



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

East and Southeast Europe



**#FreeThemAll**

# **PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE**

**Political Prisoners from East and Southeast Europe**

**ANALYSIS**

# Imprint

## Publisher

Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom

Regional Office for East and Southeast Europe

Tsar Kaloyan Street No 8, Floor 5  
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria

 [FREIHEIT.ORG/ESEE](https://FREIHEIT.ORG/ESEE)

 [/FNF.ESEE](https://www.facebook.com/FNF.ESEE)

 [/FNF.ESEE](https://www.instagram.com/FNF.ESEE)

 [/FreedomTVEurope](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1aE12kF0T0aE12kF0T0aE12k)

## Contacts

Phone + 359 2 969 60 10

Email [soe@freiheit.org](mailto:soe@freiheit.org)

**2021**

# Contents

1. MARFA RABKOVA, BELARUS	4
2. NEDIM TÜRFENT, TURKEY	5
3. OSMAN KAVALA, TURKEY	6
4. YURY DMITRIEV, RUSSIA	7
5. AZAT MIFTAKHOV, RUSSIA	8
6. ZARIFA SAUTIEVA, RUSSIA (INGUSHETIA)	9
7. EMIR-HUSSEIN KUKU, UKRAINE	10
8. POLAD ASLANOV, AZERBAIJAN	11
9. ELCHIN ISMAYILLI, AZERBAIJAN	12



# MARFA RABKOVA

## BELARUS

On September 17, officers from the Interior Ministry detained a Belarusian human rights advocate, Marfa Rabkova, and her husband. Later, officers searched their home in Belarus' capital, Minsk, and confiscated some personal property, including their laptops and cell phones.

A week later, Rabkova was charged with planning to incite riots, an accusation which both Belarusian and international human rights advocates see as unjust and fabricated. If convicted, she faces up to three years in jail.

Rabkova coordinates the Volunteer Service of Viasna, a Minsk-based human rights organization which also monitors elections and protests. Ales Bialiatski, Viasna's chairman and a former prisoner of conscience, thinks Rabkova's detention is politically motivated. As part of her job, Rabkova monitored peaceful gatherings during the recent national election campaign, tracking cases of the torture and abuse of arrested demonstrators.

Mass protests erupted in this former soviet republic following an election on August 9. Alexander Lukashenko, a strongman who has ruled the country for 26 years, declared a landslide victory. His claim of getting 80 percent is considered dishonest by most independent Belarusian and international observers. The main opposition candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya (BY: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya), disputed these results and was forced to flee the country. She currently lives in exile in neighbouring Lithuania.

Since the summer, thousands of protesters, including human rights advocates and journalists, have been arrested; many have been beaten or harassed. Security forces used tear gas, rubber bullets, and stun grenades during rallies that

were predominantly peaceful. Some people are now missing, others have been found dead.

In October, Amnesty International expressed concern about the criminal persecution of Rabkova and called for her immediate release. In the meantime, Viasna announced that other members of the organization had also been detained.

"Marfa Rabkova has committed no crime and there are no grounds for her prosecution," reads the statement. "Her arrest, detention, and prosecution are retaliation for her human rights work, and constitute a major breach of Belarus' obligations under international human rights law."

In November, the European Parliament passed a resolution on Belarus, criticizing "continuous violations of human rights" in the country, including the murder of Raman Bandarenka, a 31-year old teacher who was beaten to death on November 11 by a group of masked men thought be close to Lukashenko. The statement, adopted by 613 votes in favour, refuses to recognize him as the president of Belarus and calls for new and fair elections.

Members of the European Parliament condemned the Belarussian authorities, saying they had met the peaceful rallies "with violence, repression, systematic intimidation, harassment, restrictions on fundamental freedoms, and inhumane treatment, including torture and sexual violence against people detained during protests, human rights defenders included". European Union also agreed to impose sanctions on the Belarusian leader and a number of Belarusian officials, which include banning visas and freezing assets.



Disclaimer: As of March 31, 2021, Marfa Rabkova is still in custody.

**#FreeThemAll**

# NEDIM TÜRFENT

## TURKEY

**B**ecause authoritarianism in Turkey has yet to peak, it is now more crucial that writers fulfil their responsibility to promote peace and freedom in our everyday lives," said the imprisoned Turkish journalist, writer, and poet Nedim Türfent. He sent this plea to support peace and freedom from prison after learning that English PEN had granted him an honorary membership in September.

This prominent global writers' association referred to him as "one of many writers currently imprisoned in Turkey" and sentenced on trumped-up charges. Previously, the organization had launched a solidarity campaign in his support, translated some of his poems, and called for his release.

Türfent was arrested in the spring of 2016 while covering a story in southeast Turkey for the pro-Kurdish Dicle News Agency. A few months later, this media outlet was shut down by a special decree from the Turkish government. Most of Türfent's work deals with Kurdish-related issues. He was in the region to document the alleged abuse of Turkish and Kurdish workers by Turkish forces. Once his story was published, Türfent became a target of online harassment and received death threats.

A day after he was detained, he was charged with "membership in a terrorist organization" and "making terrorist propaganda". He was only indicted more than one year later and his first hearing was delayed to June 2017. During his trial, a majority of the witnesses against him admitted that their statements were obtained through torture. In December

2017, a Turkish court sentenced Türfent to jail for eight years and nine months. A year later, Turkey's Court of Cassation upheld the sentence.

PEN International condemned this decision. "We deplore the decision of Turkey's Court of Cassation to uphold Nedim Türfent's lengthy and unfair prison sentence, despite blatant violations of his right to a fair trial," said Salil Tripathi, Chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee, in a statement. "It is another dark day in Nedim's ongoing miscarriage of justice. The Turkish authorities must release him immediately and unconditionally, and urgently overturn his conviction."

Other international organizations and human rights defenders also criticized the court's decision as a miscarriage of justice.

In June 2020, several international organizations issued a statement marking the 1,500th day of the journalist's imprisonment and again called for "his immediate and unconditional release".

"For the "crime" of doing journalism, Nedim Türfent has now spent 1,500 days in prison. He has been harassed, targeted, threatened, and deprived of his freedom. Turkey must end this injustice and immediately release Nedim and all other journalists in Turkey jailed for doing their jobs," said Scott Griffen, Deputy Director of the International Press Institute, in a statement.

Disclaimer: As of March 31, 2021, Nedim Türfent is still in prison, serving the remainder of his sentence.

**#FreeThemAll**



# OSMAN KAVALA

## TURKEY

**O**sman Kavala is a prominent Turkish entrepreneur and philanthropist. Since his arrest in 2017 he has additionally become one of Turkey's most prominent political prisoners.

He took over the family business, Kavala Group, after the death of his father in the 1980s. He co-founded the Iletisim Publishing Company, which gave a platform to democratic voices in the country at a time when it was experiencing another period of repression after the military coup in 1980. Kavala also set up a number of civil organizations, which promote ethnic diversity and human rights causes. One of them is Anadolu Kultur, a non-profit organisation that supports art and culture projects. In the aftermath of the 1999 earthquake, which killed tens of thousands of people, Kavala aided disaster relief efforts by building temporary housing.

In 2017 Kavala was arrested and accused of "attempting to overthrow the government" and "attempting to overthrow the constitutional order". In February 2020 a Turkish court acquitted him on the former charges for his alleged involvement in the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul. Before he could walk free, however, just hours after his release, he was re-arrested and charged for his alleged role in the attempted coup in 2016. The failed uprising triggered a massive crackdown on political opponents, media, judges, academics, and anyone with links with Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen who Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan sees as the mastermind behind the failed operation.

In March 2020 a Turkish court acquitted Kavala on charges of "attempting to overthrow the constitutional order" but the businessman was kept in custody on the charge of "political

or military espionage". While Kavala was never convicted of a crime, on December 18 another court ruled to keep the philanthropist in remand. Moreover, he is held behind bars despite a decision of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, ECHR. In December 2019 the judges ruled that Kavala's detention is based on political motives and ordered Turkish authorities to free him. The court also stated that his arrest "pursued an ulterior purpose" of "reducing Mr Kavala, and with him all human-rights defenders, to silence".

Since Kavala's detention, a number of international human rights organizations and governments called for his release.

"We call upon Turkey to comply with its own commitment to justice and rule of law and to release Osman Kavala from detention, while pursuing a just, transparent, and speedy resolution to his case," reads a statement in support of the Turkish businessman issued by the US State Department.

In December the Council of Europe issued an interim resolution, demanding his immediate release and urging Turkish authorities to ensure that Turkey's Constitutional Court hears Kavala's case without any further delay.

Rights organization Amnesty International also urged Turkey to end his detention right away. "Almost a year to the day after the European Court for Human Rights issued a binding judgment finding that the detention of Osman Kavala is politically motivated, today's resolution demanding his immediate release sends a clear message to the Turkish authorities that his continued imprisonment cannot and will not be tolerated," said in a statement Nils Muiznieks, the organization's Europe Director.



Disclaimer: As of March 31, 2021, research shows that Osman Kavala is still in custody, awaiting trial on different charges.

**#FreeThemAll**

# YURY DMITRIEV

## RUSSIA

In 1997 historian and researcher Yury Dmitriev made a gruesome discovery in the Sandarmokh forest of Karelia, a Russian region close to the border with Finland. He found the burial grounds of thousands of political prisoners massacred there under Stalin's regime. The woods are considered the region's largest site where executions took place of the communist party's political rivals during the so-called Great Terror. Between 1936 and 1938, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin killed hundreds of thousands of Russians seen as a threat to his regime and sent many more to labour camps known as Gulags.

Since the 1980s, Dmitriev had been studying mass graves in Karelia and trying to shed light on its Stalin-era atrocities. However, his pursuit of truth about Russia's past has cost him dear. He was initially arrested in 2016 when police raided his home, found naked photos of his adopted daughter on his computer, and charged him with producing pornographic photos, sexual abuse of a child, and possession of a firearm. Dmitriev, a representative of the rights organization Memorial, explained that the photos had been taken to monitor the girl's growth and health, as she was suffering from a chronic disease at the time. His arrest came shortly after state media started criticizing Memorial of aiding "those who aim to destroy the Russian state", the Moscow Times reported.

In 2018 the Petrozavodsk City Court acquitted Dmitriev of two charges but sentenced him to three and a half years in prison for illegally possessing a firearm. A few months later, a higher court overturned the sentence and returned the case for retrial. As a result, Dmitriev was detained again. In July 2020 the Petrozavodsk City Court sentenced the historian to three and a half years in prison and he was expected to be released in November due to time served. In September, however, the Karelia Supreme Court overturned the earlier verdict and sentenced him to 13 years in prison.

A few days prior to the court's decision, close to 250 Russian human rights advocates, academics, journalists, politicians, and writers sent a letter, asking the trial to be transferred to another region and expressing doubt about the objectivity of the court.

Local and international human rights organizations see the sentence as an attempt to silence the researcher for his work with Memorial which has been investigating Stalin-era crimes. Moreover, Dmitriev's case is an example of the increased state repression of human rights advocates and organizations in Russia, which oftentimes include prosecution, smear campaigns, and bogus charges. Memorial and its supporters see Dmitriev as a political prisoner and say that the trial against him was based on fabricated evidence. In the meantime, pro-Kremlin media and different nationalistic organizations in Russia launched a campaign to challenge Dmitriev's findings in Karelia by claiming that some of the corpses found at Sandarmokh belong to Soviet soldiers killed by the Finnish Army during World War II.

Russian authorities have long targeted Memorial for its efforts to commemorate victims of the Stalinist regime and list it as a "foreign agent". In October 2019, special forces raided the offices of the organization and the home of its director in the Ural city of Perm. The search was part of an investigation into "illegal logging" allegedly done by the organization's activists a year earlier. Memorial's team told Human Rights Watch their alleged crime constituted of removing old branches and a fence from a cemetery where some Lithuanians and Poles displaced under Stalin's regime were buried. A month later, a Moscow court fined the organization for failing to add "foreign agent" tags to their social media and YouTube posts.

**Note:** Some Western publications refer to him as Yuri Dmitriev.



Disclaimer: As of March 31, 2021, research shows that Yury Dmitriev is still in prison, serving the remaining of his sentence.

**#FreeThemAll**

# AZAT MIFTAKHOV

## RUSSIA

In February 2019 police searched the dorm room of Azat Miftakhov, a Russian mathematics student and anarchist activist.

Initially he faced charges on assisting to make an improvised explosive found a month earlier in Balashikha, a town near the Russian capital Moscow. Later the student told his lawyer that security agents had beaten and tortured him with a screwdriver to confess to a crime he said he did not commit. Human rights advocates also saw and documented marks of torture on his body.

A few days after his arrest, Miftakhov was released due to lack of evidence, only to be detained again a few hours later in connection with another incident. This time police claimed that Miftakhov had been involved in an attack on an office of United Russia, the country's ruling party. In January 2018, unknown perpetrators broke a window and threw a smoke grenade inside the party's office in Moscow. While police detained several suspects, some of whom pleaded guilty, they were later released and the investigation was suspended. The case was reopened following Miftakhov's

arrest and he was charged with hooliganism. If convicted, Miftakhov faces up to five years in jail. According to investigators, a secret witness confirmed that the student was present at the night of the incident. Curiously, in October 2020 the witness could not testify in court because he had died, said prosecutors, quoted by local media.

Miftakhov denies all the charges and says that he has been prosecuted because of the anarchist views.

Since Miftakhov's arrest, a wave of rallies took place in Moscow to protest his detention. In July 2019 graduates and students of Moscow State University, where they young man studies, staged a rally in his support and called for his release. They also placed a huge sign that read "Free Azat" in front of the university building. Russian human rights center Memorial has recognized Miftakhov as a political prisoner.

In January 2021 a Moscow court sentenced Miftakhov to six years in prison. The verdict could be appealed.



Disclaimer: As of March 31, 2021, research shows that Azat Miftakhov has been sentenced to six years in jail.

**#FreeThemAll**



# ZARIFA SAUTIEVA

## RUSSIA (INGUSHETIA)

In September 2018 border posts along the Ingushetia-Chechnya border mysteriously began to move. Later, it turned out that presidents of the two Russian republics in North Caucasus – Ingushetia's Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov had struck a closed-doors deal. The secret trade of territory, which some Ingush see as unfavourable to their country, sparked a wave of protests, calling for a halt of the land transfer. The tensions ultimately led to the resignation of Yevkurov who had ruled the region for more than a decade.

While the wave of rallies in the republic's capital Magas also spread to other Russian cities, Ingush authorities tried to crack down on protests. Police arrested dozens of demonstrators, including activists and journalists, accusing them of provoking civil unrest and violence towards law enforcement. Among those prosecuted is Zarifa Sautieva, an activist and former deputy director of the Museum of Victims of Political Repression in Ingushetia.

She was detained in July 2019 for allegedly attacking a police officer and was placed under pre-trial detention. Sautieva, the only female protester arrested, has been a regular at the demonstrations and often times broadcasted the rallies live on social media.

In September 2020 a court in Stavropol ruled that Sautieva's detention between September and December 2019 was illegal, her lawyer Bilan Dzugaev told local media. He also said the case against her is politically motivated and based on trumped-up charges.

Sautieva believes her participation in the rallies cost her the job in a museum. In November 2018, a month after the start of the protest, she learned that she would be dismissed from her position as deputy director starting January. She challenged the sacking in court and was reinstated back in March 2020. Two months later, however, the museum's new director fired her again.

Despite many calls to release Sautieva as well as petitions in her support, the activist is under house arrest since March 2021 awaiting her trial. In the meantime, Russian human rights center Memorial has recognized her as a political prisoner.

**Note:** Some Western publications refer to her as Zarifa Sautiyeva.

Disclaimer: As of March 31, 2021, research shows that Zarifa Sautieva is still under house arrest, awaiting her trial.

**#FreeThemAll**



# EMIR-HUSSEIN KUKU

## UKRAINE

In February 2016 Russian security forces raided the house of Emir- Hussein Kuku, a Crimean Tatar human rights activist, searched his home for five hours, and arrested him. Later Kuku was charged with being a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir party that is banned as a terrorist organization in Russia, but legal in Ukraine. Kuku denied any involvement with the movement.

The 2016 raid was not activist's first encounter with Russian Federal Security Service, FSB. In the spring of 2015, FSB agents attacked him on his way to work, severely beat him, and then took him for interrogation to the FSB headquarters. In fact the security agents tried to recruit him as an informant on multiple occasions.

In 2014 Russia sent troops to Crimea and later annexed the peninsula in a breach of international law. Shortly after Moscow invaded Crimea, local activists started disappearing. Many of them were Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of Crimea that makes up to 13 percent of the population. Witnessing the injustice carried against his people, Kuku was inspired to join Contact Group on Human Rights, an organization which documents such enforced disappearances and monitors violations of human rights in general.

At the end of 2017, Kuku was transferred to Rostov-on-Don, a city in the South-West of Russia, around 700 km away from Yalta. In February 2018 a military court in Rostov-on-Don started the trial proceedings against Kuku and five other Crimean Tartars charged with membership in the local branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir. The case became known as the "Yalta Six".

"The charges are absurd in their very essence: how can six people who neither possess vast financial resources, nor enjoy the support of the top brass of Russia's Armed Forces possibly seize power in a powerful nuclear-armed state with a million-strong army?!", said Kuku in an open letter from May 2018, as quoted by online publication Open Democracy. "Yet the FSB continues to paint us as terrorists, falsifying 'evidence' for our 'guilt' in a fashion consistent with most dismal traditions of the NKVD – and thereby demonstrating that little has changed in Russia since Stalin's time."

In the summer of 2018 Kuku went on a hunger strike for 23 days and lost 13 kilograms, calling for the release of all Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia.

Amnesty International, a human rights organization, named Kuku a prisoner of conscience, and called multiple times for his release along with his fellow co-defendants from the "Yalta Six".

In November 2019, almost four years after his initial arrest, the Southern District Military Court in Rostov-on-Don sentenced Kuku to twelve years in a high-security prison. In the summer of 2020, a higher military court upheld the sentence.

Currently Moscow holds around 120 Ukrainians who are considered by Kiev to be political prisoners. In September 2019, in a historic prisoner swap, Ukraine and Russia exchanged dozens of prisoners, the first such move since the relations between the two countries soured following the annexation of Crimea five years earlier. Two more swaps followed and a total of 130 inmates had been freed, according to data, provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

Disclaimer: As of March 31, 2021, research shows that Emir-Husseini Kuku is still in jail, serving the remaining of his sentence.

**#FreeThemAll**



# POLAD ASLANOV

## AZERBAIJAN

In the summer of 2019 Azerbaijani journalist Polad Aslanov and his family were on their way to Iran to attend a friend's wedding. Little did they know that they would not be able to make it for the ceremony. At a border crossing, trying to enter Iran, Aslanov was detained along with his wife and daughter. Later his spouse and child were released but he was charged with treason. Azerbaijani police accused him of conspiring against the government and selling state secrets to Iran. Authorities also confiscated some of his belongings after searching his and his mother's homes.

The reporter denies all the charges. In the summer of 2020, Aslanov went on a hunger strike to protest the investigation and trial against him, which he believes, are politically motivated. Aslanov, founder and editor of two independent news websites Xeberman and Press-az, says he has been targeted because of an investigation of alleged high-ranking corruption and his previous criticism of the state.

In November 2020, a court in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, sentenced Aslanov to 16 years in prison for treason.

Following the sentence, international media rights organizations such as Reporters Without Borders, RSF, and Committee to Protect Journalists, CPJ, condemned the sentence and expressed concern that the Aslanov didn't receive a fair trial.

"Everything indicates that Polad Aslanov is the latest victim of Azerbaijan's constant persecution of critical journalists," said Johann Bihl, the head of RSF's Eastern Europe and Central Asia bureau, in a statement. "We call for his immediate release and the release of the six other journalists who are unjustly imprisoned in Azerbaijan."

CPJ also called Azerbaijan to free the journalist. "By jailing a critical journalist on trumped-up charges, Azerbaijan is only cementing its reputation as one of Eurasia's leading jailers of journalists," said Gulnoza Said, CPJ's Europe and Central Asia program coordinator, in a statement.

Aslanov is not the first Azerbaijani journalist to be detained on fabricated charges. In 2017 Afgan Mukhtarli, an Azerbaijani investigative journalist living in self-imposed exile in Georgia, was abducted and detained in Georgian capital Tbilisi and was later convicted for smuggling. Two years earlier, investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova, known for her investigations of high-ranking graft, was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison. After continued international pressure for their release, both Mukhtarli and Ismayilova have been freed.

In 2019, Azerbaijan, a country known for its tight control on media and its abysmal press freedom record, ranks 166th out of 180 countries in RSF's World Press Freedom Index.



Disclaimer: As of March 31, 2021, research shows that Polad Aslanov is still in prison, serving the remaining of his sentence.

**#FreeThemAll**

# ELCHIN ISMAYILLI

## AZERBAIJAN



In March 2021, thanks to a presidential pardon, more than 30 secular and religious opposition figures, have been released from prison in Azerbaijan. Among them are as well the journalist Elchin Ismayilli\* and many other individuals unjustly incarcerated after the 2015 Nardaran events. The tradition of a broad presidential pardon of prisoners right before the Novruz holiday has led to the release of many high-profile prisoners in the past.

In mid-February 2017, police arrested Azerbaijani journalist Elchin Ismayilli and later charged him with bribery, extortion, and abuse of power.

He is a founder and editor of a news platform called Kend, a local website, which investigates corruption and human rights abuses in the Ismayilli region of Azerbaijan. The journalist has also worked for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service and for the independent newspaper Azadliq.

Authorities accused the reporter of trying to blackmail an official from the state tourism agency by threatening to publish a critical article unless he was paid off. Ismayilli denied the charges and said he never covered tourism issues.

In September of the same year, an Azerbaijani court sentenced Ismayilli to nine years in jail. The court found him guilty of extortion, abuse of office, and bribery. A year later, the Supreme Court reduced his sentence to seven years.

Following Ismayilli's detention and sentence, a number of international rights organizations and media watchdogs called on the Azerbaijani government to release him.

This was not the first time Ismayilli has faced pressure because of his work. In 2014, he was attacked while investigating allegations that local restaurants were illegally tapping the water supply system, leaving villagers without water. A year earlier, local media reported that he had been threatened for covering protests that had erupted in the Ismayilli region. He was one of the very few journalists filming these demonstrations and authorities tried to prevent him from reporting and even offered him bribes. When these tactics to silence him did not work, his brother was arrested on charges of instigating public disorder.

Ismayilli is just one of many journalists, bloggers, and activists who have been unjustly jailed in the past few years in Azerbaijan, a country that has become notorious for its attempts to silence those who criticize the government. In 2019, Ismayilli and four other political prisoners signed an open letter of support for Mehman Huseynov, a prominent blogger, who had been sentenced to two years in jail for what is believed to be trumped-up charges of defamation. That same year, the Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatovic, expressed regret that the country had failed to make any progress when it comes to protecting the free press.

Since Ismayilli can no longer appeal his sentence in Azerbaijan, he has submitted his case to the European Court of Human Rights. He is still awaiting the court's decision on his appeal.

**Note:** Ismayilli is both the name of a region in Azerbaijan and the family name of the journalist.

Disclaimer: As of March 31, 2021, research shows that Elchin Ismayilli is released from prison.

**#FreeThemAll**



