

## Russia behind bars: the peculiarities of the Russian prison system

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Russia is among the countries with the highest number of prisoners. Hundreds of thousands of inmates are supervised by an elaborate apparatus of the Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN). This extended system is used as a tool for exercising control over society and solidifying the system of power. At the same time, it impacts the process of how shared norms and values are being formed in Russian society, in connection with society's frequent contact with the so-called prison culture. Due to the absence of a major overhaul of the prison service, whose institutions and code of conduct date back to the time of the Soviet Gulag, the prison system is an excellent example of pathologies that are also present in other elements of the Russian state apparatus. These include the poor state of infrastructure, endemic corruption and the primacy of informal rules over the rule of law, consent to harsh exploitation of working prisoners and the omnipotence of the coercion apparatus.

### The size of the prison system

At present, over 467,000 individuals are incarcerated in Russia's prisons. In terms of the number of prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants, Russia is ranked first in Europe and 17<sup>th</sup> globally<sup>1</sup>. However, due to the fact that the figures many countries quote regarding the number of their prisoners are often hard to verify, this ratio should be treated as an approximation. The present number of inmates in Russia's prisons is among the lowest in the country's history and has been gradually declining over recent years. A decade ago, the number of prisoners in Russia was almost double the present figure (893,000 in 2008).

The decrease in the number of inmates has mainly been linked to the fact that the courts pronounce prison sentences for minor crimes

less frequently and tend to apply other penalties (such as non-custodial sentences or community service). It has also been caused by demographic changes in Russian society: depopulation and an ageing population. Other factors include the closing of a significant number of penal colonies with the least strict regime (over the last eight years almost a quarter of the total number of such colonies were closed down)<sup>2</sup>. As a consequence, prison overcrowding decreased only marginally and there has been no evident improvement in prison conditions. The recidivism ratio also remains very high: around 63% of inmates in Russian prisons are reoffenders<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Data compiled by the World Prison Brief, <http://www.prisonstudies.org/world-prison-brief-data>

<sup>2</sup> 'Вижу новости про «исторический минимум заключенных» в России. Это из-за закона «день за полтора»? Колонии массово закрывают?', <https://meduza.io/feature/2018/12/14/vizhu-novosti-pro-istoricheskij-minimum-zaklyuchennyh-v-rossii-eto-iz-za-zakona-den-za-poltora-kolonii-massovo-zakryvayut>

<sup>3</sup> В. Никитеев, 'Проблемы ресоциализации осужденных', <http://www.kipkr.fsin.su/upload/territory/Kipkr/mtb/Сборник%20материалов%20Всероссийской%20конференции.pdf>

The reason behind the high number of prisoners in Russia is the repressive nature of the Russian judiciary as a whole. Most recent amendments to the penal code have toughened the penalties<sup>4</sup>. Figures compiled by the Investigative Committee for 2015 show that acquittals accounted for a mere 0.4% of court rulings.

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This is why the fate of the accused is decided by prosecutors during their investigations. As far as the reasons for imprisonment are concerned, the largest group of prisoners are criminal prisoners, most of whom were convicted for murder (27.8% of inmates). A similar proportion of prisoners are serving their sentences for drug dealing (25%)<sup>5</sup>, which likely results from the fact that the proceedings regarding possession of drugs are straightforward and investigators use them as an easy means of demonstrating the activity and efficiency of the prosecution bodies. Due to the repressive approach of the Russian law enforcement agencies and courts, the number of prisoners in Russia decreased at a slower pace than the crime rate did<sup>6</sup>.

The Russian penitentiary system is organised in a different manner to corresponding penal systems in most countries: instead of cells in prisons the inmates are housed in barracks in penal colonies. In total, there are 869 such colo-

nies of various regimes scattered across Russia, eight prisons and 315 remand centres. The geographical location of penal colonies is linked to the concept of economic development adopted back in Soviet times, when prisoners were used as forced labour, such as during the construction of large-scale investments carried out by the Soviet state including the White Sea-Baltic Canal and the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), as well as in forestry in harsh weather conditions – in Karelia, for instance. Even today, the largest number of penal colonies is located in regions that are rich in natural resources (mainly forests), such as Krasnoyarsk Krai and Perm Krai, or in highly industrialised ones, such as Sverdlovsk Oblast, Kemerovo Oblast and Primorsky Krai. The Republic of Mordovia is a special case, because it hosts a large number of penal colonies within a relatively small territory. There are regions in the Republic of Mordovia, the Komi Republic and Chuvashia, where work performed by prisoners and individuals employed by the FSIN accounts for a major portion of the local labour market<sup>7</sup>. In these regions, the role of FSIN is particularly significant. Due to the geographical location of the penal colonies, prisoners serve their sentences far from their home towns. Those penal colonies that are located in remote areas far from densely populated regions usually have harsher conditions: problems with running water and heating are common. Due to their remote location and inaccessibility, these colonies are less frequently inspected by external bodies and the control mechanisms are weak.

### The conditions in prisons

Prior to the court pronouncing their sentence, the suspects are held in remand centres. In Russia, custody is the most popular preventive measure (it is more frequently used than bail or

<sup>4</sup> М. Никонов, 'Развитие системы уголовного правосудия: векторы, меры реформирования, основные игроки', <https://csr.ru/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Report-12.01.2017-2.pdf>, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Cf М. Алехина, И. Рождественский, Г. Макаренко, 'Первые по числу заключенных', *РБК*, 15 March 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2017/03/15/58c702399a79473b36f47d9c>

<sup>6</sup> 'Расходы по неволе. Как дорого обходится стране уголовно-исполнительная система', *Коммерсантъ*, 13 February 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3218170>

<sup>7</sup> А. Табах, 'Подземная империя: половина продукции ФСИН идет налево', *Финмаркет*, 12 February 2014, <http://www.finmarket.ru/life/txt.asp?id=3627907>

a ban on leaving the country). In recent years, it has become increasingly popular<sup>8</sup> (17.3% of all imprisoned individuals are held in remand centres). As far as the conditions of imprisonment are concerned, the time the suspect spends in the remand centre is often considered the harshest (a system was recently introduced according to which one day spent in a remand centre counts as one and a half days spent in the facility in which the prisoner serves their actual sentence<sup>9</sup>). The same applies to the so-called transfer stage, or the time during which the convict is being transported to their penal colony (in Russian: *etap*).

**The conditions in which the inmates serve their sentences in penal colonies are mainly impacted by the poor state of infrastructure, mostly built before 1970, as well as by overcrowding.**

Most often, prisoner transport is organised in special windowless railroad carriages known as Stolypin cars, in which prisoners in groups of ten are transported in compartments measuring 3.4 m<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, neither the convicts nor their families know the train's destination. One example is Ildar Dadin, a political prisoner sentenced for repeated protests. After he exposed cases of torture in his penal colony, he was taken to another location to serve the rest of his sentence and his transfer lasted one month. Due to the fact that most penal colonies are located far from densely populated areas, inmates held there are deprived of regular contact with their families and lawyers and need to

be transported over long distances, which was assessed negatively by the European Court of Human Rights and other bodies<sup>10</sup>.

The conditions in which the prisoners serve their sentences depend on the type of the specific penal colony. In Russia, there are four types of penal colonies each with a different regime. In the least strict penal colonies, the so-called *colonies-settlements*, the inmates can freely move around the facility, they are usually housed in large barracks, can leave the colony on a pass quite frequently, meet with their relatives and wear civilian clothing. In *ordinary regime* penal colonies, the supervision by the guards is much stricter, the inmates are housed in large barracks with up to 150 beds in each, are under constant supervision and cannot move around the facility freely. In *strict regime* and *special regime* penal colonies, the inmates face more restrictions, they are housed in locked cells usually with 20–50 other prisoners. Due to overcrowding, in most colonies the required standard of two square meters of space per inmate, which is stipulated in Russian law, is usually not met. It should be noted that this standard is 50% of the standard stipulated in the European Convention on Human Rights which Russia has ratified<sup>11</sup>. Another important factor that impacts on prison conditions is the policy of the local FSIN officials and of the governor of the specific prison.

The conditions in which the inmates serve their sentences in penal colonies are also impacted by the poor state of infrastructure that the FSIN has at its disposal. Most facilities were built before 1970 and a large portion of them date back to tsarist times. In most prisons, the state of repair and the overcrowding make it difficult

<sup>8</sup> М. Никонов, 'Меры пресечения: 5 главных проблем и их решение', <https://pravoirk.ru/archives/5900>. Data compiled by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, <http://www.cdep.ru/index.php?id=79&item=2074>

<sup>9</sup> Э. Фанзисов, 'Как начал работать долгожданный закон «День за полтора»', *Тюремный консультант Руси сидящей*, 8 August 2017, <https://vturme.info/kak-nachal-rabotat-dolgozhdannyj-zakon-den-za-polto-ra/>

<sup>10</sup> В. Гефтер, 'ФСИН злоупотребляет правом распределения заключенных. Но готов встать на путь исправления?', 10 July 2018, <http://antipytki.ru/2018/07/10/fsin-zloupotrebyaet-pravom-raspredeleniya-zaklyuchennyh-no-gotov-vstat-na-put-ispravleniya/>

<sup>11</sup> A. Bobrik, K. Danishevski, K. Eroshina, M. McKee, *Prison Health in Russia: The Larger Picture*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/7834446\\_Prison\\_Health\\_in\\_Russia\\_The\\_Larger\\_Picture](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/7834446_Prison_Health_in_Russia_The_Larger_Picture)

for the inmates to maintain basic hygiene. This leads to regular outbreaks of epidemics. For years, one of the major problems in Russian prisons has been prisoners developing AIDS

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and tuberculosis. According to data compiled by the FSIN, up to a third of deaths in prisons are caused by AIDS. Despite this, over the last couple of years the mortality rate among Russia's prisoners has declined<sup>12</sup>. It is extremely difficult to quote any estimates regarding prison mortality rate. Human rights defenders claim that the health statistics are not credible because most cases of prisoners falling ill are not reported<sup>13</sup>.

Respect for human rights in Russian prisons is the subject of country-wide debates. In the first seven months of 2018 alone, the Russian press revealed 24 cases of torture in prisons<sup>14</sup>. In recent years, the most appalling cases reported by the media included the torture of Yevgeny Makarov in penal colony no. 1 in Yaroslavl and the death of two prisoners in Chelabinsk in 2015<sup>15</sup>. Abuse is common, even official statistics

indicate that it is practised on a mass scale. The inspections the FSIN ordered when the scandal over the torture of Makarov broke out, showed 168 recent violations involving FSIN officials using force and 'special measures' against prisoners<sup>16</sup>. Most of these violations were incidents where physical coercion was used in rooms with no CCTV monitoring. Harsh conditions in prisons and violence against inmates are the reasons behind the riots that periodically break out in penal colonies. Official FSIN data indicate that each year there are on average around 15 such riots but experts argue that the actual number is higher<sup>17</sup>. In recent months one such event was witnessed in penal colony no. 6 near Omsk: a conflict involving 150 individuals resulted in clashes in which four individuals were injured and taken to hospital<sup>18</sup>.

## The FSIN empire

Administration of the prison system and supervision of the thousands of inmates is the task of the Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) which employs 325,000 individuals<sup>19</sup>. Despite the decline in the number of prisoners, the number of FSIN employees has not decreased significantly since its establishment in 1998. As a consequence, in Russia the proportion of the number of prison system employees to the number of inmates is 2.3 times higher than the corresponding figure recorded for the USA<sup>20</sup>. In 2017, the FSIN's budget was 257.6 billion rou-

<sup>12</sup> 'Смертность в исправительных учреждениях ФСИН снизилась на 9,6% в 2016 году', РИА Новости, 20 February 2017, <https://ria.ru/society/20170220/1488383898.html>

<sup>13</sup> А. Рыкова, 'Смерть за решёткой. От чего умирают российские ээки', Life.ru, 10 July 2017, [https://life.ru/t/%D0%B7%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%8C%D0%B5/1024540/smiert\\_zh\\_rieshiotkoi\\_ot\\_chiegho\\_umiraiut\\_rossiiskie\\_zeki](https://life.ru/t/%D0%B7%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%8C%D0%B5/1024540/smiert_zh_rieshiotkoi_ot_chiegho_umiraiut_rossiiskie_zeki)

<sup>14</sup> 'Все сообщения о пытках 2018 года в одной таблице. Их уже больше полусотни', Медуза, 9 August 2018, <https://meduza.io/feature/2018/08/09/vse-soobscheniya-o-pytkah-etogo-goda-v-odnoy-tablitse-ih-uzhe-bolshe-polusotni>

<sup>15</sup> 'Челябинск: для фсиновцев, убивших заключенного Исраилова, требуют до 12 с половиной лет', Грани, 24 October 2018, <https://grani-ru-org.appspot.com/Society/Law/m.273470.html>

<sup>16</sup> 'ФСИН выявила 168 нарушений порядка применения силы в колониях и СИЗОФСИН выявила 168 нарушений порядка применения силы в колониях и СИЗО', Интерфакс, 12 October 2018, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/633116>

<sup>17</sup> О. Романова, 'С чего начинается бунт', Новая Газета, 12 May 2015, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/05/12/64098-s-chego-nachinaetsya-bunt>

<sup>18</sup> 'Волнения в ИК-6 Омска', Zona Media, 7-11 October 2018, <https://zona.media/chronicle/ik6#21125>

<sup>19</sup> Data for 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Е. Коростелева, *Обзор Предложений по Совершенствованию Системы Исполнения Наказаний*, [https://csr.ru/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/20171017\\_Report-Prisons.pdf](https://csr.ru/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/20171017_Report-Prisons.pdf), p. 22.

bles (around US\$ 4.5 billion), which accounts for around 1.5% of Russia's total budgetary spending (more than twice as much as Moldova's total budgetary spending). This ranks Russia first in Europe when it comes to prison system spending in absolute numbers<sup>21</sup>.

**The FSIN operates as a unique 'state within a state' with no supervision mechanisms, but with a separate health care service, transportation system, education system, a unique system of trading in goods characterised by widespread corruption, and the primacy of informal rules and hierarchies over formal ones.**

The Federal Penitentiary Service is a powerful financial machine. Aside from the federal budget subsidy, the FSIN receives revenue generated by manufacturing plants operating in penal colonies. In 2016, this stood at around 50 billion roubles<sup>22</sup> (over US\$ 800,000). Most contracts under which prisoner labour is used cover the production of clothes, textiles and foodstuffs, as well as the execution of construction works. The contractors mainly include institutions associated with the FSIN and a portion of the goods manufactured by prisoners are sold in the grey market outside the reach of official statistics. The scale of this unregistered output is extremely difficult to assess. However, some sources claim that its actual size is as much as double that of registered production<sup>23</sup>. In this way, a parallel market is being created for the FSIN's needs, in which prices are regulated top-down, labour is virtually unpaid and statistics

are fake. All this enables FSIN officials to sell a portion of the manufactured goods in the grey market.

Around 25–40% of prisoners perform paid work while serving their sentence<sup>24</sup>. According to the law, work is compulsory for most prisoners but the number of jobs available is insufficient. Performing work while serving one's sentence is one of the main criteria for an early release from prison. It also enables the prisoner to enjoy privileges such as additional visits by relatives or being allowed to watch TV. Failure to meet production targets often results in restrictions on visits, compulsory physical exercise and, most importantly, a refusal to be granted early release from prison. There are numerous accounts suggesting that prisoners who refuse to work for a long period of time (for example, in a situation where the facility's management is behind schedule)<sup>25</sup>, are beaten. The criteria for an early release are unclear, which enables the prison guards not only to discipline prisoners, but also to force them to work harder, to recruit informants and to force bribes.

Most prison manufacturing plants deal with textile and timber production. The salaries paid to prisoners are low because 75% of the money is used to fund the prisoner's room and board in the penal colony. Low salaries are also the result of the colony's supervisors setting inflated targets regarding prisoners' work, which enables them to reduce the amounts of remuneration paid out to inmates. Human rights defenders argue that the average monthly salary paid to prisoners working in prison manufacturing plants ranges between 400 and 5000 roubles (US\$ 6 to 80 per month).

Despite the fact that the prestige associated with working in the prison system is low and that the FSIN has a rather poor image in society (as opposed to special services such as the

<sup>21</sup> М. Алехина, И. Рождественский, Г. Макаренко, 'Первые по числу заключенных', РБК, 14 March 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2017/03/15/58c702399a79473b36f47d9c>

<sup>22</sup> 'ФСИН оценила годовые доходы от производства в тюрьмах в 50 млрд рублей', 18 October 2016, <https://rns.online/economy/FSIN-otsenil-godovie-dohodi-ot-proizvodstva-v-tyurmah-v-50-mlrd-rublei--2016-10-18/>

<sup>23</sup> А. Табах, 'Подземная империя: половина...', *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> И. Халецкая, 'Кто не работает, тот ест. Сколько зарабатывают заключенные', РИА Новости, 11 March 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180311/1515928668.html>

<sup>25</sup> Numerous accounts published for example on <http://antipytki.ru/>



Federal Security Service), certain social groups and residents of certain regions view employment with the FSIN as a stable and desirable job. As a consequence, due to tough competition in many locations it not easy to find employment in the prison system. A frequently selected career path involves enrolling at a school run by the FSIN, in which students are offered special training for prospective prison system employees from an early age (in some locations the FSIN even runs primary schools).

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Employment with the FSIN is linked to various non-salary benefits. The officers receive room, board and other benefits offered to employees of uniformed services (including easier access to health care and the opportunity to take part in the beauty contest known as “Miss FSIN”). Some of the pathologies of the prison system in Russia result from the absence of independent supervision mechanisms (even the physicians who monitor the inmates’ health are functionaries of the prison apparatus). This makes the FSIN a unique ‘state within a state’.

For around two years, Russian media has reported on the prospective reform of the FSIN, involving a change in its leadership and even the transfer of the service from the Ministry of Justice to the Ministry of the Interior (until 1998 the prison system was supervised by the interior ministry). These press leaks confirm that a game is underway for control of this major component of the law enforcement system and that attempts are being made to curb and rationalise the FSIN’s spending. In the unofficial hierarchy within the Russian services, the FSIN occupies the bottom rung. This may encourage

other law enforcement agencies to try to subjugate ‘the FSIN empire’ to themselves or prove their effectiveness by exposing scandals in the prison service.

## **Imprisonment as a tool of political repression**

Human rights organisations point to the large number of politically-motivated criminal trials in Russia. Amnesty International emphasises that repression and persecution of human rights defenders, restrictions on freedom of expression, cultural freedoms and minority rights are particularly common<sup>26</sup>. According to data compiled by the Memorial Human Rights Centre, in 2018 195 political and religious prisoners were incarcerated in Russian prisons<sup>27</sup>.

Recent years have seen a significant increase in the number of political prisoners, which was mainly connected with the annexation of Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian war – a large number of Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians accused of extremism have recently been incarcerated in remand centres and penal colonies on political charges. A portion of Ukrainian political prisoners, including Oleg Sentsov, a film director sentenced in a show trial in Russia for 20 years in prison (according to the prosecutors he had planned to blow up the Lenin statue in Crimea), went on a hunger strike during the 2018 FIFA World Cup and demanded that all (more than 60) Ukrainian political prisoners should be released. The protest ended in a fiasco despite the fact that it was a blot on the image of the Russian leadership during the World Cup and contributed to several world leaders boycotting the tournament. The Russian government’s determination as regards this issue

<sup>26</sup> A report by Amnesty International, “Russian Federation 2017/2018”, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/russian-federation/report-russian-federation/>

<sup>27</sup> Memorial Publishes Lists of Political Prisoners in Russia, 30 October 2018, [https://memohrc.org/en/news\\_old/memorial-publishes-lists-political-prisoners-russia](https://memohrc.org/en/news_old/memorial-publishes-lists-political-prisoners-russia)

is linked to the fact that show trials of Ukrainian activists are intended to deter the residents of Crimea from demonstrating their loyalty towards Ukraine.

In contemporary Russia, political trials are among the basic tools the government uses to tackle political opposition. In recent years, the most well-known political trials were those of Alexei Navalny. Between the beginning of 2017 and September 2018, Navalny spent a total of 140 days in remand centres and penal colonies for organising protests and taking part in them.

**Large-scale human rights violations in prisons and the absence of effective mechanisms in state institutions to counteract this phenomenon have become a catalyst for Russian society's self-organisation.**

Political lawsuits are frequently given priority in court schedules – over 17 working days that followed the protests Navalny had organised in Moscow on 26 March 2018 the Tver District Court in Moscow alone heard 476 cases against the protesters. Criminal trials are also used as a tool in the rivalry between specific power-holding groups for influence in the Kremlin. Former prominent politicians, such as Alexei Ulyukaev, former minister of economic development, are now incarcerated in penal colonies. Ulyukaev's trial was inspired by Igor Sechin, the CEO of Rosneft, and was intended to intimidate the more liberal portion of the apparatus of power and demonstrate the rising importance of Sechin himself.

Large-scale human rights violations in prisons and the absence of effective mechanisms in state institutions to counteract this phenomenon have become a catalyst for Russian society's self-organisation. A social movement and a number of non-governmental organisations have formed around the issue of defence of prisoners' rights. The most prominent ones

include Rus Sidyashchaya (Russia Behind Bars), the Committee for the Prevention of Torture, OVD-Info and Memorial. The employees of Rus Sidyashchaya, which offers help to prisoners and their families, include individuals who used to be prisoners themselves (for example, people persecuted following the protests in Bolotnaya Square in Moscow in 2011 and 2012), as well as lawyers and journalists. Frequently, the individuals who receive support from the activists are victims of so-called commissioned cases or lawsuits brought by public prosecutors who had been bribed for example by the victim's business competitors. OVD-Info and Memorial, for their part, are two major organisations that gather and expose information on political prisoners, arrests and protests. Organisations involved in defending prisoners' rights and criticising the actions of the state's law enforcement agencies operate under constant pressure and are aware that they may become subject to inspections and repressions at any time (this is why Olga Romanova, the leader of Rus Sidyashchaya, had to leave the country). Even the relatively efficient prisoner support organisations are not capable of eliminating the problems of the Russian prison system as a whole. Their operation (similarly to the operation of organisations of soldiers' mothers who protested against the war in Chechnya and against bullying in the military) confirms the theory that Russian society is able to demonstrate its capability for self-organisation, when facing a threat.

### **Prison culture**

Another manifestation of the unique nature of the Russian prison system is the presence of its informal code of behaviours and customs. This code sets the rules of prison life, including the standards of addressing guards and fellow prisoners, the rules regarding tattoos, and other detailed requirements, such as the ban on using the colour red in prison. All this serves

to create a parallel reality with an alternative hierarchy. “Vory v zakone” (воры в законе, literally: “thieves in law” which in free translation means “criminals of honour”) are at the top of this hierarchy. They form a group that has its separate informal code of conduct (including a ban on disclosing the rules of prison life and details about the criminal world) and elects its own informal leader. The importance of this individual is confirmed by the fact that in August 2018 the process of electing the new “thief in law” no. 1 was covered by Russia’s major newspapers<sup>28</sup>. Prison culture norms observed in Russia’s remand centres and penal colonies date back to Soviet times and are also valid in most of the republics of the former USSR.

### **The unique nature of the Russian prison system mainly results from the presence of an informal code of behaviours and customs observed in prisons.**

In most prisons, informal rules prevail over the official code of conduct. The supervisors of penal colonies value their peace of mind (which is guaranteed when there are no protests and complaints to the public prosecutor’s office). In achieving this peace of mind, they are usually helped by the prison committee (Russian: “блаткомитет”) or a small group of prisoners associated with criminal groups, who are ready to use violence to ‘pacify’ the rebellious fellow inmates. In exchange for this, the penal colony supervisors offer them access to banned substances such as alcohol and drugs, as well as to mobile phones, and turn a blind eye to other violations of prison rules.

Corruption is widespread in the prison system, which makes the conditions for serving a prison sentence dependent on the inmate’s financial

status. In recent months, Russian media reported extensively on the affluent life in a penal colony in Amur Oblast of a prisoner sentenced for the gravest crimes, and published eye witness accounts and photos of the individual. He offered bribes to prison guards, which enabled him to use rooms intended for staff only, order caviar to his cell, made shashliks and used private health care<sup>29</sup>. According to Olga Romanova, a well-connected criminal is able to arrange comfortable living conditions in prison for himself using a network of his accomplices remaining at large. Romanova has reported on situations whereby these criminals permanently occupied special rooms intended for longer visits and were issued bogus health certificates confirming their disability, in order to be transferred to an upgraded cell or a prison hospital. She also mentions that a prisoner who was recognised as an ‘authority’ was even granted consent to have a free-standing dacha built on the premises of the penal colony, surrounded by a garden, and to employ his private cook and gardener. According to Romanova, this practice is common and unofficial price lists are used for many services<sup>30</sup>.

The unique nature of the Russian prison system has also been shaped by the frequent contact society has with prison facilities and by the popularity of prison culture. For representatives of certain social groups, serving a sentence in prison forms part of a typical life history amongst males, a stage in life comparable to military service. The popularity of prison culture is reflected, for example, in the presence of practices typical of prison life and the criminal world in Russian politics and business, as well as in politicians using expressions

<sup>28</sup> ‘Избран новый «вор в законе № 1»’, *Газета*, 20 August 2018, [https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2018/08/20/n\\_11927161.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2018/08/20/n_11927161.shtml)

<sup>29</sup> А. Иванова, ‘Кто такой Вячеслав Цеповяз? Как он связан с бандой Цапка?’, *Аnews*, 6 November 2018, <https://www.anews.com/p/100385862-kto-takoj-vyacheslav-cepovyaz-kak-on-svyazan-s-bandoj-capka/>

<sup>30</sup> О. Романова, ‘Цеповяз и другие ВИП-осужденные. Зачем нужна роскошь в российских тюрьмах’, *Carnegie.ru*, 20 November 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77743>



derived from prison slang and prison songs in their official statements. The most well-known example of this was the statement by Vladimir Putin in which he justified the Russian air raids on Grozny, which marked the beginning of the war in Chechnya in 1999, using words derived from criminal slang – he said that he will “waste the terrorists in the outhouse”.

## Summary

Most Russian penal colonies and prisons were built back in Stalinist times. Despite several attempts to reform the prison system in Russia, they still resemble the Soviet Gulag: human rights violations and torture are common, the prison service is a machine that knows well how to hide pathologies and earn extra money (for example, by taking bribes and engaging in financial swindles). Among the most alarming statistics regarding the Russian prison system is the high rate of recidivism. It has increased over recent years<sup>31</sup> and is proof of the inefficiency of the prison system as a whole.

However, this inefficiency is not a problem for the government because in Russia the prison system is mainly a part of the machine used for exerting control over society and ensuring the stability of the system of power. During

his annual press conference on 20 December 2018, President Putin confirmed that there are no plans to reform the prison system. When asked about the possible reform of the FSIN in connection with the reports on prisoners being tortured, he answered that it would be necessary to make the prison system more efficient but that no thorough changes are needed. The absence of supervision of what happens in prisons by independent institutions aggravates the repressive nature of the system as a whole and affords new opportunities for using it as a tool of political repression<sup>32</sup>. As a consequence, the FSIN operates as a unique ‘state within a state’, lacking supervisory mechanisms yet possessing its own health care service, transportation system, education system, a unique system of trading in goods characterised – as is typical of Russian power structures – by widespread corruption, and the primacy of informal rules and hierarchies over formal ones. There is no indication that in the upcoming years the practice of using imprisonment as a handy tool for removing rebellious citizens, as well as political and business rivals, will be curbed.

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<sup>31</sup> В. Никитеев, *op. cit.*

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<sup>32</sup> According to the report by Amnesty International, the level of social control and the transparency of the prison system has recently decreased, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/russian-federation/report-russian-federation/>

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**The views expressed by the authors of the papers do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Polish authorities**

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