

To the
The New York Times
Joseph Kahn

Dear Mr. Kahn,

My name is Ilya Yashin, I am a Russian politician representing the democratic opposition to Vladimir Putin's regime.

I have devoted many years to defending the rights of my fellow citizens and transforming Russia into a peaceful, free and civilized state. I spent more than two years in prison after being sentenced for openly and publicly criticizing Putin's aggression. I was only released as part of a political exchange between the Kremlin and Western countries in the summer of 2024.

I am now in Germany and trying to unite communities of Russian citizens around the world in an anti-war democracy movement. But I am concerned that Russians who are forced to leave their country because of political repression often face official pressure and discrimination in their new countries. **As for the welcome they get in the United States, unfortunately even imprisonment occurs.**

I ask you to pay attention to the situation that has developed in the United States with Russian asylum seekers in recent months. There has been very little news about this, and with all the attention focused on the sheer number of recent immigration I fear this story will continue to stay under the radar. By our estimates, there are at least 900 Russian asylum seekers now languishing in U.S. prisons. Should deportation happen, as expected, Russian asylum seekers will be sent back to Russia to face certain imprisonment in the Russian penal system.

Since June 2024, it has been common practice for U.S. authorities to detain Russian citizens who legally apply for asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border in accordance with the rules established by immigration authorities after they wait the 7-9 months for their turn in Mexico.

Once in the United States, Russians are forced to prove their right to asylum while being physically imprisoned. Of course, this limits their ability to defend themselves legally, as it is more difficult for people to obtain legal assistance. In addition, they are deprived of access to the internet as well as their own evidence, because all their personal belongings, including documents, phones and laptops, are seized by prison authorities.

In addition, imprisonment creates enormous psychological pressure as asylum seekers are held as criminals and among criminals. Refugees are forced to wear prison clothes and are transported in shackles. According to lawyers, refugees are regularly placed in the punishment cell for any disagreement with the administration's actions or refusal to sign documents, the content of which people often don't understand due to the language barrier.

Moreover, it is a common practice for families to be separated, with both parents placed in immigration detention and their minor children placed in foster care or shelters. It is also the established norm to separate spouses who are imprisoned in different states without being able to communicate with each other. This is a terrible injustice, especially when these asylum seekers are not involved in any criminal activity.

In fact, my compatriots who have fled political persecution and imprisonment in Putin's Russia, who have legally applied for asylum in the United States, and who have not committed any crimes, find themselves in American prisons en masse. As a person who was subjected to political repression in Russia, I am shocked and outraged by this attitude toward people trying to seek protection from the United States under the laws of your country.

I want to emphasize that this is a practice that has developed in recent months. If an asylum seeker in the United States has a Russian passport, he or she is virtually guaranteed to be sent to jail to await the processing of his or her application, regardless of gender, age, or state of health. When applying for asylum at the border, Russians are not given the choice of staying in Mexico or waiting for their application to be processed behind bars in the United States. People are let in and simply put in detention. Immigration attorneys are currently working with 900 Russians who are now in this situation and whose names have been identified. But I believe there are far more currently in prison.

During my visit to the U. S. on January 7, 2025, I met with officials from the White House, the Department of State and the U.S. Senate – and conveyed to them information about this situation, asking them to take measures to protect the rights of my compatriots.

At the same time, I think it is important to draw the attention of the media to this problem to help contribute to its solution. I would be grateful if you could find an opportunity to cover this story in your publication. I am happy to put you in contact with immigration attorneys and advocates and assist you in anyway possible.

I look forward to helping you bring this important issue to the public.

Best regards,

Ilya Yashin