guards disallow card games and backgammon.

» Furthermore, it is possible to send pens and pencils to Kremlin prisoners, but only in black or blue colors. Colored pencils, erasers, and pencil sharpeners are prohibited. It is also permitted to send A4 paper to the prisoners, however, it must be folded as Russian prisons only allow small envelopes, not A4 format.

If you have not decided to whom exactly to write a letter, but you still want to support political prisoners, you can not indicate a specific addressee, since political prisoners (especially in places of deprivation of liberty in Crimea) are often held together by several people in one cell, so they will be able to read your letter together.

What Letters Get Screened by Prison Censors?

All your letters and images will be checked by a censor before being passed on to your addressee. The censor may redact or remove the information in your letter. If they don't like something in it, your letter may end up not reaching the intended recipient at all. Hence, you should follow these rules:

» Write in Russian: If the censor does not understand something, your letter will not reach the addressee.

» Keep your letters politically neutral.

» Refrain from asking questions about criminal cases (sometimes, it can do damage).

» Do not write anything that could compromise you or the recipient.

» Do not use ciphers, obscure symbols, or abbreviations.

» Do not use obscenities, insults, erotic or pornographic descriptions.

» Do not call for escape and other illegal actions (even jokingly), nor write disparagingly about the prison administration or personnel handling the political prisoner's case (this will primarily damage you).

» Please, keep in mind that censors in some correctional facilities disallow poems and cross out names in the letters.



Are There Any Restrictions on Letter Formats and Length?

There are no restrictions on the amount of text in letters or their format. You can even send a folded A2 size paper and it should be accepted.

To save money, you can make your own envelope using an A4 size paper (instructions are available on the Internet). You need to glue it well and then put some stamps on it.

If the detainee is transferred to another pre-trial detention center or prison camp prior to receiving the letter, your letter should be sent back within three days after receipt.

Letters to political prisoners may not be delivered on purpose. In this case, you can file a complaint with the prison camp administration.