



# Psychiatry as a tool of repression in the Russian Federation

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past year and a half, the use of psychiatry as a means of political repression in the Russian Federation has expanded significantly. It occurs in several directions at once and approaches the pattern typical for the USSR in its late period.

The following main methods of psychiatric repression are currently used:

- (a) Unjustified admission of defendants in political trials to psychiatric hospitals for forensic psychiatric assessment;
- (b) Forced admission of political opponents and civil society activists to psychiatric hospitals immediately after their detention at protest actions;
- (c) Declaring opposition activists insane and their admission to closed psychiatric institutions for socially dangerous psychiatric patients for compulsory treatment;
- (d) Compulsory "treatment" of prisoners protesting against the violation of their rights in places of deprivation of liberty, in psychiatric departments of the camp hospitals.

## 2. UNJUSTIFIED ADMISSION OF DEFENDANTS IN POLITICAL TRIALS TO PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS FOR FORENSIC PSYCHIATRIC ASSESSMENT;

To date, almost all accused under "extremist" and "terrorist" articles of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation are referred by the investigators to closed hospitals for forensic psychiatric assessment. They have to stay there 30 to 90 days, together with other defendants accused of committing criminal offenses, who often are seriously mentally ill and dangerous to others.

Also, there are cases when, before being officially diagnosed, defendants receive forced treatment with neuroleptics. In almost all forensic psychiatric assessments, neuroleptics are also used as punishment for various violations of the regime.

Despite the fact that from a legal point of view, forensic psychiatric assessment is quite legitimate, its application in political cases has all the signs of abuse of psychiatry.

First, in comparison with criminal cases, inpatient forensic psychiatric assessment in political cases is used much more often. Persons who have no history of mental disorders and have never sought psychiatric help, are sent for forensic psychiatric assessment. This makes the procedure itself legally groundless.





The unjustified nature of the application of the forensic psychiatric assessment is even more evident from the nature of the charges. Andrei Shasherin, a resident of Barnaul (Altai Krai), was sent for forensic psychiatric assessment, being charged with "insulting the feelings of believers" (article 148 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) and with "inciting hatred" (article 282 of the Criminal Code). In fact, Shasherin was accused of the fact that he posted caricatures and memes on his social-network account.

Secondly, while in ordinary criminal proceedings most defendants are assessed by psychiatrists on an outpatient basis, in political cases almost all accused persons are sent to closed hospitals for assessment.

Thirdly, the referral of the defendant to closed hospitals under those articles of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation that do not provide for imprisonment, is a clear abuse of psychiatry. In June 2018, an opposition activist, a member of the "Solidarity" movement from St. Petersburg, Peter Trofimov was sent to a hospital for forensic psychiatric assessment. Since 2014, there has been a trumped-up case against him under article 330 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation ("arbitrariness"). He has been accused of taking home for one day the equipment belonging to the company where he worked. According to human rights activists, the real reason for Trofimov's hospitalization was the intention to deprive him of the opportunity to participate in protests during FIFA 2018 in Russia. (Trofimov stayed in a closed hospital for 14 days.)

### **3. FORCED ADMISSION OF POLITICAL OPPONENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS TO PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS IMMEDIATELY AFTER THEIR DETENTION AT PROTEST ACTIONS**

Cases when opposition activists detained by the police at protest actions are sent directly from police stations to psychiatric hospitals have become more frequent.

In August 2018, Eugeny Yuzhakov, a resident of the village Rassvet, Kemerovo region, was detained after his one-man protest against environmental pollution by the company "Energougol", allegedly belonging to officials from the administration of the region.

Yuzhakov held two protests. During the first one, he scattered broken glass on the road leading to the company, after which he was detained and released until the processing of the case of an administrative violation by the court.

The second time, on August 24, the police managed to detain Yuzhakov before the protest. The police broke the window in his car, pulled Yuzhakov out of the car and took him first to the police station and then to a psychiatric hospital.

Even more strange was the case of a Moscow opposition activist Elena Kozlova.

On July 1, she stood in a single-person picket holding two posters. One of the posters contained a slogan demanding the release of Oleg Sentsov, Crimean film director, who is in prison on trumped-up charges of terrorism. Another poster contained offensive words addressed to President Putin.

In spite of the fact that Kozlova didn't violate the law because one-man protests are allowed, Kozlova was detained by police and was taken from the police station to a closed drug rehabilitation clinic and hospitalised there.



This is the first known case of the forced hospitalization of an opposition activist in a drug rehabilitation psychiatric clinic, but it is also a revival of the Soviet practice of using such institutions against dissidents (dissidents-Baptists in particular, who were often sent to closed drug rehabilitation clinics and even to STD clinics).

There are also cases of "preventive" hospitalization of opposition activists – without any reason at all. On August 12, an opposition activist Yury Ionov was detained by the armed group of people in masks in the city of Kaltan of Kemerovo region. Later, it became clear that Ionov was forcibly hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital in the city of Novokuznetsk.

Since Ionov is a member of the precinct election commission, human rights activists believe that he was isolated in order to prevent him from participating in the work of the commission on the day of elections of deputies of regional legislative assemblies on September 9. Also, it became clear that the police didn't report to the prosecutor's office about hospitalization of Ionov in violation of the law. The police provided no explanation for the reasons for the hospitalization.

#### **4. ADMISSION OF OPPOSITION ACTIVISTS TO CLOSED PSYCHIATRIC INSTITUTIONS FOR SOCIALLY DANGEROUS PSYCHIATRIC PATIENTS FOR COMPULSORY TREATMENT**

Currently, Eduard Nikitin, a member of the movement "Solidarity" stands trial in St. Petersburg. He is charged with "inciting hatred or enmity" (article 282 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). He is mainly accused of the fact that he posted political jokes on his "VKontakte" social-network account.

It is for the first time in 35 years when a person is prosecuted for political jokes. Apparently, it is because of the scandalous nature of the case, that the investigation decided to use the methods of punitive psychiatry. After forensic psychiatric assessment, Nikitin was declared insane, and the court is considering the request of the Investigative Committee to send Nikitin for compulsory treatment in a psychiatric hospital.

Despite the fact that since 2013 the courts have already sent a number of opposition activists for compulsory treatment, they all underwent it in ordinary psychiatric hospitals. This was a serious difference from the practice of punitive psychiatry of the Soviet times, when almost all dissidents were forcibly treated in the so-called "special psychiatric hospitals of the Ministry of Internal Affairs", or, in fact, in psychiatric prisons.

These prisons still exist, but since 1988 they have been placed under the auspices of the Ministry of Health and are referred to as "specialised psychiatric hospitals with intensive supervision". At the same time, they are still under the protection of the interior ministry troops and are secret institutions, information about which is not available to the press or human rights defenders. All unauthorized contacts of prisoners with the outside world, such as telephone calls from mobile phones, are punishable by high doses of antipsychotics, fixation and beatings.

In September 2017, for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the visiting board of the Moscow district military court decided, given the severity of the crime, to send a video blogger Albert Gyurdzhiyan from Nizhny Novgorod to such a hospital with intensive supervision for compulsory psychiatric treatment.



In fact, Gyurdzhiyan made and posted a video containing testimonies from several people about the actions of the Federal Judge Roman Yartsev, who in a drunken state opened fire from a traumatic gun on a neighbour who was walking her dog (according to the judge himself, he shot in the air).

The video was deemed criminal under two articles of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation: "inciting hatred or enmity" against a "group of persons, employees of the judicial bodies of the Russian Federation, and against a Federal Judge, a representative of this group" (article 282 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) and "incitement to terrorism via the Internet" (article 205.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation – the article under jurisdiction of military courts). If you watch the video on the Gyurdzhiyan's account in the social network "Vkontakte", it contains nothing but a call for opening a criminal case against judge Yartsev, as well as the definition of judges as "a criminal group worthy of capital punishment (execution) or a prison term".

The video also shows that Gyurdzhiyan's text and actions are logical, balanced, contain irony, and do not contain any signs of mental illness. However, the court refused to listen to the opinion of Yuri Savenko, President of the Independent Psychiatric Association in Russia, who examined Gyurdzhiyan and did not find his condition socially dangerous.

According to the report of forensic psychiatric assessment, Gyurdzhiyan was declared insane, and was sent to a special psychiatric hospital with intensive supervision for compulsory treatment. Currently, according to available information, he is at a special psychiatric hospital with intensive supervision in Kazan, the first "psychiatric prison" of the Soviet Union, opened in 1938, where many dissidents were on compulsory "treatment".

One of the most ominous signs of the revival of the Soviet system of punitive psychiatry is the phenomenon of "secret prisoners" of psychiatric hospitals. In this case, a person is arrested, accused under the "extremist" article of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (as a rule, for posts in social networks), undergoes forensic psychiatric examination and is declared insane. After that, taking advantage of the fact that the medical data are confidential, the court is held behind closed doors, where only relatives (if any) are allowed to be present.

The case becomes known only from press releases of the prosecutor's office or the courts. However, they specify neither the essence of the charges, nor the psychiatric hospital where the accused was sent to. They do not contain even the name of the accused – only his initials.

There are many such cases, and neither the press nor human rights organizations can get information about any of them – again, because these data are, by law, confidential.

In September 2017, the office of public prosecutor of Irkutsk region has informed that a person A., who lived in the city of Angarsk, was arrested on charges of "calling for the implementation of actions aimed at violating the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation" (separatism) (article 280.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). In a press release, it is reported that in his posts in social networks he "called for action to create a separate republic from the Urals to the Pacific."

A. was declared insane and sent to a psychiatric hospital for compulsory treatment. However, his name, the content of his posts and the psychiatric hospital where he was sent to, still remain unknown.



## 5. COMPULSORY “TREATMENT” OF PRISONERS PROTESTING AGAINST THE VIOLATION OF THEIR RIGHTS IN PLACES OF DEPRIVATION OF LIBERTY, IN PSYCHIATRIC DEPARTMENTS OF THE CAMP HOSPITALS.

A journalistic investigation conducted in August by the newspaper “Novaya Gazeta” together with human rights activists, revealed a completely new form of abuse of psychiatry, which did not exist in the USSR. Journalists found out that in the psychiatric unit of the hospital for prisoners №11 in Omsk region, several mentally healthy prisoners were forcibly “treated”. They had been sent there as a punishment for their protests against violations of their rights, torture and poor conditions in the camps. All their “fault” consisted only from the fact that they legitimately wrote complaints to the prosecutor's office and other government agencies.

In order to legitimize forced hospitalization, the camp administration uses two methods. First, prisoners with somatic health problems are sent to psychiatric unit of a camp hospital. It happened with a prisoner with tuberculosis Alexei Shcherbonos. On arrival at the hospital No. 11, Shcherbonos was beaten, and then placed in a psychiatric unit, where he was fixed and given injections of aminazine during three days. According to Shcherbonos, he received 50 injections of aminazine, which led to kidney failure and unconsciousness. At the same time, the hospital psychiatrists did not hide the fact that he was sent there by order of the security department of the camp.

According to Shcherbonos, TB patients are often placed to the psychiatric unit. They cannot receive the necessary treatment there, and according to his words, there were cases of death of two such patients in the psychiatric unit.

The second method, which is used for forced hospitalization, is even more dangerous and has all the signs of a criminal offense. In the food of a prisoner staying in solitary confinement, some powerful psychotropic drugs (most likely neuroleptics) are added. The prisoner then shows signs of mental illness and is sent to the psychiatric unit of the prison hospital.

Alexei Shchepetov, a resident of the city of Yuriev-Polsky, Vladimir region, was arrested on trumped-up charges after he recorded a video message to President Putin complaining of corruption in his city. In a pretrial detention centre in Vladimir, Shchepetov noticed that in the morning after taking food he felt dizzy, and a few days later he fell in such a state that he did not even know where he was.

Shchepetov was sent to a hospital at camp No. 3 in Vladimir region where a request for treatment was signed with his hand (he was not able to sign it himself). After that, Shchepetov was beaten unconscious and kept in a psychiatric unit for three weeks, receiving injections of aminazine and olanzapine.

Prisoner Vladimir Khalilov, a witness on criminal case against employees of administration about tortures in the camp, got to the camp hospital No. 11 in Omsk region approximately in the same way. He also felt strange after eating in the camp №7 in Omsk region. In the hospital №11, he was given injections of unknown antipsychotic (apparently, aminazine), after which he got tachycardia and bleeding from the nose.





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## CONCLUSION

New information about the abuse of psychiatry in Russia appears constantly and clearly opens just the tip of the iceberg. This suggests that all these cases are just incidents, but are manifestations of the re-established system of punitive psychiatry.

Therefore, the issue of abuse of psychiatry for political purposes in the Russian Federation needs to be brought to the international level as soon as possible and should be addressed by international government bodies, international organizations and the psychiatric community. Otherwise, psychiatric repression will endanger the health and lives of thousands of people – as it was in the USSR.



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*Peace, progress, human rights – these three goals are insolubly linked to one another.  
Andrei Sakharov, Novel Lecture, 1975*