WORLD LIBERTY CONGRESS

FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

Tales of courage, endurance,
and unwavering faith in freedom
— told by **Iryna Khalip**

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The World Liberty Congress was inaugurated in November 2022 in Vilnius. It gathered leaders, activists, academics, civil society members, and thinkers from over 50 countries in an action-oriented event designed to confront and dismantle autocratic, repressive regimes and their global networks of repression through nonviolent action.

The mission of the WLC, as stated in its Founding Document, is not to simply speak of the pressing issues that freedom fighters confront today, but to create a solidarity network to find new ways to confront the autocrats worldwide.

In its Founding Document members of the World Liberty Congress declared:

"We believe that to find a solution to this issue, we must connect, support and advocate for our movements, as the fight for freedom in one country, is the fight for freedom of all countries.

We believe that one clear reason for the failure of democratic movements in creating political change is that autocrats are working together, learning from one another, and building a global network of support while they attack the democratic values of the free world in concert.

We are action oriented: The WLC seeks to implement solutions to the atrocities committed by autocrats by arranging movements, organizations, and institutions into different working groups to best leverage their expertise and develop actionable plans.

We have a clear political mission: The WLC is political in that it has one clear mission to unite and support freedom-fighting movements and dissidents who are most capable of creating peaceful and nonviolent political change in their respective countries.

We are a point of intersection: The WLC serves as a point of intersection between activists and institutional representatives. In doing so, cooperation among both parties will be swifter, allowing for better coordination and clearer plans of action to combat autocrats and dismantle their global autocratic networks."

Leaders of the WLC (left to right)
Garry Kasparov, Masih Alinejad, Leopoldo Lopez

EDITOR'S NOTE

Andrei Sannikov,
Belarus
WLC Leadership Council Member,
former political prisoner

The book you are about to read — or perhaps first leaf through, only to find yourself unable to put it down — opens a window into the lives of the brave men and women of **the World Liberty Congress (WLC)**. This extraordinary community brings together freedom fighters from every corner of the globe — people who chose not to surrender to tyranny, but to unite their courage, wisdom, and experience in the fight against evil regimes that still poison our world.

In these pages, you will come face to face with the kind of pain and suffering we like to believe belong to the distant past — stories of cruelty so medieval they seem impossible in the age of the Internet and artificial intelligence. Yet they are real. And the people who lived through them are very much alive.

What makes them truly remarkable is not what they have endured, but what they have become. Having faced the darkest nights imaginable, they refuse to see themselves as victims. They rise again and again, continuing their struggle for freedom and dignity — often against all odds, often at unimaginable personal cost.

The heroes of this book are not made of steel, as the cliché goes. They are made of flesh and blood, of fear and faith, of pain and unbreakable hope. They have been tortured, imprisoned, silenced. Some have been murdered in cold cells or hunted down by the secret services of dictatorships. But those who survive carry within them the light of a future built on peace and justice.

These remarkable stories are told by the renowned Belarusian journalist Iryna Khalip, who knows firsthand what she writes about — having been a political prisoner herself.

This book is more than a collection of testimonies. It is a testament — to resilience, to truth, and to the indomitable will of those who believe that freedom is worth everything.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Iryna Khalip,
Belarus
Belarusian journalist

Hi!

I'm **Iryna Khalip**, a Belarusian journalist working for **Novaya Gazeta Europe** and **Charter97.org**. These media are in exile — and so am I.

In the summer of 2021, when a total purge of independent journalism swept through my home country, **Belarus**, I managed to escape, as many of my colleagues did. Those who didn't escape ended up in prison. Many are still there.

The hardest part of exile was learning how to keep working. I felt I had no moral right to write about **Belarus** without actually being there. Then I forced myself to open my eyes, go outside, and look around. I began speaking with emigrants from other countries — and discovered an entirely new universe.

For many years, I believed that nothing could be more terrifying than the repression in Belarus and the torture in its prisons. I had lived through it myself: the torture, the threats to take my son — who was only three years old when my husband, Andrei Sannikov, and I were arrested — and put him in an orphanage, and the almost year-long incommunicado detention of my

husband, when I didn't even know if he was alive. To me, my country had become a place of absolute evil.

But when I began talking with other exiles from around the world, I encountered so much suffering, so many tragedies, so many monstrous injustices, that I realized I needed to write about those who had lived through such things — and were still living through them.

Incredibly courageous people with broken lives, who refused to give up or surrender, entered my world.

For example, Afghan feminist **Nilofar Ayoubi**, who built a business for women in Kabul, ended up on the Taliban's death list and miraculously escaped on one of the last flights out of the city. In Warsaw, she opened a small Afghan restaurant where her husband, a former diplomat, is now the cook. Nilofar doesn't cry — she works tirelessly and raises three children.

Then there is Iranian journalist **Masih Alinejad**, who found refuge in the United States but cannot go for a walk in the park alone: she lives under 24/7 FBI protection after surviving her fourth assassination attempt last year. She expects a gunshot at any moment, yet never stops working. Masih created the My Stealthy Freedom movement, where Iranian women posted photos of themselves without hijabs — while their husbands and brothers wore hijabs in solidarity. She taught me something vital:

> "Don't think your voice won't be heard in exile. It will become louder — because it can no longer be silenced by threats or arrests. I have more followers in Iran than all the ayatollahs combined."

Lilian Tintori, wife of Venezuelan opposition leader **Leopoldo López**, told me how she fled Maduro's secret services by boat, sailing for 13 hours with

her small child across the ocean — risking their lives — until they reached the island of Bonaire, then part of the Netherlands. She reunited with her husband, who had been imprisoned, only five years later.

Farid Tukhbatullin, an environmentalist from Turkmenistan, described how he was imprisoned on charges of plotting to assassinate the president simply because he had attended an OSCE human rights conference in Vienna. Ironically, the Turkmen ambassador to Austria ended up in the next cell.

Muhamadjón Kabirov, a Tajik journalist, told me how he founded an independent Tajik TV channel in Poland. Exiled Tajik activists worked construction and restaurant jobs during the day, then ran to the studio at night to broadcast live.

Uyghur women **Kalbinur Sidik** and **Gulbahar Jalilova** spoke bitterly of how hard it was to convince the world that — in the 21st century, with technology monitoring nearly every inch of the planet — concentration camps could still be built and two million people imprisoned in them. Yet the Uyghurs in exile succeeded in making the world recognize their people's genocide.

Carine Kanimba, daughter of the renowned **Rwandan** human rights activist and hero **Paul Rusesabagina**, left a stable, respectable job to campaign for her father's release after he was kidnapped by Rwandan security services. She succeeded — after two and a half years of relentless struggle, sleepless nights, and constant threats.

These heroes have taught and inspired me beyond words. Their greatest lesson is simple yet profound: **continue doing what you do, no matter how horrific the circumstances**.

Love is stronger than dictatorship.
Honor is stronger than dictatorship.
We are stronger than dictatorship.

Love, Iryna

FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM

Ammar Abdulhamid,
Syrian American
Pro-democracy activist

We are living through a hinge moment in history. The post–Cold War illusion of a steadily liberalizing world has given way to a more jagged reality: a multipolar era in which democracies and autocracies now contend openly, not merely for power but for the very meaning of human freedom. This is not the polite competition of rival economic models. It is an existential struggle between those who accept the dignity of the individual and those who fear it.

Today's autocrats are a diverse lot — monarchs and military men, party bosses and populist strongmen. They quarrel over creed and culture, but they are united by one common terror: their own people. Call it **demophobia** — the fear that ordinary citizens, if allowed to think and act freely, will strip them of their borrowed grandeur. A fear that drives them to extraordinarily lengths to maintain their hold on power, risking even isolation, sanctions and internal strife. Beneath the grandiose revanchist dreams — of lost empires restored, of cosmic orders re-centered — lies a single ideology: the raw pursuit of power. Their mottos could be distilled to a pop-culture villain's creed: raw power is the idea; greed works. For all their railing against Western "imperialism," the alternative they offer is nothing more than unbridled elitist rule — government by crackdowns, by corruption, and often by one-man whim.

Against this darkness stand the men and women you will meet in these pages. They come from Belarus and Venezuela, from Afghanistan and Iran, from corners of the world where freedom is not a birthright but a wager with destiny. Their choice to resist is at once foolhardy, brave, and — too often — suicidal. Yet here they are: the living proof that the human appetite for liberty survives every repression. They are the frontline of a global struggle whose outcome will shape the moral climate of the twenty-first century.

The Founding Fathers of the United States feared the mob as much as they feared tyranny, and so built a system of checks and balances. Today's autocrats know only the second fear: the fear of losing power. They mask it in rhetoric about sovereignty and tradition, but their true nightmare is the day when their own people cease to be afraid. This is why they reach across borders to aid one another; why they share surveillance technologies and launder each other's crimes; why they speak with one voice in cynicism even when divided by ideology.

But if we are to defeat them, our own camp must be vigilant. Not everyone who opposes a dictator does so in the name of freedom. Power tempts even those who claim to fight for justice; some merely wish to exchange one form of domination for another. Freedom threatens the corrupt, but it also unsettles those who cannot imagine power as anything other than power over others.

That is why **the World Liberty Congress** — the fellowship to which many of the figures in this book belong — is itself an experiment. We strive not merely to advocate democracy, but to practice it: to learn the habits of cooperation, to submit our own egos to the discipline of common rules, to be true democrats not just in theory but in the daily frictions of shared work.

This volume, conceived and curated by my colleague Andrei Sannikov — himself a veteran of Belarus's pro-democracy struggle — captures that spirit. Through these profiles you will hear the voices of those who have staked their lives and reputations on the belief that liberty is worth the

risk. Their stories remind us that freedom is not a Western inheritance but a universal human claim, and that its defence requires courage, clarity, and the humility to guard against the very temptations we resist.

May these pages embolden all who read them to join that fight, in whatever sphere their conscience calls them.

Ammar Abdulhamid is a Syrian American pro-democracy activist who currently divides his time between Damascus and Washington, D.C. He is the Parliamentarian and Director of Policy Research in the World Liberty Congress.

MASIH ALINEJAD

Iran
President of the WLC

Masih Alinejad, born in Qomi Kola, Babol, Iran, is an Iranian-American journalist, author, and women's rights activist. She began her journalism career in 2001, working for various reformist newspapers in Tehran. In 2014, she launched the "My Stealthy Freedom" campaign, encouraging Iranian women to share photos without hijabs, challenging Iran's compulsory hijab laws. This movement became the largest civil disobedience campaign in the history of the Islamic Republic. Alinejad has faced multiple threats from the Iranian government, including kidnapping and assassination plots, leading her to live under FBI protection in the United States. In 2023, she was named one of Time magazine's Women of the Year and was elected President of the World Liberty Congress, an organization uniting pro-democracy activists worldwide. She continues to advocate for women's rights and democracy, giving a voice to Iranian political activists on the global stage.

HAIR

Masih's hair enters the room before she does. I am not sure what to call it exactly — a mane, a shock, a fireball — all three concepts are close, but not on point. Masih Alinejad's hair is a completely separate entity. It's as if it lives a life of its own, making up for years of being cooped up under a *hijab*. It was this hair that became the first step in Masih's personal revolution, that has since grown into the countrywide movement *My Stealthy Freedom* and spilled onto the streets of Tehran.

Victim-1

Masih Alinejad currently lives in New York City. She has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, met leaders of the Western world, given lectures at US universities, spoken on global platforms, and amassed 10 million followers on social media. Not many people know, however, that even in the USA there have been three attempts on her life.

Her name is not mentioned in the indictment against four Iranian nationals that was filed with the US Department of Justice last year. For security reasons, this publicly available document refers to Masih as "Victim-1."

The four accused were allegedly planning to kidnap her and bring her to Iran. Her movements were being tracked not by the Iranian intelligence agents themselves, but by American private investigators who were told that Masih had got into debt in Dubai and subsequently fled to the US.

Masih recalls that before this attempt, Iranian agents had tried to lure her into a third country (this trick, unfortunately, worked with Iranian

journalist Ruhollah Zam, who had been living in France but was lured into Iraq under the pretence of providing exclusive information, from where he was taken by force to Iran and executed). On 31 July of last year, Azerbaijani-born Khalid Mekhdiyev was arrested next to Masih's home carrying an AK-47 rifle.

Now, Masih has bodyguards. Nobody notices them — they're professionals from the FBI. I would not have noticed them either if she had not pointed them out to me herself: a man and a woman, not standing out from the crowd, not cutting through it with confident moves, but noticing everything and always ready to come to her defence.

"The word 'safe' is too much of a luxury for those who dare to speak against Islamic ideology," says Masih. "Salman Rushdie was going to give a talk at an event where he was attacked, where the title of his talk was 'America is a heaven'. I believe that, and I'm really thankful to the FBI, to the law enforcement in America that they protect me," she says.

"These two are protecting me, but why? This is America, this is all about freedom of expression. Why should I be protected by the FBI?

That actually shows you that America is not safe, the West is not safe, Europe is not safe. As long as the Islamic states are in power, as long as the Islamic Republic is in power, not only me — you won't be safe. None of us are safe while the Islamic Republic, the Taliban, dictators are in power. But that doesn't mean I'm scared. I do not fear for my life. But it is scary that, in the 21st century, two people should protect me so that I can speak up. I'm not a criminal, I'm not doing anything wrong!"

Even if you've never come into contact with Islamic ideology, you cannot feel safe in the West, as no one can give you a guarantee that you won't be in the way of an Islamic fanatic or that you won't end up in a plane with an explosive on board, Masih points out. No one is completely sure of their own safety.

A Small Homemade Revolution

It all started during childhood. Masih was born in Qomi Kola, a small village in Iran's Mazandaran Province. She was three years old when the Islamic Revolution triumphed.

However, smaller settlements held on to Islamic values even during the reign of the Shah. Tehran may have been the Paris of the Orient, but Mazandaran Province was always separated from the rest of the country, including geographically — by the Alborz mountain range. Shah Pahlavi had built railroads and highways through the mountains into Mazandaran — but century-old familial traditions cannot be destroyed by a railway.

Masih Alinejad's family fit the picture — they were very religious and traditionalist. Women and girls had to wear a *hijab* even when at home. Masih recalls how, as a small girl, she would touch her hair while half-asleep, unconsciously checking if it was properly covered by a *hijab*.

It was at home that Masih started her first small revolution: when she was alone, she would take off the *hijab* — just for herself. She looked into the mirror, realizing that this is exactly how she wants to live, go outside, study — dressed in ordinary clothing. And one day, she took her Muslim garb off while in the street.

"From the age of seven, when you go to school you have to cover your hair. If you don't, you don't exist. You will be denied all your rights. It doesn't matter if you are Muslim, Jewish, Christian, non-religious — you have to follow the dress code in Iran," Masih says.

"This is how the doors are opened to go to school, to university, to get a job. Going to school, we had to wear the long, black garb called *chadoor*. I remember that I used to take it off on my way home from school, and one day my father saw me not wearing it in the street and he spit on me. I was shocked that he had spit on me in front of my friends. But that was the

moment that I realized: now, I can say "no" to my father. Because I love you, but you love my dress code, you don't love me."

"So since the moment when I found the power to say no to my father, I never wore the *chadoor*. That's why I say that if we want to launch a revolution against dictatorship, we, the women in the Middle East, have to launch it in our family, in our kitchen, in our community first, and either make the men our allies or kick them out."

The Voice of Iran

Iranian women are not prohibited from getting a higher education. Who knows whom a woman will marry — maybe her husband will want an educated, working wife. And if the man wants his wife to sit at home, going out only to the market and never taking off her *hijab* — well, her diploma will lie around in a drawer somewhere. Masih's diploma did not end up in the recesses of a drawer. In fact, it was her job that would later become the reason for her emigration.

Masih worked in the Hambastegi newspaper, the Iranian Labour News Agency, published columns in different media outlets. When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (the sixth president of Iran) came to power, immediately starting a fight against women's hair in public, Masih wrote an exceptionally vitriolic column in which she, with false naiveté, inquired the new president how many jobs he had created, how many families he had saved from poverty and how many unjust court rulings he had reviewed. She asked him to divulge the secret of how he found so much spare time to fight women's hair.

Masih also got involved in a corruption scandal. In 2005, the government reported that it had cut the salaries of its members. But Masih found out

that officials had actually started earning several times more than they had before by way of "bonuses" for everything from religious holidays to "proper behaviour" and following traditions.

Masih was accused of stealing pay statements. When it turned out that she had received this information from a member of the *Majlis* (the Iranian Parliament), she was accused of defamation.

Her brother even went to the office where she was working to ask her boss not to fire her. Nonetheless, she lost the job. In 2007, having been completely banned from her profession, she was forced to leave: first to the UK, then to the USA, where she started working for the Persian Language Service of Voice of America.

"I was a student activist. They put me in jail because of spreading pamphlets. I was a parliamentary journalist and exposed corruption. They kicked me out."

"I was a columnist for a newspaper. Because I criticised the government, they took my column away. They did everything to keep me silent. I had to make a decision: to stay in Iran and censor myself, respect the red lines, or leave Iran and be loud. I decided to leave Iran," the woman says.

"At that moment, the government thought: if we kick her out, she's going to be silent. But I have a window. Every day, through that window I am in Iran. The window is my social media. I have more than 10 million followers. I'm not an actress, not a model. These are people who want me to be their voices. I have more followers on social media than the Ayatollahs, more than the leaders of Iran."

"Women are sending videos to me, practicing their civil disobedience, taking off their *hijab*, walking unveiled. Mothers of those killed send videos to me. It means that the government can kick you out, censor you, kill you, but it cannot kill the idea. They cannot break the bond between me and

my people in Iran. That's why they created a new law — anyone who sends videos to Masih Alinejad will be charged with up to 10 years' prison.

But that didn't scare people. Women took to the streets and said they would rather go to prison for 10 years but send their videos to me. Dictators did everything to break me, but they failed. Now, it's not about me. Millions of women who are more brave than me are challenging the dictators."

"Three years ago, I gave a talk at Stanford University, and I said to the students: the next revolution will be led by women. Nobody took me seriously. But this is it now. I knew that women are fed up with religious dictatorship. That's why I used a symbol — the forced *hijab* — to unify them."

Stealthy Freedom and White Wednesdays

When Masih Alinejad left Iran, she had nothing but social media at her disposal. They were not as popular as now, but they were her only window into Iran. So she began writing on social media. First — on Twitter and Facebook, then on Instagram, once it appeared. But it was on Facebook that her most important campaign was launched.

In 2014, Masih posted a picture of herself, hair streaming in the wind, and asked Iranian women who were following her to send in similar pictures — without a *hijab* or any other veiling. Not in public places, of course, but wherever they wished and could be it at home or in the desert. Unexpectedly, the trend became viral. Masih founded a Facebook group called *"My Stealthy Freedom"*. It currently has over a million members.

Later on, she created the *White Wednesdays* movement, inviting women who were against compulsory *hijab* to take to the streets on Wednesdays

wearing white headscarves. No slogans, signs, or demonstrations — simply a white headscarf as a symbol of protest. Then, she founded the *#MenInHijab* campaign, where men took photos of themselves wearing a *hijab* to show solidarity with the protesting women. On White Wednesdays, the men tied white ribbons onto their wrists.

Masih also wrote a book called *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran*. It's hard to imagine how wonderful it feels to walk around in the rain with your hair out, feeling the wind in your hair, for those who haven't had to wear a *chadoor* for most of their lives, she says.

One time, she received a photograph of a beautiful older woman as part of the *My Stealthy Freedom* campaign. The woman wrote to Masih: *"My hair turned grey without having ever felt the wind"*.

That was devastating to read, Masih tells me.

Hostage Diplomacy

Masih's brother Alireza spent two years in prison. Before the authorities came after him, however, they arrested 29 women from her home village and forced them to make a video appeal to Masih asking her to stop her activism because she was only making things worse for them. The youngest one of these women was only 19 years old, and Masih thought to herself if she should indeed stop her campaign if she was putting them in danger.

But then, the mother of the 19-year-old wrote to Masih: *"Now, you have to be my voice. Freedom is not free, we have to pay a price"*. Afterwards, Masih received a message from a woman whose son was killed during a protest. Masih reminded her that the woman could be imprisoned for 10 years for sending videos to her, but the woman answered: *"I have already lost my son*

for freedom. Iran is like a jail for me already. It doesn't matter to me if I'm inside the jail or outside. But I cannot keep silent".

Then, they took Masih's mother in for questioning. One night in 2019, they came after her brother Ali as well as Leila and Hadi, the siblings of her ex-husband Max Lotfi. Leila was taken to a Tehran prison and released after two weeks. Hadi was released after an interrogation but banned from leaving Babol, the town where he lived.

As for Ali Alinejad, he was sentenced to five years in prison for anti-government propaganda and released on parole in 2021 after spending two years behind bars. Shortly after his arrest, a video that he had made in advance was uploaded onto the Internet. In this video, he told Masih that their whole family was under great pressure and that he could be arrested at any moment, but asked his sister not to give up and continue spreading information about what was going on in Iran.

> "When they put my brother in jail, I was totally broken. They have a hostage and they ask you to stop — what are you going to do? It's a very difficult decision. Sometimes you even think that if you continue your work, then you're betraying your brother. But what will happen if you stop being the voice of those being tortured, of those killed? 1,500 people have been killed, and their mothers come to me and want me to be their voice. So what should I choose? Keeping silent will be a betrayal to my bigger family, to the bigger goal, to freedom and democracy. So I have to let the government know that I won't stop my work. I know they can hurt my brother, but there is no difference between my brother and those who got killed in the street. In the bigger picture, you're helping and fighting for your brother as well because you're telling the oppressive regime that hostage diplomacy doesn't work. Whereas if you obey them and say

"OK, I'll give up my fight, release my brother", you're actually putting millions of lives in danger because you're sending the signal to the oppressors that hostage diplomacy works."

The Revolution of Hope

Protests in Iran erupt every few years and are always ruthlessly crushed. But now, after student Mahsa Amini died in a Tehran prison after being arrested for wearing an "incorrect" hijab, the security forces will not be able to suppress the people's ire — of this Masih Alinejad is sure.

"The government doesn't respect its own law. According to the law in Iran, people can take to the streets and protest as long as they don't carry weapons. But the people's only weapon is their mobile phone. Now, Iranian schoolgirls,

from the age of 15-16, are not only going to prison — they're getting killed. So far, reports say that 42 protesters killed in this uprising are children. But I'm sure the number is much higher than this. The regime cut off the Internet, so we don't know the real number. Nika Shahkarami was only 16 years old. You know what her crime was? She burned a small piece of cloth — her headscarf — in public. The government followed her, tortured her, and killed her, then they arrested the family members and brought them on TV to say that "the government didn't kill my daughter, she just committed suicide". Immediately afterwards, the mother came out and said that the confession was forced. The more people they kill, the more anger it creates," Masih says.

And the men join the mothers, grandmothers, and sisters this time, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with them, she adds.

> "The government has only two options: to step back and get rid of the compulsory hijab, which is not going to happen because the compulsory hijab is the main pillar of the Islamic Republic. Their other option is to kill people. By killing more people, they will make others more determined to take to the streets. Nowadays, I only rarely see people cry among the family members of those who got killed. People are angry, and that shows that even execution, torturing, imprisonment won't stop them from fighting against the Islamic Republic."

Masih does not talk of her second husband and their son — it's too dangerous. After three assassination attempts, "Victim-1", as the indictment sent to the

US Department of Justice last year refers to her, prefers not to give names and addresses.

We have got carried away with our conversation, and Masih says sorry to the guards. She's constantly excusing herself to them, feeling that she is distracting them from more important work. Masih continues walking, and in a few minutes, I hear her say loudly to someone: *"Women will make this revolution and win!"*

As for me, I sit down to read the recent news on *My Stealthy Freedom's* website. Female student Ghazal Ranjkesh has been shot by the police and lost an eye. Another female student, Aylar Haghi, has been killed during a protest in Tabriz. Schoolgirl Asra Panahi has been shot while at school for refusing to sing a song praising the government. And at the same time — the women's national basketball team are photographed without *hijabs*. Iranian football players refuse to sing their country's national anthem during the World Cup. In Isfahan, male and female students march through the streets together in protest against segregation. *Hijabs* are burned at the burial of a woman killed in Amol during protests against the murder of Ghazaleh Chelabi. In the evenings, unveiled women can be seen dancing in the streets of Basht.

What is this if not a revolution?

Oh, and another important thing. Sometimes Masih Alinejad does cover her head — with a dashing gavroche cap. And she puts a flower in her hair. After all, hair is a symbol of freedom, she says, and freedom is always met with flowers.


WLC
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GARRY KASPAROV

Russia
Vice-President of WLC

Garry Kasparov, widely regarded as the greatest chess player in history, retired from the game in 2005 to dedicate his life to human rights and democracy advocacy. A vocal critic of Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin, he founded the United Civil Front to combat the resurgence of totalitarianism in Russia and participated in the pro-democracy coalition, The Other Russia. Kasparov has been a strong advocate on the global stage, contributing to major publications like A co-founder of the World Liberty Congress, alongside Masih Alinejad and Leopoldo López, Kasparov remains a steadfast voice against authoritarianism worldwide. His latest initiative is a platform called The Next Move.

On one hand, democracy is far more common today than in 1963, when I was born in Baku, at the edge of the Soviet empire. But we are also in a moment of upheaval, and the trend lines have been moving in the wrong direction for two decades. Extremists and would-be authoritarians are capturing the institutions of power in the Free World. In Ukraine, Putin's genocidal invasion is supported by an international coalition stretching from Tehran to Pyongyang. Across the Taiwan Strait, China is already preparing its invasion force.

Yet the advantage still rests in our corner. The Free World is more prosperous, more dynamic, and mightier than our enemies.

From the Opening Address at Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, 2025

LEOPOLDO LÓPEZ

Venezuela
General Secretary of the WLC

Leopoldo López is a Venezuelan opposition leader and pro-democracy activist who founded the opposition party Voluntad Popular and served as mayor of Chacao in Caracas. Arrested in 2014 on fabricated charges for leading peaceful protests against Nicolás Maduro's regime, he endured nearly 14 years of imprisonment, including four years in solitary confinement. Named a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International in 2015, Leopoldo later escaped house arrest and fled Venezuela in 2020, reuniting with his family in Spain, where he now lives in exile. As a co-founder of the World Liberty Congress, López remains a prominent advocate for democracy and human rights worldwide, working to unite activists against the rise of authoritarianism.

LILIAN TINTORI

Venezuela
Director of the WLC
Political Prisoners Support Team

Lilian is a Venezuelan human rights activist and the Director of the WLC Political Prisoners Support Team. She became a prominent voice for democracy following the 2014 arrest of her husband, opposition leader Leopoldo López, who was sentenced to nearly 14 years in prison on politically motivated charges. Since then, Tintori has led international efforts to advocate for political prisoners and human rights in Venezuela. She continues to play a central role in raising awareness about the country's political crisis and in supporting those unjustly detained.

Today, as Director of the Political Prisoners Support Network under the World Liberty Congress, she provides these families with crucial guidance, emotional support, and life coaching, helping them navigate the challenging road to freedom. Through her work, she empowers families to become advocates, guiding them in strategy, communication, and resilience. In 2024, she launched a groundbreaking handbook for political prisoners with her team, offering a lifeline to families facing the unthinkable. With unwavering dedication, Lilian Tintori inspires others to believe in freedom, justice, and the power of collective action.

WHEN LEO MET LILIAN

A Story of Love Resistance and Liberation from the Other Side of the World

The first time I saw Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López was on television, as he was being taken into custody. It was February 2014. Crimea and Donbas had not yet captured the attention of the international media, and footage of the mass protests erupting across Venezuela flooded screens around the world.

Nicolás Maduro, who had just succeeded **Hugo Chávez**, had launched a so-called "economic offensive," which within six months spiraled into hyperinflation and empty shelves in grocery stores. The anti-government protests that began on February 12 were, according to Maduro, an orchestrated attempt to overthrow the government. He accused López of masterminding the uprising. On Venezuelan television officials announced López would be arrested. But then, he disappeared. Police raided his relatives' homes, but found nothing. Afterward, Leopoldo tweeted: "Maduro, you're a coward. You will never break me or my family."

Then, on February 16, López posted a video calling on the people of Caracas to gather on the 18th, dressed in white to symbolize peaceful resistance. He pledged to show up and surrender himself to the authorities.

What followed was a breathtaking act of defiance. A strikingly handsome man in a white shirt walked through the capital, surrounded by citizens, until he reached Brion Square. There, he climbed atop a monument to José Martí and gave a seven-minute speech. He spoke with fire and fervor, as only Latin American orators can. He said he was surrendering himself to an unjust court by choice, hoping that his arrest would awaken a nation that had grown numb under fifteen years of Chavista rule. López urged people to keep protesting — because when censorship silences the media, the streets must become the voice of the people.

He thanked the Venezuelan people who yearned for change and dared to march. “Especially – he said and paused — I want to thank my wife, Lilian.” That was when a blond woman in white pants began to climb the monument. It was her.

Moments later, Leopoldo wrapped himself in the Venezuelan flag. Lilian placed a cross on a chain around his neck. They stepped down together. Minutes later, he was taken into custody.

He knew that a long-term prison sentence almost certainly awaited him. Three people had been killed during the protests. The charges — terrorism, murder, arson — were severe enough to lock him away for years.

And he might have remained there for years — if not for Lilian.

We met in Vilnius. Leo and Lilian are still as strikingly cinematic as ever, and they still dream desperately of a free Venezuela. One day, someone will make a film about them. The more I learned from my conversations with Lilian, the more obvious it became that their story is truly unique, just like the stories of all political prisoners and the loved ones fighting for their release. And yet, authoritarian regimes often feel eerily similar, even when they’re worlds apart.

The Last Heroine

Before meeting Leopoldo, Lilian Tintori was a television host. And she ended up on TV thanks to a reality show. A young athlete — she was Venezuela’s national kite-surfing champion — she competed in The Last Hero in 2001 (in Venezuela, it aired as Robinson. La Gran Aventura) and placed seventh. The show was wildly popular in Venezuela, and Lilian quickly became recognized on the streets. Her natural beauty and the public recognition

from the show helped her land a job on television and create the national kite-surfing federation. From billboards in public service campaigns, Lilian Tintori urged Venezuelans not to drive drunk.

In short, she had achieved both success and fame. And then she met Leopoldo. Lilian was passionate about sports and her career at the time, but not politics. Still, working in Venezuelan television, it would have been impossible for her not to notice what was going on around her.

“One day during a live broadcast, our signal was simply cut off on Chávez’s orders,” Lillian recalls. “It was the main channel in Venezuela. Just like that, the signal went dark. Chávez showed us his strength, his power, his control.

But things are even worse now. Maduro’s regime controls every word — on the air, in the newspapers, on the internet.”

At that time, Leopoldo López was the mayor of the **Chacao** municipality. Young, educated, charismatic, and proactive — he was a reformer who created a transparent system of public budget oversight in Chacao, winning a prize from Transparency International. Even then, Leopoldo was organizing demonstrations against Hugo Chávez and was known as a prominent opposition leader. A “golden boy” from a well-known family — his mother, Antonieta Mendoza, is a descendant of Venezuela’s first president, Cristóbal Mendoza — Leopoldo was a Harvard graduate: young, well-educated, and with the looks of a movie star. He stood in stark contrast to Chávez. Wanting to protect himself from potential threats, Chávez tied up Leopoldo with criminal charges ahead of the 2008 Caracas mayoral election. No formal proceedings were launched at the time, but López was banned from holding public office.

Leopoldo had met Lilian earlier. They were introduced to each other by a mutual friend, and from that night on — a night filled with hours of talking and dancing — they were inseparable, right up until Leopoldo’s arrest. That same friend who introduced them was found dead in 2014, shot while out on a bike ride.

Married to Venezuela

It was Lilian who proposed to Leopoldo.

> "One day — it was 2007 — I said, 'Leo, we've been together for five years. I want a family, I want children. In short, I want to marry you," Lilian recalls.

Leopoldo replied, "Are you sure you want to marry me? Because if we get married, you'll also be marrying the country."

She didn't understand at first. Then Leopoldo explained: "I've committed to Venezuela — I took on these commitments willingly. I want to bring about change in this country, and that means one day I might end up in prison. Are you ready for that?"

Without hesitation, she said yes.

But when Leopoldo was imprisoned seven years later, she realized she hadn't been ready.

"You can't really prepare for prison," she says. "Sure, you can pack what you'll need — toiletries and essentials — but emotionally, no one can be truly ready for it."

Leopoldo hadn't prepared either — he didn't have time. He was constantly working, transforming Chacao into the most prosperous municipality in Caracas, building a political movement, and fending off attacks.

There were multiple attempts on his life: he was shot at, beaten, and in February 2006, armed men stormed a university and held him hostage for six hours.

The following month, an unknown assailant shot and killed his bodyguard.

Leopoldo took it as a clear message:

> "We can kill you — anytime, anywhere."

And yet, despite all the assassination attempts, it was still Lilian who asked Leopoldo to marry her. She agreed to marry Venezuela — and she was happy.

Lilian and Leo got into triathlons; she began running marathons, and in between athletic competitions, they had a son and a daughter. Every year, on their wedding anniversary, they swam across the Orinoco River. They chose it as a meaningful tradition — a three-kilometer swim to mark each year together.

In 2009, Leopoldo founded the party "Popular Will." Due to the charges filed under Chávez, he was barred from running for office or holding government positions, forcing his political efforts to shift exclusively to street activism. As an organizer, speaker, and coordinator, Leopoldo turned out to be far more dangerous to the regime than he would have been as a mayor — even if he had won that election. Still, Hugo Chávez never imprisoned him. But Maduro couldn't tolerate it. The sentence was 13 years.

"I clearly remember the moment I realized Leopoldo wouldn't be released. I closed the door behind me to be alone and asked myself, 'Lilian, are you ready to fight? Do you want to fight? Or not?' I listened to my body, my mind, my emotions, my heart — and they all said yes. Then I came to understand that I needed to work not only to free my husband but also all the political prisoners in Venezuela. It would be a long, difficult battle. But first, I had to learn. I reached out to human rights activists and asked them to teach me what to do and how to do it. Essentially, I was a beginner, starting with the basics. I realized I needed to form a group — a coalition of people dedicated to freeing political prisoners. We had to connect with foreign politicians and human rights advocates.

I was also very lucky with my mother-in-law. Together, we made a great team. My mother-in-law, Antonieta Mendoza, is a remarkable and strong woman — a role model for everyone. She developed the strategy for Leo's campaign to win his freedom. She told me, "Commitment, discipline — and let's get to work! No stopping now."

Now, whenever I speak with families of political prisoners, I tell them: we have every tool we need to fight for their release. I wrote a small guidebook — an instruction manual for relatives of political prisoners. But the core message is simple: commitment, love, discipline, and resilience. Every day, we must do something to help free them. Every day, we must think about our imprisoned loved ones. Every day, we must feel what endure behind bars. We must understand that we are their voice.

Of course, there are days when it feels hopeless, when everything seems too heavy and strength runs out. That's when you have to remind yourself: this is reality. Everything depends on you right now, this moment — you must do whatever you can today. Because the commitment to fight for your loved one's freedom isn't just a promise to them; it's a promise to yourself, to your soul, and your love.

This mindset works in many situations — I've tested it myself, and it truly gives you strength. I remember telling myself that I had to walk this difficult path with a smile on my face, energy in my body, and love in my heart.

Life Is Beautiful

Addiction specialists often use the term "co-dependent" to describe the relatives of drug addicts and alcoholics. But strangely, there's no term like "co-prisoner." And there should be, because the families of prisoners are imprisoned too. Their lives become consumed by the struggle to secure

their loved one's freedom while managing everyday needs. Lilian called herself a "carrier pigeon" — running back and forth to the notorious military prison, **"Ramo Verde"**.

She wrote letters and complaints, and when Leopoldo went on a 30-day hunger strike, she tried to get access to an independent doctor. She never succeeded. Sometimes she felt crushed, broken, and defeated. But she reminded herself:

> "If women have the strength to bring life into this world, then I can find the strength to endure this too."

By then, it was Lilian — not Leopoldo — who was organizing demonstrations demanding the release of political prisoners. She met with politicians and human rights activists, the U.S. president, and even the Pope, pushing for strong resolutions and increased pressure on the Maduro regime. She had no background in politics, but she had something stronger: the fierce determination to free her husband and two young children who needed a mother who was strong, joyful, and full of life.

"I explained everything to the children right away: 'Dad is in prison, that's the reality, and unfortunately, we can't just turn off this reality like a television. So let's try to love this reality and continue living in it.' At that time, I found great inspiration in Roberto Benigni's film Life is Beautiful. Life is beautiful — even in prison, even in a concentration camp. So my children and I made our lives beautiful. Every weekend, we would climb a beautiful mountain, admire the views, play, and then come back down to buy the tastiest ice cream.

Even if I had lied and said Dad was on a business trip, they would have found out the truth anyway. My daughter Manuela was six when her father was arrested, and sometimes other kids at school would point at her and call her

'the daughter of the monster from the Ramo Verde' — that's what President Maduro called Leopoldo López. When visits were allowed, I always brought the children with me. Manuela would ask, 'Dad, will you die in prison?'

Every visit could turn into a nightmare for me. Once, after all the relatives of the prisoners at Ramo Verde had already been allowed inside, the prison chief stopped me and started insulting me in front of a row of soldiers. When I asked him to stop, he shouted that if I opened my mouth again, I would lose visitation rights forever. Then they forced me to strip completely in front of two soldiers — that's what a prison search looks like in Venezuela."

"They constantly tried to intimidate me. I was openly followed, sometimes with police pointing guns at me. There were two assassination attempts — once, they even set a fire on the plane I was on. I barely made it out alive.

But at the same time, I knew that what Leopoldo was going through might have been even worse. He was locked in solitary confinement without light or water — no candles, no letters, no phone calls, no books, no paper, not even a pencil. They kept him in total isolation for an entire year.

That's how they operate: they aim not only to destroy the person who dares to challenge their power, but also their family, especially if the family dares to speak publicly about the abuse. Maybe if I had stayed silent and hadn't fought for Leopoldo, they wouldn't have tried to break me, too.

But they needed to silence my voice. Beyond intimidation and attacks, they weaponized lies. You know how that goes — 'She's just pretending to care about her husband for publicity; she's with someone else now and even pregnant.' But I knew exactly who I was — and who I was with."

The plane fire happened in November 2015. At the time, Lilian was actively involved in the parliamentary campaign, supporting opposition candidates, attending rallies, and traveling across the country. On November 25, as she landed in the state of Guárico, a fire broke out on the plane. The passengers,

including Lilian, miraculously escaped unharmed, and she still made it to the rally. She even gave a speech.

But shortly afterward, shots were fired from a passing car. Standing right next to her, Luis Manuel Díaz, a regional leader of the Democratic Action Party, was killed. No one was ever arrested for the murder. Lilian believes the bullet may very well have been meant for her.

A Long Road to the Sea

After three and a half years in a military prison in Caracas, Leopoldo López was transferred to house arrest. Nicolás Maduro framed the move as a gesture of goodwill and peace, while Venezuela's Supreme Court cited "health reasons" in its official ruling.

It hadn't all been in vain. It seemed Lilian could finally rest, especially with the birth of their third child a year after Leopoldo's return home. Even under house arrest, Leopoldo remained actively engaged in his political work. He maintained secret contact with allies and began preparing an uprising.

That uprising came in 2019. Leopoldo's ally and fellow Popular Will party member, Juan Guaidó — then Speaker of the National Assembly — declared himself interim president during a new wave of anti-Maduro protests. In April, military supporters freed Leopoldo from house arrest. He was taken to La Carlota Air Base, where Guaidó was waiting.

When the uprising was quashed, Leopoldo managed to take refuge in the Spanish Embassy. Escaping house arrest meant another prison sentence awaited him if he were captured again. Later, Lilian arrived at the embassy with their one-year-old daughter Federica. She had already sent their two older children to Spain.

“Leopoldo spent time at the Spanish embassy in Caracas. I stayed there with him for a month. Then my daughter and I fled Venezuela in secret, by sea. We traveled by boat for 13 hours until we reached Bonaire, a Dutch territory. Leopoldo didn’t manage to escape until a year and a half later. Everyone advised him against it — it was a critically dangerous situation. But he took the risk anyway. He drove to the Colombian border, crossed it illegally, and from there made his way to Aruba by sea, traveling under false documents. The children and I waited for him in Spain all that time.

Neither Lilian nor Leopoldo know when — or if — they will be able to return to Venezuela. Lilian says that now they stay open to life and try, every day, to do something — however small — to help change the situation in their country. And every morning, Lilian wakes up hoping to open her eyes and see Caracas outside her window — the city of her dreams.


TEDx Warsaw
TEDx Warsaw
TEDx Warsaw

NILOFAR AYOUBI

Afghanistan
Regional Secretary of MENA region

Nilofar Ayoubi is an Afghan activist, journalist, and entrepreneur who escaped Afghanistan with her family shortly after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. She lives in Poland with her husband and three children. She was a speaker on the importance of investing in the protection and participation of women human rights defenders in conflict and crisis at an event hosted by the United Nations and International Non-Government Organizations in December, 2022.

She is CEO of Asia Times Afghanistan and Editor of Akhbar Afghan. She founded a group called the Women's Political Participation Network. In Afghanistan she owned several businesses, including beauty products, designer clothing and bridal wear, a design and decoration company with furniture manufacturing. She created 300 jobs for women across Afghanistan with a hand-made carpet company.

IN MY NIGHTMARES, I SEE KABUL AIRPORT

When the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, **Nilofar Ayubi** found herself on two lists at once: the evacuation list and the death list. After surviving two assassination attempts and seeing her husband wounded, she knew she had to flee. With their three children, the family boarded an evacuation plane Poland had sent to Kabul. Then came the challenge of starting over — building a new life in Warsaw.

Nilofar Ayubi — Afghan journalist, feminist, and human rights advocate. Today, she lives in exile, but Afghanistan still fills her dreams.

> "Whether it's the sweetest dream or the worst nightmare, it's always about my country. Afghanistan is always there. If the Taliban disappeared today, I'd be back in Kabul tomorrow."

Bacha Posh

Until the age of thirteen, Nilofar lived as a boy. She wore boys' clothes, kept her hair cut short, and went by the male name Wahid. In Afghanistan, this is a relatively common phenomenon known as *bacha posh* — literally, "dressed like a boy." Families do it for different reasons: to shield daughters from early marriage, to stand in for a son when there are none, or because war has left the household without any men. Nilofar's parents chose it so their daughter could have the freedom of a normal childhood.

"I was born during the Taliban's first rule," Nilofar recalls. "I remember it clearly, even though I was only three or four. I was playing outside when a passing Taliban fighter slapped me hard because I wasn't wearing a headscarf. That day, my parents decided to dress me as a boy. They gave me the rare gift of knowing what it felt like to live a free life.

But you couldn't ignore what was happening around you. I remember going to the bazaar with my mother — in my boy's clothes, I was free to walk beside her as her escort. I saw the Taliban surround women as if they were herding sheep, beating them with rubber batons, even though the women wore *burqas* that covered them completely."

At thirteen, when Nilofar put on a dress for the first time, she felt sick. It seemed to choke her, to swallow her whole. She couldn't breathe. Being a *bacha posh* was, on one hand, a way to escape slavery and humiliation, at least for the years of childhood. But on the other hand, it meant sacrificing one's gender identity, and the return to a girl's dress could leave lasting trauma, sometimes for life.

Nilofar realized then how much her life was about to change. As Wahid, the boy everyone saw, she behaved like one — she could play outside with friends until late, go anywhere she pleased. Her older sisters asked her to escort them to the market. But the moment she put on that unfamiliar, suffocating, alien dress, her freedom ended. She was now to become a shadow woman, like all the others, including grown *bacha posh* girls.

"I went through a severe identity crisis," Nilofar recalls. "Until I was 18 or 19, I constantly had suicidal thoughts. Wearing a dress kept me from playing in the garden with my male cousins — it forced me to sit properly with my female cousins instead. But I had no interest in their conversations! I found the boys' company much more engaging. At the table I now sat with the women, and it was incredibly hard for me. Only now, after years of struggle and having three children, do I feel a sense of femininity. I think I'm very feminine now, though my husband sometimes says otherwise."

Family and School

In 2012, Afghan President **Hamid Karzai** signed a "Code of Conduct" that once again legalized the ban on women appearing in public without a male escort and on speaking with unrelated men in public places. The code also allowed beating women under Sharia law. When Western countries condemned it as a return to complete female disenfranchisement, Karzai insisted it fully aligned with Islamic law.

"Our society has never liked women who ask questions," Nilofar says. "It's never liked women who speak at all. At school, I was always in trouble because I questioned my teachers, especially in religious studies. I demanded precise answers. I told them the religion they were teaching us was not the real faith — it was a version modified by mullahs to fit their views and convenience. No religion demands that women be treated like animals. But that modified version was what they sold to the public, and the senior clerics profited from it."

Her bold questions got her suspended from classes. The school would summon her father to shame him for his daughter's "improper" behavior, but he always defended her.

Nilofar's family is Pashtun, and her grandfather was the head of their tribe. As she recalls, a tribal chief lives like a king in a small monarchy. The family owned vast lands, much of which her father inherited. But he refused to inherit the "throne" and moved to the city to become an educator.

"Whichever school you attend, most of your teachers will have been my students," he would tell his daughter.

When her teachers accused him of being overly liberal, he replied:

"I'm not a liberal — I simply have reason. God gave us reason so we would use it. Isn't that what I taught you? My daughter has done nothing wrong.

She thinks, she asks questions, and she explains to her classmates what will happen to their bodies — because no one else will tell them in advance."

The teachers would throw up their hands in disbelief: "How are you still walking the earth?!"

Nilofar's older brother often heard remarks from his friends: "Why doesn't she just stay home? From school to English class, then to the computer lab — she's out all day. Doesn't she have household chores? And you mean she doesn't have any responsibilities?"

Soon, tensions began to build between Nilofar and her brothers. They wanted her to stay home like the women and girls in their friends' families. But she kept making her way to school clubs and private lessons, no matter what they said.

In 2009, during one of her computer classes, a classmate took a group photo and posted it on Facebook. (At the time, Nilofar would go to a book club that had internet access to check her newsfeed. It was a small act of defiance, because Afghan women weren't allowed to register on social media.)

When that group photo appeared online, her older brother rushed home and started choking their father. He was hysterical, shouting at the top of his lungs. Her father slapped him to bring him back to his senses. That's when her brother began hitting himself in the head, screaming that he understood Nilofar had done nothing wrong — but he couldn't handle the public shame. "Everyone is calling, texting, saying, 'How could you let this happen? That is disgraceful!'" he cried. He said he was terrified to step outside, afraid of bumping into someone who would heap shame on him.

Her father's answer was blunt: "If that's what bothers you, you can leave this house."

"A lot of that pushback from society — and even from some relatives — shaped who I am," Nilofar says. "But now I understand my brother. He has it

much worse than I do. His family lives under Taliban rule. His wife must wear a *burqa* and can't leave the house without permission. My mother also wears a *burqa* now, and when she was young, she wore miniskirts. I feel terrible for my nephews growing up in that hell. My brothers have suffered because of me — they've been arrested, pressured to force me back to Afghanistan. My mother was tortured. They even demanded that my brother divorce his wife."

"Why would they want your brother to get a divorce?" I asked. "What's the point for the Taliban? What do they gain from it? It sounds completely absurd."

Nilofar replied:

> "They can do whatever they want — and they enjoy it."

A Hazara and a Pashtun Woman

On Nilofar's pinky finger is a small heart tattoo. Islam forbids tattoos. It's an act of rebellion, but not only that.

"For us Pashtun women, tattoos are a tradition," Nilofar explains. "For centuries, Pashtun women have worn small tattoos on their faces, near the eyes. Yes, Islam forbids them, but in Pashtun culture, it's part of our heritage. Of course, in Afghanistan, if a woman has a tattoo, she's not considered respectable. Even after the Taliban left, that mentality stayed. Fighting it has proved brutally hard."

Nilofar's rebellious streak showed itself in more than just the little heart tattooed on her pinky. She married a Hazara — a member of a different ethnic group, which is frowned upon in Afghanistan. And it wasn't just

about ethnicity or tribe. Her husband, Hadji, is a Shiite; she's a Sunni.

Even before agreeing to marry him, she laid down conditions that would make a traditional Afghan's head spin.

"I told Hadji: I will never cook, I will never clean. I will not be a housewife. If you want us to have children, you must promise to help raise them. Children must never become an obstacle to my work or public activities."

Hadji agreed to everything. They went on to have three children. When Nilofar needed to travel, Hadji stayed home with them without hesitation, even as neighbors whispered, "This isn't normal — how can she just leave her children with their father to go on a trip?"

Nilofar posted photos of herself without a hijab and shared moments of family joy on social media. She received countless messages from women who were thrilled to see that it was possible to live so freely in Afghanistan and to have such a supportive husband.

Hadji's inbox told a different story. Men wrote asking how he could "allow" such behavior, insisting a wife should be obedient, quiet, and invisible online. Hadji's reply was simple:

> "She is not my slave. She is my wife. She has the right to do whatever she sees fit."

Before the first Taliban regime, Afghan women had choices. Some preferred to go out fully covered, while others wore jeans or short skirts. Both groups coexisted in complete harmony. That, Nilofar says, is the real Afghanistan — a multicultural country where the Taliban and other Islamists are not its true representatives. Our national costumes are colorful; women wear bright dresses. The Taliban banned even that — only dark burqas are allowed now,

turning women into something frightening, like shadows from another world. That's exactly how the Taliban want women to appear.

Nilofar never tried to convince other Afghan women to give up dividing their lives between the kitchen and their children. She says feminism doesn't take root in Afghanistan. If you start voicing feminist ideas publicly, 99 percent of women will say, "No, no — she doesn't represent anyone but herself. That's not our voice." So Nilofar decided to move toward her goals in small steps, short sprints. Changing minds is often far more challenging than changing laws.

Since childhood, Nilofar had been an observer and an analyst. By the time she was a young woman, she had reached a simple conclusion: one of the main reasons for Afghan women's oppression was their lack of financial independence. A woman left her parents' home only to enter her husband's house, beginning life as part of the domestic staff. She had to obey her father and brothers first, then her husband. What say can a woman possibly have in the family, young Nilofar wondered, if she can't even afford to buy so much as a loaf of bread for the table?

> "It's like when someone is starving — they can't think about anything but food. But once they're well-fed and can afford three meals a day, their focus shifts from mere survival to seeking greater comfort in life. If a woman starts earning her own money, she won't simply accept everything a man tells her. Independence inevitably sharpens her mind and gives her the ability to analyze."

Nilofar decided to start her own business and integrate women into the workforce, offering them a chance to earn and gain independence. She studied the market, talked to people, and asked questions. She realized

that most men, even educated ones, didn't want their wives leaving home to work instead of caring for the children and the household. Fine, she thought, then I'll find a way for them to work from home, earn money while the children are asleep or playing, and set their hours. And what kind of work could bring them immediate income without leaving the house? Of course — carpets. The famous Afghan carpets.

"I met with the husbands of potential female employees and spent a long time talking to them. I explained there was no need to worry about contact with strange men: I would personally come to each of them to collect the carpets and pay immediately. I even offered to involve them in the process — 'Gentlemen, would you like to handle buying the threads, choosing the colors, and delivering the carpets?' Many agreed. This way, I tried to build cooperation between men and women within families. At the same time, I told the men, 'Look at me — I got an education. Isn't that a good thing? Now I can start companies and give people jobs. Wouldn't you want your daughters to get an education and be able to earn money on their own, without needing anything from anyone?'

Nilofar gave work to 300 women. The business was large — she exported thousands of carpets worldwide. Later, she opened several stores and a company specializing in interior design and decoration, and again hired women. She told potential clients, 'You don't need to worry. Female decorators and designers will come to your home to discuss the project. That way, your wife won't have to interact with any strange men. Let her approve the project herself. So you can avoid conflicts at home.' With a bit of careful persuasion aimed at the men, Nilofar achieved her goals.

She also donated one-fifth of her profits to a nonprofit organization that supports widows whose husbands served and died in the national army."

Two Assassination Attempts Amid Peace Talks

Nilofar herself founded and leads another non-governmental organization — the Women's Political Participation Network. Peace talks were beginning in Afghanistan, and, of course, no one intended to allow women to participate: the Taliban would never negotiate with women.

"And so I reached out to Afghan women through Facebook. Thousands of women from different regions came together to form a civic organization demanding women's participation in peace talks and political life in general. We ran a very active campaign, constantly speaking in the media, declaring that we opposed any negotiations in which women were excluded. For this reason, the Taliban put me on their kill list. Five of my colleagues were murdered during those so-called peace talks. I survived two assassination

attempts; my husband was shot in the back. Yes — they shot him in the back. But we never even considered leaving. I never wanted to live in Europe or anywhere else. I owned property in Dubai, but in 2020, a year before the fall of Kabul, I sold everything — I decided my place was at home, in Afghanistan."

The year 2020 was perhaps the most challenging and the most successful for Nilofar. It was in 2020 that she founded the Women's Political Participation Network and landed on the Taliban's execution list. It was also the year someone attempted to assassinate her. That same year, amid the pandemic, Nilofar coordinated food deliveries to 15,000 families in western Kabul. And it was in 2020 that her previous public campaign achieved a major victory: Afghan birth certificates began including the mother's name, not just the father's.

"Together with my friend, human rights activist Leyla Osmani, we launched the campaign Where is my name? (#whereismyname)," Nilofar recounts. "In Afghanistan, for a long time, birth certificates only included the father's name. It was as if the mother did not exist at all, having no rights whatsoever. If the father died, the child's fate would be decided by the grandfather, uncle, or older brother — anyone but the mother. She had no voice, no rights to her child, and essentially no rights at all. With the support of thousands of women who joined the campaign, we succeeded: in 2020, the Afghan government finally decreed that the names of mothers be recorded on birth certificates."

In addition to raising three children, running a business, and engaging in public activism, Nilofar also worked as a journalist. How she managed to juggle it all is beyond me, especially since her husband, Hadji, was a diplomat equally overwhelmed with work. Yet she still found time for everything. Perhaps it was a habit she developed in childhood, when she would spend her afternoons running from one school club to another until late in the evening to avoid sitting at home.

Kabul — Warsaw.
Hoping for a Return Ticket

In August 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul. Even before reaching the city, they began spreading videos online showing the execution of National Army soldiers. Meanwhile, the residents of Kabul went out onto their balconies and shouted in support of their army. Nilofar, with her children and husband, stood on their balcony and shouted too. When the Taliban were already in Kabul, scared employees of her stores — Hazara Shiite women — called her, knowing they would be targeted. Nilofar told them, "Take black *hijabs* from the warehouse, run home, and take everything you can carry."

Nilofar and her family hid in their basement. She knew they would be looking for her to finish what two failed assassination attempts hadn't. And they searched. Cameras were installed in her shops, office, and home, and Nilofar watched in real time on her phone as the Taliban stormed in, destroying her house, her business, her life. From that same basement, she gave dozens of interviews about the events unfolding in Afghanistan.

On August 21, Nilofar, still hiding with her family, was offered evacuation to Poland. She didn't hesitate: with her husband, three children, and two backpacks, she made her way to the airport and managed to board a Polish evacuation plane. The family arrived in Warsaw.

"Since we escaped from Kabul, I haven't had a single night when I could sleep peacefully. I often have nightmares in which I'm at the Kabul airport, unable to board that plane. All my dreams are about Afghanistan — both the nightmares and the sweet memories from childhood. From the very first minute we found ourselves in the refugee camp, I grabbed my phone and started calling international NGOs that provide medical care, safe housing, and shelters. I helped organize evacuations for women targeted by the Taliban. And once again, I gave interviews, wrote articles, spoke at conferences, and volunteered at a foundation helping refugees."

But Nilofar wouldn't be herself if she had abandoned public work entirely and buried her entrepreneurial talent. Last year, she opened a restaurant in Warsaw serving Afghan–Persian cuisine. That's where we met, and after visiting, I can say without hesitation: the food is superb. *Kabuli pilaw, bolani, chopan kebabs, borani banjan, mantu* — all dishes are prepared strictly according to the recipes of Hadji, a former Afghan diplomat and now the chef of this small restaurant.

They are managing. They are living. They are grateful to Poland for saving their lives. But every day, they dream of returning home.

"If the Taliban leave Afghanistan today, I'll be in Kabul tomorrow," Nilofar said as we parted.

I think she was exaggerating slightly. If the Taliban left today, she'd be in Kabul not tomorrow, but tonight — and I do not doubt that.

PALINA SHARENDA-PANASIUK

Belarus
Wife of WLC member Andrei Sharenda

Palina is a Belarusian human rights defender and a politician. A noted pro-democracy activist in Brest, she is a frequent and strong critic of dictator Lukashenko. In 2021, she was sentenced to two years' imprisonment on charges of insulting state officials and using violence against a police officer. Sharenda-Panasiuk stated that she was tortured in prison, and her sentence was extended on two occasions until she was released in 2025.

PRISONER OF WAR

Temporary Detention Facility, punishment cell, solitary confinement, psychiatric ward, a prison for repeat offenders — the survival story of a Belarusian political prisoner.

The story of Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk, whom her fellow citizens in Brest called **the Belarusian Joan of Arc**. Palina is both an activist and a dissident. Before her arrest, she worked as a regional coordinator for the civic campaign European Belarus. In 2019, she even ran for parliament and briefly appeared on state television, only to have her candidacy swiftly revoked.

Then came the protests of 2020, her husband's arrest, and, inevitably, the night security forces broke down her door. Criminal charges followed, then trial, then prison.

For more than four years, no one truly knew what was happening to Palina. Three times, as one sentence was coming to an end, she was transferred from the penal colony back to a detention center, where fresh charges under Article 411 — "persistent disobedience to prison administration" — were filed against her. Each time, she was returned to the colony, where she spent nearly all her time in solitary confinement.

"By the time they took me down in the elevator, I had already committed two more 'crimes'."

— Palina, you were arrested on January 3, 2021. At that time, your husband Andrei was serving yet another 15-day administrative sentence. Did you realize they might come for you, too?

— By the end of 2020, I already knew that in Belarus they had drawn up lists straight out of Stalin's era — lists of people who had to be imprisoned. Back in August and the fall, the security forces mostly grabbed people off the streets during and after the marches. But by early 2021, the next stage had begun: they started going door to door, pulling people out of their apartments. They came for me with an investigator — not just to detain me preventively for 15 days and then decide what to do, but with a full-fledged criminal charge. They broke down the door and stormed into the apartment.

The indictment the investigator carried had just one article — the standard Article 342: "organization of actions that grossly violate public order." That was the charge used against everyone who took part in the marches.

"But while they were taking me down in the elevator from the eighth floor to the first, I managed to commit three more 'crimes'," Palina recalled. "I told them exactly what I thought of them."

In the end, she was charged under three separate articles: Article 364 ("violence or threat of violence against a law enforcement officer"), Article 368 ("public insult of Lukashenko"), and Article 369 ("insulting a government official").

— Did you, like many of the protesters, hold on to hope that just a little longer — and it would all be over, the dictatorship would collapse, and the prisons would open? Some former political prisoners from the "first wave" told me they would sometimes start packing their belongings in their cells whenever they heard noise outside, thinking it might be their release.

— I had no such illusions. By the end of the summer of 2020, everything was already clear to me. When that wave of naïve sentiment began — "Look, we're taking off our shoes and standing on benches in our socks!" — and people started handing flowers to riot police, I knew exactly where it was heading. I was just waiting for the terror to unfold. I understood it was only a matter of time. My husband was detained preventively and spent the entire protest movement

locked up in a detention center. Later, we did discuss whether we should leave or not. But I've always fought to the last bullet — that's my principle in life.

— Your dialogue with the judge ("Defendant, stand up!" — "I don't stand up for bandits"; "Do you want to file a motion to recuse the court?" — "You are not a court"; "When were you detained?" — "Taken prisoner on January 3") has already become something of a classic — even staged in theaters, for example in the Czech Republic, as short performances in solidarity with you. Did you prepare yourself for that trial?

— I don't live within that terminology — court, case, charges. From the very beginning, I said: **I am a prisoner of war**. And for four years, I kept hammering that into their heads. I told them my captivity happens to coincide geographically with your penal colony. That was the dialogue I carried on with them — the judges, the prosecutors, the operatives — for four years straight. I never once thought of myself as a defendant, or the accused, or the convicted, only as a prisoner of war.

"We'll lock up your children and your parents."

— When you were brought to the penal colony after the trial, you must have realized that by continuing to call yourself a prisoner of war rather than a convicted inmate, you were inviting another charge of insubordination and a new sentence?

— I didn't just call myself a prisoner of war — I also called them, the operatives and the prison administration, terrorists and occupiers. Right from the start, they made it clear I'd be hit with a new charge under the so-called "insubordination" article. In August 2021, I was brought to the Gomel colony, and senior operative officer Zborovsky from the regional Department of Penitentiary Administration immediately came to see me. He said, "This is my first visit, and I'll be back for a second.

If by the time I return you haven't signed these papers — 'I admit guilt, I promise to follow the internal rules,' and so on — then you'll spend the next ten years shuttling back and forth between the colony and pre-trial detention."

— I'd already heard the name Zborovsky from the Gomel Department of Penitentiary Administration. Released female political prisoners described him as a rare scoundrel.

— When Yulian Zborovsky showed up at our colony in September 2021, he started holding auditions with political prisoners. He would call us in one by one and lean on us to write petitions for pardon, threatening and intimidating us. At the same time, he told me he had fought in Ukraine — on the side we can only guess about. Basically, a piece of Russian-world scum. The last time I saw him was in August 2023, when he said: "We'll run these elections so smoothly, nobody will even dare to squeak." The elections were still a year and a half away, and already, they were worried about silencing everyone. That's when I knew there was no chance of getting out before those "elections."

— Palina, but your original sentence was short — just two years. Was there any chance to quietly serve it and get out without extra terms, transfers, or solitary confinement?

— Yes, if I agreed to their conditions. When they brought me to the colony, Voskresensky was just sending out his "spam" to political prisoners (Yuri Voskresensky had worked in 2020 on the campaign of presidential candidate Viktor Babariko, was arrested, then quickly released, and later announced that he would petition Lukashenko for the pardon of other political prisoners). In these "letters of happiness," they suggested writing a petition for pardon, claiming Voskresensky would personally vouch for you with Lukashenko. I wrote everything I thought on the sheet — about Lukashenko and Voskresensky alike — and sent it off. For some reason, I suspect my letter never reached its destination.

Then the political prisoners are split into “good” and “bad.” Those who signed immediately, agreeing to their terms, could quietly serve their sentences and even get released on pardon. The “bad” prisoners, however, are turned into scarecrows for the newcomers. The indoctrination begins immediately, even during quarantine. The intimidation is brutal: “If you don’t sign the pardon, you’ll cry every day; we’ll put your children and your parents behind bars.” I saw women leaving quarantine and entering the unit, too scared to even look at us. They just walked along the fence, heads down.

— Still, are both “compliant” and “non-compliant” political prisoners placed on the so-called official registry, with yellow armbands marking them as extremists?

— Yes, that happens almost immediately. Experienced inmates used to say that in this Gomel facility, you could count those on the registry on one hand. But now, it’s the majority. Within a month or two, everyone is labeled a “malcontent” — a chronic rule-breaker. That immediately restricts their privileges: a “malcontent” is allowed to shop in the commissary for only two basic salary units (the basic salary unit in Belarus is a measure used to calculate duties and payments; it currently equals 42 rubles, or about 12.6 euros).

After that, the punishment escalates: loss of parcels, denied visits and phone calls, and provocations by informants working for the authorities. In short, it’s psychological terror.

And, of course, there’s solitary confinement and SHIZO (punishment cell, a prison within a prison). It’s flexible, though. You might be sentenced to six months in SHIZO, but during that time, they can send you to solitary confinement for ten days — seven times, for example. In my case, at the second colony in Rechytsa, what was supposed to be six months in SHIZO ended up stretching to ten months, with occasional stints in solitary confinement.

“We made pillows out of soap and toilet paper.”

— I can’t even imagine surviving in solitary confinement. You can’t bring anything with you, right? No personal belongings at all?

— You have nothing. Only a toothbrush, toothpaste, toilet paper, and soap are provided. In the Gomel colony, women at least received a bottle of warm water once a day for hygiene, but in my second colony, in Rechytsa, we had to wash ourselves using nothing but soap boxes. The toilet was just a hole in the floor, like at a Soviet train station, and the water tap was at the other end of the cell. Hot water was only available for twenty minutes a day, and everyone had to make an effort to fit everything into that short time. One woman needed to wash her face, another her armpits, a third to brush her teeth, and a fourth to wash her socks. So we would fill soap boxes with water for intimate hygiene and carry them to the hole in the floor.

— Did they at least give you mattresses?

— What mattresses? No blankets, no sheets — just bare bunks. Double-decker bunks with no support to climb to the top. During the day, it was fine, but at night, when you get up five times because of the cold, climbing back up was a real challenge. In solitary confinement, we came up with a way to make makeshift pillows: either shoes under your head with toilet paper on top, or a bar of soap wrapped in toilet paper — and that was your pillow. We also used toilet paper to keep warm, wrapping ourselves in it at night.

— I know that in solitary confinement, you’re not even allowed to read library books. How do you pass the time there while keeping your sanity?

— Solitary confinement is like being locked in a grave, with nothing but emptiness. In Gomel, there was at least some kind of radio that played propaganda. In Rechytsa, there’s absolutely nothing. I stayed in solitary

confinement not for 15 days, but for a minimum of a month. That is their kind of "preparation": to open a case for insubordination, they quickly rack up a certain number of rule violations. So they put you in solitary and wait — will the orders come to fabricate a criminal case? In my case, the orders came three times, and then the next stage began. They even recorded violations while I was in solitary. You might think, what could you possibly violate while sitting in a cell? But it turns out, you can.

In Gomel, it was so unbearably cold that without exercise, it was impossible to warm up even a little. And they marked me down for doing calisthenics: "Lying on the floor, performing physical exercises, thereby violating internal regulations."

After that, I stopped doing exercises. In winter, I stayed pressed against the radiator, because stepping even a little away would leave me freezing painfully. I even got burn marks on my knees from pressing them hard against the radiator. And you can't bring warm socks or shoes — solitary confinement only provided some cardboard slippers.

Keeping your sanity requires ironclad discipline. You set a schedule: this much time sitting, that much time walking. You also distract yourself with your cellmates: they fight, gossip, or reminisce about drinking in some yard.

It's a bit easier in the punishment cell: the daily horrors are the same, but books are allowed. You pick up a book and immerse yourself completely. In SHIZO they also provide you mattresses and pillows.

— How much time did you spend in solitary confinement and the SHIZO in total?

— Let me think. From December 2021 to April 2022, from October 2022 to August 2023, and April and May 2024 — that was in the SHIZO. The rest of the time was solitary, solitary, solitary, with brief transfers to pre-trial detention centers when they were fabricating another case or sentence. In

all of 2023, I went outside only eight times: in December, at the Gomel pre-trial detention center, where they brought me from the colony for another trial. Those were the only walks — eight days out of 365!

Palina with her husband Andrei Sharenda

“They led me on a leash like a dog, past other people.”

— You were sent for court-ordered psychiatric evaluations three times at the Republican Scientific and Practical Center for Mental Health — the place people call “Novinki.” At least there’s a bed, right?

— In the psych ward, I could almost say I rested. There was a bed, bedding, and I could lie down. They did make you wear this awful 1972-era gown and robe, and flip-flops size 42. But at least I could rest and sleep. The first time, during the investigation from pre-trial detention, they brought me for the full 21 days. Later, already from the colony, they’d bring me for just a week and then send me back.

— It's clear the guards hated you for resisting. Did the doctors in the loony ward sympathize at all? They weren't punishers, after all.

— I looked for a word to describe these doctors. The only one I could find was "worthless." They play the role of doctors, but in reality, they're just like the guards. They'd ask, "Would you like to talk to the psychiatrist about your family?" I'd answer, "Let's talk about the family of Lukashenko instead."

In the summer of 2024, during the last court-ordered psychiatric evaluation, they took me to the dentist. They handcuffed me from behind and attached a leash — like an old twisted phone cord. Imagine this: the end of the leash is in the hand of a female officer, and she walks me out of the building where I was held to another building, with a male officer nearby. They led me on a leash like a dog past ordinary people and cars — ten minutes there, ten minutes back. Those were the only minutes of summer 2024 that I spent walking among trees under the open sky.

— It all seems designed around a single principle: endless humiliation for no reason, with no purpose at all.

— That doesn't even cover it. And it's not like some particular colony, SHIZO, or temporary detention facility was especially notorious — the abuse and humiliation are everywhere; it's how the system works. In the SHIZO, inmates used to be allowed to access their bags once a day in a separate room — to use something like deodorant or lotion (political prisoners, of course, were only allowed to do this while in handcuffs). Since May 2023, guards have allowed inmates to use deodorant or any personal item only once a week, on the so-called "bath day," when they take them to wash. Razors have also been banned since then, although inmates were previously allowed to use them on bath day.

At the Rechytsa temporary detention facility, they used to issue mattresses at night — now they don't. You have to sleep on the bare floor, and several

times during the night, they make you get up: you have to go to the door and identify yourself.

In the cell, three powerful lamps shine constantly, and at night they turn on a fourth — a "nightlight." Under that glare, you twist on the floor trying to block the light with your hair, shirt, and socks. And the guards say, "It's not us, it's an order from the Ministry of Internal Affairs."

In the Gomel pre-trial detention center, women had their belongings taken away, so they didn't even have spare underwear. During menstruation, while the only pair was being washed and dried, they had to sit with just rags between their legs. Others weren't allowed to lie down at night — they had to stand or sit. Meanwhile, murderers slept peacefully on mattresses. Honestly, I can't even say there's one place that's worse than another. That is the system. Torture, humiliation, and abuse — it's everywhere.

— Last year, everyone was sure you'd be released: the criminal-executive inspection even came to your mother shortly before your sentence ended to ask if she had any objections to you living with her. And then, on the eve of your release, you are suddenly back in pre-trial detention, with an extra year added.

— They didn't just stage that farce last year; they did it the year before as well. In Rechytsa, shortly before my "release date," they even held a court session that imposed two years of preventive supervision on me. They sent my mother inquiries about me living in her apartment, and in the colony, they handed me printouts of job openings from the employment office so I could "plan" my future work. But instead of release, they added one more year. In 2024, they didn't even bother with the preventive supervision show — they just moved me to the SHIZO the day before I was supposed to get out.

— And when your family came the next day to meet you, they found out you were back in the SHIZO. I remember them rushing into town to buy groceries

to send you a package, only to find out that the scoundrels had already sent you a bag of rotten apples, using up the monthly quota.

— Those weren't apples. It was feed carrots.

Lukashenko's Slaves and the Hostage Market

— One former political prisoner said that in the colony for repeat offenders in Rechytsa, it's actually morally easier for political prisoners. In the Gomel colony, "first-time" prisoners are easier to intimidate, easier to manipulate, and can be forced to create a hostile environment for political inmates. In Rechytsa, however, the inmates are seasoned "multi-time" convicts, whom the administration can't control so easily.

— That's true. The population there is completely different. It's much harder to "bend" them. Moreover, the vast majority are held under Article 174 of the Criminal Code. It's a feudal-type article — "parents evading child support or reimbursement of state expenses for child maintenance." From UN platforms, the government loudly proclaims that there is no slavery and that it fights human trafficking, but in reality, these women are the regime's slaves. They fill all the gaps; they maintain the cleanliness of Belarusian streets. The system is simple: children are taken away, then pay up, reimburse the state.

These women are generally undereducated, often struggle with alcohol dependence, and have no concept that a person might have any rights. They are assigned the harshest, lowest-paid jobs, and 70 percent of their earnings are seized as reimbursement to the state.

I met many women in the colony who hauled stones in the fields, worked at sawmills, and carried heavy loads — only to be left with a mere 20 rubles (about six euros) after paying the state.

And with 20 rubles, they still had to cover at least utilities and buy food.

Eventually, they quit these jobs, got charged under Article 174, and were sent back to the colony. The sentences there are short — six months to a year — but these women keep returning, five to seven times. They get out, their local officer finds them work, and again — payment to the state, with whatever remains barely enough for a pack of cigarettes and a small bag of candy.

In the end, these women often prefer to return to the colony, where at least they are fed. They can't even afford shampoo and have to wash with soap. There's no way out of this cycle. Women under Article 174 are Lukashenko's slaves.

— Did you hope this time you'd be released? Or were you afraid they'd take you back to the SHIZO at the last minute?

— I'm not naïve; I understood perfectly well that, formally, they could even let me out of the gates — and there'd be some "particular car" waiting. Or, shortly, I could face a charge for "violating supervision conditions." I used to think that if they released me, I'd have to leave the country within an hour — sometimes a shark lets its prey go to catch it again more easily. I eventually decided to trust the professionals who helped me evacuate. Once free, I got to stay at home for a while. I finally bought bananas, which I hadn't seen in four years. I just lay on the couch and thought: getting up, going to the fridge, opening the door, and freely taking something — that's pure happiness!

— They imprisoned you while the protests were still ongoing, independent media were still operating, and political prisoners numbered in the hundreds, not thousands.

— Not in the country. Rather, beyond its borders. I was surprised that the ICC (International Criminal Court) issued an arrest warrant for Putin, while Lukashenko seems not to be considered a criminal. I was surprised that

Lukashenko's security forces still haven't been recognized as terrorist organizations. I was surprised that the trade continues: even the colonies are stacked with crates of European products dated from last year or the year before. I was surprised that people still talk to Lukashenko. They celebrate the release of a few dozen hostages while failing to notice that hundreds more are still being thrown into prison. Belarus has turned into a hostage exchange market — and over 30 years, Lukashenko has perfected the trade like no one else.

FARID TUHBATULLIN

Turkmenistan

Chairman of Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, an underground activist network that gathers independent and reliable information on the current state of human rights in Turkmenistan. He is also the editor of the website Chronicles of Turkmenistan, which disseminates the findings of the network to the international community.

Imprisoned in 2002 following a crackdown on opposition and civil society leaders, Tuhbatullin was forced upon his release to flee Turkmenistan for exile in Vienna, Austria, where he currently directs the operations of his network and website. The author of numerous reports commissioned by multilateral organizations, including the UN Human Rights Council, he is a leading figure in bringing the world's attention to human rights violations in Turkmenistan.

Tuhbatullin is a Reagan Fascell Democracy Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy from March 2010 to July 2010. During his fellowship, Tuhbatullin is examining how exiled activists can influence the politics of closed regimes, using the experience of Turkmenistan as his primary case study.

“I HAD TO SWEAR ON THE RUHNAMA”

Human rights activist Farid Tuhbatullin learned about his release from the Ashgabat prison thanks to his cellmate’s radio. The cellmate, General Kabulov, had once overseen this detention facility, and out of respect, the staff had allowed him to keep a radio in his cell.

Before that, there was an accusation of plotting to assassinate the president of Turkmenistan — a conspiracy allegedly discussed with his participation at a conference of the International Helsinki Federation, then followed surveillance by security services, escape, an assassination attempt, protection by a special forces unit — and endless work: painstakingly gathering information about repression at home, piece by piece, and trying to draw the attention of weary international organizations to Turkmenistan.

Farid Tuhbatullin was lucky: unlike others arrested in the assassination attempt case against Turkmenbashi, he came out of prison alive.

There are places on the world map that humanity has all but forgotten — closed-off, dangerous countries where something terrible is happening. People disappear without a trace there, and getting in is difficult. Not that there’s any reason to go.

These countries are, in people’s minds, already ringed with barbed wire. Human rights defenders and journalists aren’t allowed in. It’s impossible to count the number of political prisoners — and even if it were possible, there’s no one there to do it. The best insight into what’s happening inside these sealed-off dictatorships comes from the stories of people who have lived and worked there, tried to change things, ended up in prison, and then, of course, fled.

Farid Tuhbatullin first landed in prison on charges of plotting against President Niyazov, then went into exile, and later lived under the protection of an Austrian special police unit because of death threats.

Turkmenbashi and Little Vera

When perestroika began, along with the loud exposés of the party leaders in the Central Asian republics, people in Turkmenistan also believed that change was irreversible and that freedom was about to arrive everywhere. "The Cotton Affair," "Adylovshchina" — these were perestroika-era phrases known to everyone. Newspapers finally began to write about how, for all those years, Central Asian republics had essentially been living under feudalism. Everyone was forced to pick cotton — the sick, the pregnant, the disabled, and the elderly alike. If you wanted to survive, you went.

In the Turkmen SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic), cotton feudalism never reached the extremes seen in Uzbekistan, and the republic escaped with just a few token dismissals. Two regional party secretaries were removed from their posts, including in the Tashauz region (now **Dashoguz velayat**), where Farid Tuhbatullin lived.

"In our region, they removed the first secretary and the second," Farid recalls. "The second one was always, by tradition, some Russian uncle, an outsider — that's how it was in all the Asian republics. They turned his official residence into a kindergarten. And that was the end of it. Perhaps the violations here weren't as severe as in Uzbekistan, or perhaps the investigators never got around to us — either way, Turkmenistan escaped with little more than a slap on the wrist. It's also possible that Moscow at some point realized that if they kept digging, they'd have to imprison everyone — and not only in Central Asia."

Farid is a mechanical engineer specializing in land reclamation. During perestroika, he worked in the Ministry of Water Resources system and moved in educated circles. So when the referendum on preserving the USSR came, he voted "no": he believed that Turkmenistan had not only enough natural wealth but also enough human resources to build a prosperous, independent country with a standard of living comparable to Kuwait's.

In the beginning, it seemed like anything was possible. Young, educated Turkmen were riding a wave of cautious euphoria. Saparmurat Niyazov had gone from being the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Turkmen SSR to the president of an independent nation. But he hadn't yet littered the country with golden statues of himself.

The first warning sign came from a completely apolitical direction.

"They were supposed to show Little Vera — a symbol of perestroika-era cinema — on central television broadcast from Moscow. But Niyazov went on air and said that Turkmen would not be watching such a thing. During the broadcast, Turkmenistan's TV signal was cut off without warning. And after that, everything started rolling downhill very quickly. But at the time, the scale of the tragedy was impossible to imagine.

"You see, back in Soviet times, they drilled into our heads that Turkmen were wild and uneducated. Maybe there was some truth to that. But we had a military democracy — we elected our commanders, and if one failed to meet expectations, we replaced him. When Russia came to colonize the Turkmen — first as an empire, then as a Bolshevik state — its primary goal was to make sure we understood one thing: the leader is singular and untouchable, and no one may ever doubt him.

"In countries colonized by, say, Great Britain, people were taught to obey the law. In countries colonized by Russia, people were taught to obey orders. We're still paying the price for that today."

The Seal, Split in Two

Still, it would take some time before the consequences became clear. Turkmen were, for the moment, riding a wave of euphoria over the promise of change and reform. In the early 1990s, Farid Tuhbatullin stepped down

from the Ministry of Water Resources to launch the Dashoguz Ecological Club, a community-based environmental group. The north of Turkmenistan lay within an environmental crisis zone caused by the shrinking of the Aral Sea, once the fourth-largest lake in the world.

The Turkmen Ministry of Justice officially registered the group, and for the first few years, Farid and other environmentalists were able to work without interference. They attended conferences in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia. But soon, all Turkmen civic activists began to feel the tightening grip of state control.

"Maybe I should have kept my head down and tried to ride it out," Farid says. "But then I had this crazy idea — we started publishing a printed bulletin. There was no digital technology back then; we just printed small booklets about environmental issues."

At the time, there was a fuel crisis — gasoline had vanished from filling stations. Those working at gas stations would siphon fuel off to their homes or relatives' houses, selling it later for a hefty markup. Nearly every house on a street close to Farid's home had become a makeshift gas station. The signal was simple: if an empty canister stood out front, it meant fuel was for sale. And the storage conditions? Dangerous beyond imagination. If one place caught fire, the entire street would be in flames within seconds.

Farid wrote an article about it for the bulletin. Not long after, he found himself summoned to meet with the head of the city branch of the KNB (National Security Committee). Farid suspects the official was protecting the illegal trade. The chief warned that he would shut down the organization.

I told him, "Here's the imprint from our bulletin, here's our registration certificate. You can't shut us down — only a court can do that."

But instead, they took him to the police department — straight to the office responsible for destroying seals. There, they took the official stamp of the organization and split it into two.

“That’s it,” they said.

> “No more ecological club. No legal entity. You’re nobody.”

Farid went to the capital, knocking on every possible door. One of those was the OSCE mission, headed at the time by Romanian diplomat Paraschiva Badescu. She told him he should speak at the OSCE Economic Forum in Prague, and she arranged the trip for him and two other activists.

In Prague, Farid Tuhbatullin met Batyr Berdyev, Turkmenistan’s representative to the OSCE, who also served as the country’s ambassador to Austria. “We got along well,” Farid later recalled. “The ambassador even invited me to lunch.”

Two years later, the two men would find themselves in the same prison, accused of conspiring to assassinate Turkmenbashi. Berdyev was sentenced to 25 years. No one would hear from him again; human rights defenders would later recognize him as a victim of enforced disappearance. Before the trial and sentencing, though, Farid and Batyr would cross paths one last time in a prison corridor — one being led to interrogation, the other back to his cell.

After returning from Prague, Tuhbatullin was summoned by the Minister of Justice. It was clear the authorities had not yet decided what to do with the environmentalist, and they were operating in “preventive mode.”

The minister asked why the Ecological Club’s bulletins contained no references to Turkmenbashi’s works or quotations. “Because,” Farid replied, “the president has never spoken on environmental issues.” The minister pressed further: why, in children’s booklets about local wildlife, were there no quotes from Turkmenbashi? “Because,” Farid said, “he’s never said anything about animals either.”

In the end, Farid was let go without incident — and the authorities even restored the club's official seal. The Dashoguz Ecological Club was once again legal, just as before.

"How Many Pages of the Ruhnama Has Gulshirin Read?"

By then, Farid was no longer the same as before. He had realized that all it took was the whim of an official — whether a minister or the head of the city branch of the KNB — and both the organization and its members could be wiped out overnight. He began studying human rights, determined to be ready for any situation in a country rapidly sliding back into a medieval-style dictatorship.

He attended a human rights school in Poland. "It was an incredibly valuable program," he recalls. "I learned a lot of important things there."

"I got my visa in Moscow," Farid says. "Back in 1993, at the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) summit in Ashgabat, Yeltsin and Niyazov signed an agreement on dual citizenship. After the signing, Niyazov ceremonially handed Yeltsin a green Turkmen passport. Anyone born in Russia or of ethnic Russian descent was eligible to apply for Russian citizenship. My wife was born in the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic), so she qualified and got hers. I received mine later, through family reunification. With Turkmenistan enforcing visa requirements for every country on the map — including its fellow CIS states — a Russian passport became a much-needed ticket to easier travel. I would go to Moscow, get my visa there, and then head to Europe from the Russian capital."

In the early years, Farid says, even within the security services, there were still perfectly reasonable people who genuinely didn't understand what

non-governmental organizations were or how they operated. After his trip to the human rights school in Poland, instead of being summoned to the security office, he was invited to a café. There, they asked him to explain what these "NGOs" were all about.

There seemed to be no hostility — just genuine curiosity and an attempt to understand whether such groups could pose a threat to Turkmenistan's security, or perhaps have no impact at all. Or maybe it was simply one of the security services' familiar games: "We're not your enemies — just help us understand how this works." According to Farid, such games were played by the security services in nearly every post-Soviet country.

At the end of 2002, after another trip to Europe, Farid Tuhbatullin stayed in Russia for a couple of extra days — he'd been invited to speak at a conference near Moscow titled Human Rights and Security Issues in Turkmenistan, organized by Memorial and the International Helsinki Federation. Farid was the only speaker from Turkmenistan who still lived there. The others — human rights advocates from international organizations — would return home after the conference, not fly back to Turkmenistan. But Farid was going back.

"After I got home to Dashoguz, I was immediately summoned to the KNB office — by then it had already been renamed the MNB, the Ministry of National Security," Farid recalls. "The chief told me I'd have to go to Ashgabat to give testimony, and then I'd be allowed to return. They drove me home so I could grab my passport. I left a note so that if I didn't come back, my relatives would know where to look for me. Then they took me to the local airport. Ours is a small town — I wasn't in handcuffs, but everyone knows each other, and word gets around fast. I could already see people avoiding me. On the plane, one of my escorts sat next to me and immediately launched into a speech about what an incredible karate and martial arts master he was — apparently to make sure I didn't even think about trying to escape. As if there's anywhere to run on a plane."

By then, Farid suspected he wasn't just being taken to "give testimony." He was only glad that a year earlier, he'd sent his family to Russia. In Ufa, they had relatives who owned a small vacant apartment. Farid had determined that his children wouldn't have to finish school in Turkmenistan, where Ruhnama, the "great and all-encompassing" work of Turkmenbashi, formed the core of every subject.

He often described how that worked. For example, a math textbook problem might read: "On the first day, the girl Gulshirin read 15 pages of the Ruhnama. On the second day, she read 17 pages, and on the third day, 22 pages. How many pages of the Ruhnama did Gulshirin read in three days?"

Goat Paths from Uzbekistan and Generals in a Cell

In Ashgabat, where the security services had told Farid he was only expected to give some official testimony and then return home, he was sent straight to a detention facility. At first, he thought it might be some intimidation tactic — a campaign to crush NGOs. Detain a few people, and the rest will self-censor, lying low for years, if not forever. Farid didn't yet know that in that very prison and in the National Security offices, volumes of criminal case files were swelling before his eyes — files accusing people of an anti-state conspiracy and plotting to assassinate the dictator.

"In the cell I was put into, there was just one other person," Farid recalls. "By the standard logic of Soviet-era detective stories, I immediately assumed he was planted — there to provoke me into confessing to something unknown or just to make my life unbearable. Can you imagine? It turned out this was the very man who had secretly smuggled Boris Shikhmuradov back into Turkmenistan!"

Boris Shikhmuradov had served as Turkmenistan's foreign minister and later as its ambassador to China. In November 2001, he publicly declared his turn to open opposition, forming the People's Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan and launching the opposition website Gundogar. Nobody knew that after making a high-profile statement abroad and failing to return to Ashgabat, Shikhmuradov had secretly re-entered Turkmenistan.

On November 25, 2002, Turkmen state media (the only media there was) reported an assassination attempt on President Saparmurat Niyazov. A KAMAZ truck had driven toward the presidential motorcade and opened fire. As the Prosecutor General of Turkmenistan, Kurbanbibi Atadjanova, later told a government session: "The enemy's bullet did not reach our beloved Serdar, the Great Saparmurat Turkmenbashi. The Almighty protected him from the treacherous shot and preserved him for us." (Atadjanova herself would be arrested for corruption in 2006 and sent to Farid's hometown of Dashoguz, to a women's prison.)

Niyazov blamed the assassination attempt, as dictators often do, on "fugitives." In addition to Shikhmuradov, the other accused included former Ambassador to Turkey Nurmukhamed Khanamov, former Deputy Minister of Agriculture Saparmurat Yklymov, and former Central Bank head Khudaiberdy Orazov — all of whom were residing abroad. Meanwhile, in Turkmenistan, the authorities began arresting anyone already "on the radar" of the security services. Among them was Farid Tuhbatullin.

"My cellmate Davlet used to be the head of an oil depot in a border district with Uzbekistan," Farid recalls. "Back then, we had a practice of bartering goods with Uzbekistan. Niyazov would set a cotton collection quota — completely impossible to achieve for obvious reasons — and our officials would strike a deal with the Uzbeks: we'll give you diesel or gasoline, and you give us cotton. The oil depot chief himself was the one in charge of transporting the fuel. He knew all the backroads and secret paths. The officials arranging the exchanges didn't want to involve the border

guards because they were part of the National Security Ministry. And so, using these secret paths, my cellmate brought Boris Shikhmuradov into Turkmenistan from Uzbekistan. Later, they put Yklym Yklymov — the brother of Saparmurat Yklymov — into our cell as well.

Their cell had previously been just a storage room: it had a barred window but no glass, and no bunks or beds — detainees were brought in with whatever they had. I assume the other cells were already overflowing with people accused of the assassination attempt on Niyazov. Yklym Yklymov — who had secretly hosted Shikhmuradov at his home — had been severely beaten. Davlet and I weren't beaten; we were arrested later. Those who were taken on November 25 were beaten badly. Later, I would share a cell with another young detainee, a kid who didn't understand what he was accused of. They electrocuted him and tortured him with the "elephant" method — the "elephant" being a torture technique where a gas mask is placed on the victim and the hose is clamped, cutting off the air supply.

The charge against me was that I knew about an alleged assassination plot against Saparmurat Niyazov, supposedly discussed at a human rights conference near Moscow, and did not report it to the security services. But, as I later explained, the conference was organized by a completely different opposition group — the United Opposition of Turkmenistan, led by Avdy Kuliev. So even if I had wanted to cooperate with the investigators, I had nothing to tell them.

"Later, I shared a cell with the head of the international protocol service — a good guy, from my region. He knew my father well; back in the day, my dad had been the chief physician at the polyclinic of the Fourth Department of the Ministry of Health, treating the 'big shots.' Then they transferred me to a cell with General Kabulov, the first commander of Turkmenistan's border troops. He was also a very good, polite man — always addressed me formally.

"Then, as the trial approached, I realized my entire criminal case boiled down to a failure to report — a maximum of three years, which seemed light.

So they decided to 'add' illegal border crossing. The thing is, our Dashoguz region and Uzbekistan's Khorezm region had a sort of minor border-movement arrangement: we could visit for three days without a visa, and vice versa. Border guards would not only stamp passports but also record the visit in a logbook. Once, returning from such a short trip, a young border guard forgot to log me. As a result, they told me I had crossed the border illegally. The passport stamp didn't matter — the logbook entry was the official record, and it was missing."

"Me and My Fellow 'Terrorists'"

The trial was swift. Not a single defense witness was allowed, even though participants of that conference near Moscow — members of Memorial and the International Helsinki Federation — wanted to come and testify, to confirm that no one had ever discussed assassinating the president of Turkmenistan at any session. Their letters to the court, of course, went unanswered.

In court, Farid asked, "At least bring some prosecution witnesses! Let someone say that I, for example, was present during a conversation about assassination plans or that I crossed the border illegally." The reply was always the same: no need, the court understands everything.

During a recess, his lawyer whispered that an OSCE official had visited Niyazov, and there might be a chance to get a suspended sentence and leave the courtroom if Farid pleaded guilty. He didn't. He was sentenced to three years in prison. Compared to the 15–25-year sentences the other defendants received, it seemed relatively light.

What torture Boris Shikhmuradov endured remains unknown. He was arrested on December 25, 2002, and just three days later, his sentence was

announced: first 25 years, then, only a few hours later, life imprisonment. The sentence was rewritten at Niyazov's request. Since then, no one has heard anything about Shikhmuradov.

Interestingly, two years later, a book allegedly authored by Shikhmuradov appeared briefly on the shelves of Turkmen bookstores: "Me and My Fellow Terrorists." Human rights defenders around the world launched the 2013 campaign "Show Them Alive!" demanding proof that political prisoners who disappeared from jails were still alive. But nobody showed them alive — or dead.

"After the verdict, my lawyer said we had ten days to file an appeal," Farid recalls. "He came to see me in detention several times, but we weren't allowed to work on the appeal. The days were slipping away, and time was almost up. So I wrote the appeal myself on a piece of paper and handed it to a guard.

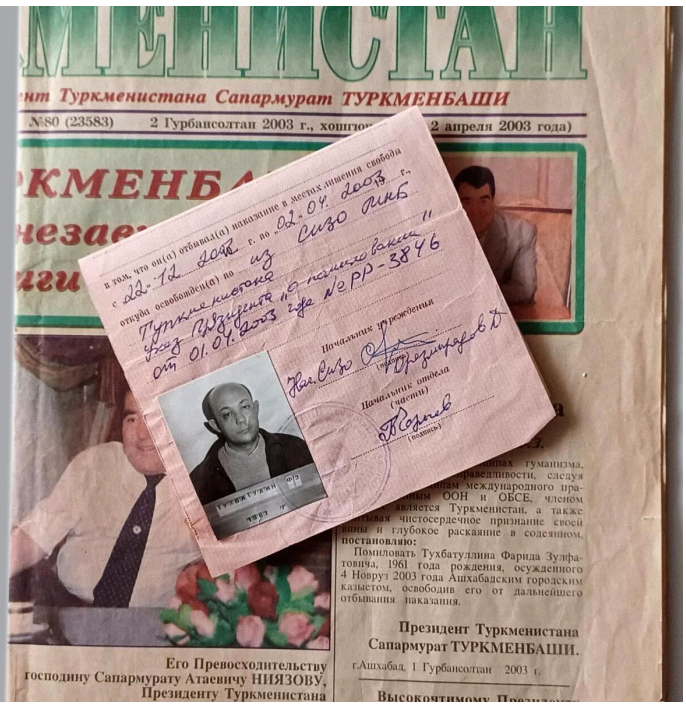
"After that, the prison warden called me in, offered me tea and coffee, and said: 'Why bother with these appeals? Better write a full confession, and things will go easier for you. Otherwise, they'll send you away on a transfer, and we won't be responsible for what happens to you. Who knows what they'll do to you? And don't think you'll be out in three years — they will find another charge.'"

Farid refused. He asked that the cassation appeal he had written be sent as required. Just in case, he packed his things in the cell, expecting a transfer. A week later, he was summoned to the investigator. Farid even remembered the investigator's last name: Khizhuk. He took out a sheet of paper from a typewriter with a pre-written full confession of guilt. He said that Farid had to copy it by hand, word for word. Moreover, he added, "I didn't come up with or write this; it was sent to us from the President's administration. The decision has already been made. You sign it today — you'll be free tomorrow."

Farid asked for a day to think it over. He returned to his cell and told everything to his cellmate — at that time, he was sharing the cell with General Akmurad

Kabulov, the former head of Turkmenistan's State Border Service. Before leading the Border Service, Kabulov had served as the first deputy head of the KNB, giving him an intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the security apparatus. The general said, "Don't even think about it — sign it. Who benefits if you stay behind bars? Your family? And what will happen to them, the relatives of an enemy of the people, have you thought about that?"

Farid didn't sleep all night. In the morning, he was summoned again. He painstakingly transcribed by hand the confession that had been carefully prepared for him the day before, then returned to his cell. There were no radios in the detention center except for Kabulov's. When he had served as first deputy head of the KNB, Kabulov had overseen this very detention facility. So he was guarded by his former staff. And indeed, Kabulov's radio worked — though it only picked up Ashgabat broadcasts, even that was important.



Clemency certificate

One evening, Farid heard a broadcast announcing his pardon. The message stated that he had been released and was already at home. The next morning, he was summoned with his belongings, forced to swear on the Ruhnama, and sign documents committing not to meet with foreigners, not to break the law, not to go, and especially not to travel without the permission of a security officer. Farid was ordered to return to Dashoguz.

"Remember, your parents and brothers are hostages."

In June 2003, Turkmenistan unilaterally ended its dual-citizenship agreement with Russia. The government gave the country's citizens two months to choose: either renounce their Turkmen citizenship and move to Russia, or forfeit their Russian citizenship and stay in Turkmenistan.

Farid called the officer assigned to oversee the process and asked whether he would be allowed to leave the country if he renounced his Turkmen citizenship. His family was in Russia, travel was prohibited, and he couldn't see his loved ones — so renouncing citizenship seemed the simpler option. The officer wasn't prepared for the question and promised to consult his superiors.

A few days later, the officer called back and said, "We're willing to let you go to Russia to see your wife and children for ten days, no more. But remember — your parents and brothers are hostages. They stay here. Think of them and don't do anything foolish."

My father then told me, "Don't come back. They won't harm us, but your life won't be safe here. You're the head of the family — think of your children, think of what you can do for your country if you stay where you can speak freely."

I went to my family, who were in Ufa, and received an invitation from the OSCE to come to Vienna and speak. The OSCE had advocated strongly on my behalf while I was in prison. In Vienna, a major conference on the human dimension was taking place, and as part of it, I gave a small briefing to a group of diplomats. I spoke about what was happening in the prisons, about how prisoners were tortured, and about how hundreds were arrested allegedly for plotting against Niyazov. Afterwards, two Austrians approached me and said that an employee of the Turkmen embassy had been present in the room where the briefing took place and would report everything to Ashgabat. "You must not return," they said. "It's better to apply for asylum. If you go back to your homeland, we won't be able to get you out of prison a second time." And I made my decision. Two months later, I was granted refugee status.

When Farid was arrested, his brother, the deputy military commissar of the city, was immediately fired. His father was also "asked" to leave his job; he had already retired from his position as chief physician of a clinic, but continued working as a radiologist. There was, in a sense, "nowhere left" to exact revenge on the family. True, they still smashed windows at the house and staged petty provocations, but primarily out of inertia. Farid Tuhbatullin exhaled and lowered his defenses. That was a mistake.

In 2010, he was approached by officers from "Cobra," an Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior counterterrorism unit created after the 1972 Munich Olympics attack. They warned Farid that an assassination attempt was being prepared against him and placed him under protection. The neighbors grew frightened — to them, the permanent police post outside his home was a sign of danger. Eventually, Farid asked for the protection to be withdrawn.

Instead, he was given several security lessons: for example, never sit by a window when entering a café, and in any location, quickly identify areas within a line of fire. In short, after these sessions, Farid felt more afraid than he had upon first hearing of the planned attack.

Now he knows for sure: you can never relax, no matter how many years have passed. Dictatorships have long memories, and counting on "time will pass — they'll forget" is both foolish and dangerous. I have heard of assassination attempts against human rights defenders and journalists from Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, even after they had seemingly been living safely in other countries. Vigilance, caution, and distrust — as grim as it sounds — are essential for survival anywhere if the dictatorship you escaped has marked you as an enemy.

In Austria, immediately after receiving asylum, Farid registered the NGO Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. He collects information on human rights violations and writes reports for international organizations. He also runs the website Chronicles of Turkmenistan. It is not hard to guess that Tuhbatullin has plenty of work. But the most challenging part is not systematizing, not compiling reports, not knocking on every door to urge attention to the situation in Turkmenistan — it is obtaining information from a country where any contact with a foreigner or an "enemy of the people" in exile can land someone in prison for a long time, and possibly make them disappear there altogether.

The exact number of political prisoners in Turkmenistan's prisons is unknown. No such statistics exist. Likewise, the number of those who have died or been killed is unknown: the Show Them Alive initiative lists as victims of enforced disappearances those prisoners with whom there has been no contact for years or even decades. Human rights defenders have documented 162 such cases. Sometimes a person turns out to be alive: for example, the opposition figure Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, who had been included on the list, was found to be alive. He was arrested in 2008 and sentenced to 11 years in prison, allegedly for illegally crossing the border. He served his entire term in solitary confinement under incommunicado conditions. When his term ended, the authorities added another five years in a penal settlement for Annaniyazov, and only then did people learn that he was alive.

Incidentally, before his arrest, Annaniyazov lived in Norway, where he had political asylum. He returned to Turkmenistan in 2008, when, after Niyazov's death, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov came to power — he believed in the end of dictatorship and the coming changes. From time to time, officials from the Turkmenistan embassy in Austria also approach Farid Tuhbatullin and offer him to return: "If you come, you'll see your family, and no one will touch you," they say.

Farid will not go.


UNITED NATIONS OFFICE
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HAUT COMMISSARIAT
DES NATIONS UNIES
AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME
STOP
uyghur
genocide

GULBAHAR JALILOVA

Uyghur camp survivor

Kazakh citizen who took refuge in France, a survivor of the internment campsin China intended in particular for Uyghurs.

From May 2017 to September 2018, she was detained for 15 months in a so-called “re-education” camp in Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang without reason.

After leaving the camp, she was threatened by police officers, who told her that if she spoke, they would find her, wherever she was in the world.

She went into exile in Turkey then requested asylum in France, where she obtained political refugee status. Gulbahar Jalilova is one of the first victims to testify about what she experienced in the concentration camps intended for Muslim populations in China, which led to her being harassed and threatened.

KALBINUR SIDIK

Uyghur civil activist

Uyghur activist who was forced to flee Xinjiang after experiencing China's full-fledged persecution of her people in the region.

Born in Urumqi, Sidik became a Mandarin teacher at a local primary school in 1999. After decades as an educator, she was coerced into teaching at two "reeducation camps" in 2016.There she witnessed rampant abuse, torture, and sexual violence of fellow Uyghurs, though she was barred from sharing what she saw under the threat that her and her family would be sent to camps themselves.

After receiving tubal ligation surgery in 2019, Sidik was finally granted permission by Chinese authorities to travel to The Netherlands to receive medical treatment. However, she would never return.

Despite ongoing threats and harassment by Chinese authorities, Sidik continues to speak out on the atrocities being committed at the camps and the broader persecution of Uyghurs in China.

THE UYGHUR STORY

Like every former inmate, I pay particular attention to those who have been through prisons and penal colonies. But recently, I met women who had survived something far worse — real concentration camps.

That is happening in China. Uyghurs are being held in prison there — between two and three million, according to various estimates.

Do you know what a "black room" is, or a "tiger chair"? I didn't either — until I learned that these are torture devices and methods used inside the Chinese camps.

One of my heroines, Gulbahar Jalilova, a citizen of Kazakhstan, was kidnapped during a business trip to China and spent a year and a half inside a camp. The other, a schoolteacher named Kalbinur Sidik, was ordered by the Chinese Communist Party to teach Mandarin — first in a men's camp, and then in a women's camp.

Gulbahar was raped and beaten. Kalbinur was forcibly sterilized. Both endured a kind of hell that is nearly impossible to read about — yet everyone must read it.

Survivors of Xinjiang

The story of two Uyghur women from China's camps: one was raped and tortured, the other forcibly sterilized.

It seems almost unimaginable that in the twenty-first century, concentration camps could still exist. And yet they do — not as relics of a distant past, but as fully functioning institutions. In Xinjiang, in China's far northwest, where

the Uyghur people live, such camps were built explicitly for them. Later, the Chinese authorities tried to disguise them with euphemisms, calling them "educational centers."

Two women whose stories I tell here lived through those camps. Gulbahar, a citizen of Kazakhstan, was taken prisoner. Kalbinur, a schoolteacher living in China, was ordered by the Communist Party to teach Chinese — first in a men's camp, then in a women's. Yet she, too, was in effect a captive, subjected to forced sterilization, like hundreds of thousands of other Uyghur women. Gulbahar endured torture and rape, the same fate suffered by countless others.

Human rights groups and survivors estimate that between two and three million Uyghurs are being held in these camps. The true number is known to no one. Official China, of course, offers nothing but silence. But this is happening now — in our time, on our planet.

What follows are the stories of two women who not only survived but found the strength to bear witness. That alone is extraordinary. Not everyone could.

GULBAHAR

"No crying, no talking allowed"

Gulbahar Jalilova is a Uyghur from Kazakhstan. She was born and raised in the Soviet Union, in the Almaty region, the only daughter in a large family with six brothers. After finishing technical school, she worked in food service, got married, and in the 1990s went into business for herself. In 1995, she traveled to China for the first time to buy goods. At the time, everything from China — shoes, clothes, handbags, underwear — was being brought back and sold successfully. At first, Gulbahar sold all of it, but later she began to "specialize."

"I started with handbags, then switched to shoes," Gulbahar recalls. "I used to import shoes from China to Kazakhstan by the truckload — literally by the

KAMAZ (heavy truck). Then, in 2010, I moved on to jewelry. I never had any problems with the Chinese. I never even thought about trouble — neither at home nor in China. I never broke the law, I paid my taxes, and I had my business officially registered. I felt perfectly safe.

"Although around 2014, things started getting strange. For example, in Guangzhou, where I often went to buy goods, Uyghurs were no longer allowed to check into hotels. They were simply turned away. I had a Kazakh passport, so it didn't affect me, but Chinese Uyghurs were flatly refused at the hotels.

"And by 2015, when I went to the Chinese consulate to apply for visas, they began warning us: don't talk to the local Uyghurs, just stick to your business — come, buy, leave. They also warned that officials might come to the hotel at night to check documents. 'Don't be alarmed,' they told me, 'just show your visa and that's all.'"

Gulbahar never struck up conversations with anyone, just as the consulate had warned her. Still, vague rumors and hushed whispers seemed to follow her on every trip. One day, an Uyghur loader might be working at the warehouse, and the next day, he would be gone. Disappeared — and no one knew what had happened. Or rather, everyone guessed, but no one dared to say it out loud. Eventually, a phrase began to circulate: "taken for study." It was a euphemism — "study" meant the camps. The word itself was never spoken, but everyone understood. Gulbahar traveled to China every two or three months and felt safe. She even admitted later that she thought the Uyghurs were to blame themselves: maybe they got into fights, or behaved improperly, so she reasoned, they were arrested for misconduct. Later, inside the camp, she would tell her cellmates: "Girls, I don't regret ending up here. Otherwise, I never would have learned the truth."

On May 21, 2017, Gulbahar made another trip to China. This time to Ürümqi, a city in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. She checked into a hotel, planning to head out early the next morning to buy merchandise. She planned to leave around nine o'clock. Shortly before then, there was a knock

on her door. Gulbahar didn't even feel nervous — after all, the consulate had warned her that the police might show up for a routine check.

"I opened the door, and three people were standing there," she recalled. "One woman and two men. They were in plain clothes, but they showed me their IDs. They asked for my passport, but it was at the hotel reception — passports are surrendered there when you check in. So we went downstairs. I only took my phone and the key to my room. They retrieved my passport, but didn't even open it. One of the officers, a Kazakh named Abai, said: 'Please come with us, we just have a few questions.'"

Gulbahar was taken to the local Ministry of State Security (MSS) office. They led her to a room on the third floor, confiscated her phone, and carried it away. Four hours later — she had been sitting in that room the entire time — the phone was returned, but not directly: it was sealed in a bag with some writing on it. Again, they said, "Come with us." Gulbahar assumed they were letting her go. Instead, they led her to the basement.

There, along both sides of the corridor, were small interrogation rooms. Screams could be heard from some of them. Gulbahar was taken into a room. There stood the "tiger chair" — a torture device used in China. It is a metal chair with armrests and a small flat table attached, to which metal cuffs for the hands are fastened. The cuffs are then tightened, the table presses into the body, and the person sitting in the chair experiences suffocation and extreme pain.

Survivors among Tibetan and Uyghur prisoners of Chinese jails have spoken about these chairs. Yet Chinese officials at the United Nations claimed they exist solely for the comfort and safety of detainees.

"They interrogated me on that chair until eleven at night," Gulbahar recalls. "They said, 'If you don't want it to hurt, don't move.' They asked about my parents and children and demanded a detailed account of my entire life. They didn't give me water and wouldn't let me go to the bathroom. Then they

brought some paper written in Chinese and told me to sign it. I realized it was a trap I couldn't escape, so I refused. I demanded a lawyer and a translator.

They beat me badly, then said, 'You don't want to sign? Fine. We'll take you to a place where you'll sign everything yourself quickly.' At one in the morning, they took me to a camp in Ürümqi. They gave me a slip of paper with a long number that I had to memorize — my name and surname were gone; I was just a number now.

They took my clothes and gave me the prisoner uniform: a yellow T-shirt and gray sweatpants. They put five-kilogram shackles on my legs. They took photos, blood and urine samples (they check every woman's urine to see if she was pregnant; if so, they immediately force an abortion). Then they led me to Cell Number Four. It was seven meters long, three and a half meters wide, with forty girls inside. About twenty were standing in the aisle, the rest lying on narrow bunks, side by side, pressed together.

Every two hours, there was a shift: those who had been sleeping had to stand, and those who had been standing lay down. I started crying and screaming: 'Why am I here? I'm normal, just an ordinary person!' The cell guard told me, 'We're all normal here. No one is guilty. But you can't cry or talk, or they'll punish you and take you to the black room. We'll explain everything to you tomorrow.'"

Blue T-shirt — sentence; orange — death

The Chinese document that Gulbahar refused to sign was sent to her family in Kazakhstan. Her relatives didn't know Chinese, but they found Uyghurs who could read it. The translation revealed that it was an official accusation against Gulbahar of planning a terrorist attack. If she had signed it without reading it in the hope of being released, she would have faced the death penalty.

In 2017, no one outside China knew that camps for Uyghurs had been built. Gulbahar's children started writing letters to every possible authority: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the embassy, the UN Human Rights Committee. But they found no trace of their mother. Some letters did reach China, and authorities were searching for Gulbahar — though she had no idea about it.

A camp is total isolation. Even relatives of prisoners who were Chinese citizens had no idea where their loved ones were being held.

"I thought I would die there," Gulbahar says. "A year, three months, and ten days of torture, beatings, and sexual assault. Don't ask me how I was assaulted — I can't talk about it. After the camp, I spent six months in the hospital and treated depression for over a year. I can only tell you this: there were two designated places for sexual assaults — one in the basement, where interrogations took place, and one outside. If they take you to the basement, they might just beat you. But if they take you outside, it means you're being led to be assaulted. Every girl went through it. Right after I got out, I memorized 67 names — girls asked me:

> "If you survive and get out, tell everyone about us and what's happening here. Because even if we survive and leave, we'll still have to stay silent. We have no choice."

Every evening from seven to nine, the prisoners were required to sing the Chinese national anthem. It was the only time they could communicate — while some sang the song slowly, others whispered to each other. Communication in the camp was otherwise forbidden — not just talking, but even making eye contact. Inmates had to stare at a single point, eyes downcast, and remain silent. During these secret exchanges with prisoners who had been in the camp for a long time, Gulbahar learned that the yellow shirt indicated no sentence — those in yellow were being held without trial.

Blue meant the person had been tried and sentenced. And then there was orange. Gulbahar learned about orange from a cellmate who had been tasked with teaching her the words of the anthem.

“Everyone was singing the anthem, and she whispered to me: ‘See that girl in the orange shirt, not like ours? Orange means you’re marked for death. They don’t come back. They say they use them for organs. The ones in blue might serve their sentence and get out. But the ones in orange — they disappear.’ I looked around — there were four girls in orange T-shirts among us. Those girls never returned. Young, healthy girls. I asked her, ‘Will it be our turn to wear orange soon?’ I was sure we would all be killed sooner or later. And when they took us for interrogation, putting a sack over my head, I truly believed they were leading me to be killed.”

Prisoners could be taken for questioning at any hour of the day or night. Gulbahar herself was once interrogated for a full 24 hours, chained to the “tiger chair.” In front of her, they waved a paper written in Chinese and shouted:

“This says you were planning a terrorist attack! Tell us! Do you think Nazarbayev (the president of Kazakhstan at that time) will help you? No one will help you! Sign a confession, and we’ll release you — you can go home to Kazakhstan. Refuse to sign, and you’ll stay here, and no one will ever find you.”

Gulbahar refused to sign anything. She understood that, in any case — whether she signed or refused — she would remain in the camp. But if she signed, any chance of release would be gone. By refusing, there remained a tiny, almost invisible chance of freedom. Her intuition was correct. Her survival instinct kicked in, even though she surely wished to sign just to stop the beatings and assaults.

She will not speak about that part.

The Black Room

A typical day in the camp was simple. At 5:30 a.m., a siren wailed, signaling the start of another "wonderful" day. For those who were already standing at that hour, it was even a relief — they could finally sit on the narrow bunks. For those who had been sleeping for two hours, it was time to wake up and take their turn sitting. And so it went until evening. Sit, stare at one point, don't speak. Not even turn your head — doing so would get you beaten. The guards suspected that turning your head might accompany prayer.

At 8 a.m., washing was allowed — exactly 60 seconds per prisoner at the sink. Surveillance cameras monitored adherence to the time. From time to time, the guards would warn, "Don't think it's only us watching you. They're watching from Beijing, too!"

Even if the Uyghur women diligently stared at one point and didn't speak, they were still suspected of secretly praying. Several times a week, police — both men and women — entered the cell and forced everyone to strip naked and squat multiple times. Experienced prisoners explained to Gulbahar that this was how they searched for surahs and ayahs, in case anyone was trying to hide them.

"At 9 a.m., we were given food," Gulbahar Jalilova recalls. "Half a glass of water, a piece of yeast bread, and a bowl of porridge made from flour boiled in water. After that, the duty officer conducted a headcount and reported who was in the cell, who had been taken, and who had been brought in. At 12, lunch was served — the same porridge, maybe with a cucumber or a bit of cabbage. And at 7 p.m., the same again. Then we had to sing hymns for two hours. We weren't allowed to wash. We all got covered in sores and lice. After a month, they shaved all of us bald.

During the day, someone might be taken from the cell. If a girl returned the next day, it meant she'd been interrogated. If she didn't return, she'd been killed. One girl was beaten during interrogation so severely that she lost her

mind. When she returned to the cell, she went to the toilet (it was behind glass), smeared feces on her face to make a mustache, and said, 'That's it, I've become a man!' After that, they took her away for good — no one ever saw her again."

Each cell had a television. It was turned on Friday afternoons, displaying beautiful images and videos of Xi Jinping with the people, high-speed trains, multi-lane highways with interchanges, and other achievements of the Communist Party. Then everyone was given paper and pencils and ordered to write about what they had seen on TV. At first, Gulbahar didn't understand why they had to write about Xi Jinping, trains, and roads. But a long-term cellmate whispered, "Wait, I'll write it and let you read it — you'll write the same way." After reading it, Gulbahar understood. They had to write: thank you, Xi Jinping; thank you, Communist Party; we live well here; we are fed and clothed for free; China is the freest country. Every Friday, all the prisoners wrote the same. At first, Gulbahar asked her wise cellmate how to write this since she was a citizen of another country and had never lived in China. Her cellmate replied: Write it, or you'll end up in the Black Room. And the Black Room was the scariest place — once sent there, you might never return.

"One day, one of our girls felt sick and fainted," Gulbahar recalls. "We called for help, asked for a doctor. While no one came, another girl, young, about 25, started massaging her arms. When the doctor and police finally arrived, they began shouting: 'What the hell are you holding her hands for? Are you a doctor to do massage? If she dies, it will be your fault!' And they took her to the Black Room for seven days. No one can last more than seven days there. She came back changed. Seemed almost crazy. But then, after two or three days, she started to recover and began to speak again."

The Black Room, which everyone fears, is a solitary confinement cell the size of a box, with walls painted black and no lighting. Standing is impossible, as is lying down. Inside this box is a metal table and a metal chair with a hole

in it. Beneath the chair is a hole in the floor. The prisoner sits on this chair and does not move for an entire week. A small portion of porridge, bread, and water is passed through a slot in the door. When the slot is opened, a little light comes in. The rest of the time, it is complete darkness. And there are rats. Women placed in the Black Room do not eat the bread themselves; they leave it for the rats, hoping the rats will eat the bread and leave them alone.

"If they don't kill you, don't forget us. Don't stay silent."

Her cellmates whispered this to Gulbahar again and again. The only chance came during the two hours of daily anthem-chanting, when voices blended and a few stolen words could slip through. They begged her to speak, to carry their story beyond the walls.

These were not uneducated women. They were doctors, lawyers, business owners — women who had once led successful lives. But they were all Chinese citizens. It meant that even freedom would not give them a voice. They would keep silent. Silence was their only protection from being dragged back inside.

Gulbahar Jalilova was different. She was a citizen of Kazakhstan. That fragile fact gave her one chance others did not have: the chance to leave, to escape to a place beyond the reach of China's security services.

"I swore to the girls that I would not forget them, that I would speak about what was happening whenever I had the chance. I had no idea I would ever be released. On August 28, 2018, during yet another strip search, when it was already my turn to undress, the police suddenly said: 'No, not you — interrogation.' They put handcuffs on me, pulled a bag over my head, and led me outside. I thought, if it's outside again, it means they're taking me to be raped.

Instead, they shoved me into a car and drove me away. The place they brought me to turned out to be a hospital — but only in name. The windows had bars, there were cameras, and iron doors. They ran tests — blood tests, an EKG, and an ultrasound. Then they left me there for three days. Every day, I was forced to swallow dozens of pills. Later, I realized they were just vitamins.

On the third day, the police returned. They took the shackles off my ankles — though not by key; the lock had jammed, so they had to saw through the metal. Only then did they tell me I was being released from the camp. Even then, I didn't believe it. Yes, they removed the cuffs and the bag from my head. But they still drove me straight to a police station. From there, they took me to a hotel, where a policewoman was assigned to stay in the room with me. 'Until we send you back to Kazakhstan,' she told me, 'I'll be staying with you.' For three days, I was not allowed to leave the room. Then they brought me back to the police.

This time, they sat me down for a talk: 'You are an intelligent woman. If you want to continue your business, no problem. You'll have a visa. Here are our phone numbers — call us if you ever find yourself in trouble. But you understand, of course, that you must never speak of where you've been. Forget it.' One of the officers put it more bluntly: 'If you talk, we will find you and kill you.'

Of course, none of my belongings were returned — including the bag of money I had brought nearly a year and a half earlier when I came to buy goods. All they gave back was my passport and my phone. And even the phone had been completely wiped — restored to its factory settings."

"The police escorted me all the way to the plane," says Gulbahar. "No documents explaining where I had disappeared for a year and a half, no personal belongings. I arrived home out of the blue with nothing but my passport. I stayed home for 20 days, expecting to be questioned. But no one ever intended to interrogate me. My children sent me to Turkey to rest, and for a while I remained there — but I never felt safe. I had promised the women in the camp that I would speak publicly about the Uyghur camps in

Xinjiang, yet I couldn't forget that Chinese police had threatened to kill me if I spoke out.

I realized once and for all that Turkey could not be safe when, one day in the middle of Istanbul, a car began following me. I turned to the French embassy and was granted refugee status.

However, even France has not proven safe. Gulbahar has lived there since 2020. Yet last year, immediately after Xi Jinping's visit, on May 8, her neighbor called and warned: 'Don't go home — there's a large car with Chinese men parked by your building. I've already called the police.' The police arrived quickly. During the document check, police discovered that one of the men was carrying a Chinese Secret Service ID.

So there are no safe places in the world — especially if you are a Uyghur woman who survived a Xinjiang camp and has dedicated her life to making sure the world knows about those camps and what happens inside them."

KALBINUR

Instead of names — numbers

Kalbinur Sidik, a native of Ürümqi, was a primary school Chinese teacher. As a student, she noticed that Uyghur children consistently received lower grades than their Chinese classmates, no matter how much they knew. Later, at university, she joined student demonstrations, marching in the crowd and shouting, "Uyghurs! Uyghurs!" — to show that Uyghurs resisted too, that they were not second-class citizens, that they were full-fledged members of society.

On February 28, 2016, the first day of the spring semester, the school principal summoned her: "At 1:30 PM, you are expected at the district party

committee for an important meeting." In China, one does not ask "why?" — when the Party calls, you go, and you do not arrive late.

At the party committee, Chinese language teachers from other schools in the district had already gathered. The party secretary of the district education department said, "Today you begin the new semester. We have assigned you groups of illiterate students, whom you must teach the language wherever they are located. But there is a condition: you must sign a non-disclosure agreement. You must never tell anyone what you see."

Kalbinur was taken aback — China has many illiterate people, so keeping this fact secret seemed pointless. She could never have imagined that she would be teaching Chinese to prisoners in a concentration camp.

"After we signed the six-month contract and the non-disclosure papers," says Kalbinur Sidik, "the party secretary asked, 'Teacher Kalbinur, your daughter studies in the Netherlands, right? What is she studying?' I replied that she was studying medicine and wanted to become a doctor. The secretary said, 'China has excellent relations and strong ties with the Netherlands. If necessary, we can bring her home.' It was a clear threat. But I had no intention of telling anyone anything — I didn't even fully understand what was happening at that moment."

On the morning of March 1, a police driver came to pick up Kalbinur and silently drove her to her new assignment. It was a male camp, an old four-story building surrounded by barbed wire. In the classroom where Kalbinur was to teach, she counted eight surveillance cameras. Two of them were focused on the teacher.

Then the students were brought in. They were shackled and handcuffed — and that was not all. Their chains were connected, forcing them to move in a bent-over posture.

When asked what was the most terrifying part of her time in the camp, Kalbinur said, "The eyes of those chained men, looking up from their bent, twisted positions — there was hopelessness and despair in those gazes."

The prisoners wore gray robes and vests with orange tags. Using their names was forbidden — inside the camp, they were known only by numbers. The lesson lasted four hours, followed by a lunch break. Uyghur women hired as camp workers served the gruel. Kalbinur volunteered to help: a prisoner's meal consisted of a bowl of water with rice and two small pieces of bread.

Later, the teacher learned that her first students were religious leaders and scholars. Some of them even held doctoral degrees in Chinese philology. Yet they were forced to study a first-grade curriculum. Over a month, the number of students steadily increased. New prisoners arrived constantly, brought in by buses during the night.

Three weeks in, a guard named Qadir told Kalbinur that there would be no lessons that day: the number of prisoners had grown too large, and a new schedule needed to be created. The schedule proved grueling: each day, she was expected to teach six to seven groups, each comprising over a hundred people. Some groups contained only elderly prisoners, others only young men. Kalbinur roughly estimated the total number of prisoners in the camp: no fewer than seven thousand.

"Tell my wife I haven't abandoned her."

Three months into teaching, a student from the third row lingered after class. He fell in step beside Kalbinur and whispered a desperate request: "My home is in Ürümqi, near the cement factory. Please go there and tell my family." She didn't answer. Eight cameras scanned the room, two fixed squarely on her. One wrong move, one word spoken, and she could vanish like the others. The next day, the student was gone. Kalbinur never saw him again.

Then came Osman, a wealthy, prominent man who owned a sprawling supply business across Xinjiang. After class, he begged her to deliver

a message to his family. Kalbinur walked past him in silence, heart pounding. That was the last she saw of him. Later, she learned from a colleague that he had supposedly “fallen ill” and died en route to the hospital. But in truth, prisoners weren’t taken to hospitals — only to disappear. The lesson was clear: even wealth and status offered no protection.

By the fifth month, another young man approached her from the back row. His wife was pregnant, and he needed to send a single message: he hadn’t fled, betrayed, or abandoned her. “I have a small shop near the restaurant ‘Tashkent,’” he said. “Please go there.” By the next day, he had vanished without a trace. Kalbinur walked to the location, watched from a distance, and saw a pregnant woman. She did not approach. She could not. One step closer, one word spoken — and she could be next.

In that camp, every message, every glance, every plea was a gamble with life itself. Every disappearance was a warning: speak, and you vanish; stay silent, and you survive. Fear was constant. Fear was survival.

Kalbinur knew this was exactly how it would be. In the camp, Uyghur staff had told her about another teacher who, at the request of a prisoner, went and informed his wife where he was being held. The wife then came to the camp with a package — bringing food, clothes, and bedding. When the guards asked how she knew her husband was there, the woman answered honestly: a teacher had told her. The guards gladly kept the parcel — why not, when it fell into their hands so easily? And the teacher was sentenced to eight years in the camps.

Kalbinur herself was never sure she would be released when her six-month contract ended — she constantly feared she would remain in that camp forever. But when the term expired, nothing happened. The camp director even praised her for doing good work. Kalbinur returned home after her final lesson, and the next morning she went back to her school, where her classes had already been reassigned to other teachers for the six months she had been away. But as soon as she arrived at the school, she

was immediately summoned to the principal's office. There, the same party official from the district education bureau informed her curtly that, starting September 1, she would begin a new six-month contract. Protesting, of course, was impossible. Asking questions — even more so.

"Even their lice don't die in boiling water."

On September 1, a new police driver brought Kalbinur Sidik to a women's camp. The building had six floors, each with twenty cells. The staff instructed her: "There's a classroom on every floor. You'll start your first lesson on the first floor, the second on the second, and so on, up to the sixth." Prisoners were only brought into the classroom after Kalbinur had taken her seat, with two policemen stationed beside her. They all wore masks. Later, she understood why: the stench inside the camp was unbearable.

"In the men's camp, there was at least a toilet in the corridor, and prisoners lined up for it. There were no facilities for washing, and no change of clothes was ever provided. Once, I saw guards fill two big vats with boiling water in the yard, and the prisoners stripped down and threw their clothes and bedding in. Everything was crawling with lice. The inmates' skin was covered in bloody scratches from constant itching. And the guards just stood there laughing: 'Look how tough these Uyghurs are! Even their lice don't die in boiling water!'

But in the women's camp, there wasn't even a toilet on the floor. In every cell, there was only a bucket. It couldn't be emptied until the guards gave the order. The women suffocated from the stench. The police officers, too — but at least they had masks. The prisoners had to breathe the foul air day and night."

When Kalbinur compares the conditions for men and women, she says that at least men weren't regularly raped, while women were constantly subjected to sexual violence. For the guards, this was routine. Rapes happened both arbitrarily and during interrogations, and the interrogations themselves were just a form of sadism. Everyone understood — both the prisoners and the guards — that the women were guilty of nothing except being born Uyghur and raised in the Muslim faith. But being kept on a "tiger chair" for twenty-four hours, beaten, raped, and threatened with death — that was the everyday reality of the camps for Uyghur women in Xinjiang.

Kalbinur said that the guards took particular pleasure when a victim screamed loudly during torture: they knew other prisoners could hear the screams and imagine the same fate awaiting them. Additionally, there was always a way to extract more information: to stop the torture, a prisoner might be forced to name someone they had prayed with or attended the mosque with. And that meant a new report, a new prisoner, a new victim.

Teaching Chinese in the camp was also a unique experience. Kalbinur was given three textbooks to use for her lessons. The first three weeks focused on the basics: simple characters, counting, and common words. After the third week, lessons progressed to sentences containing the phrases "Communist Party" and "Xi Jinping." By the end of the course, the lessons had shifted to constructing propaganda sentences expressing gratitude to the Party.

But the women in the camp used even this opportunity to share at least minimal information about themselves with the teacher. Kalbinur recalls that when the lesson required making sentences with the word "Motherland" (祖国), every woman was eager to speak. Throughout the class, one after another, they formed sentences.

One said: "I love my Motherland very much. I have four children. The youngest was only fifteen days old when I was taken here to study Chinese. I am grateful to the Motherland and the Party for giving me this opportunity."

Another said, "My parents spent a lot of money sending me to study in the United States. I returned because I missed my Motherland, my parents, and my friends. I was brought here straight from the airport to study Chinese. I didn't even get to see my parents. I am grateful to the Party and the government for giving me the chance to study."

A third said: "I also love my Motherland very much. I was about to get married; all the invitations had already been sent. My fiancé was taken away a week before the wedding, and two days later, so was I. I thank the Party and the government for the chance to study Chinese."

Of course, the prisoners were already fluent in Chinese. For them, the lessons became an opportunity to convey something about their lives through sentences containing the required words — at least to the teacher, who returned home after class rather than back to a cell.

"Sterilization isn't painful."

Another horrifying practice Kalbinur encountered while working in the women's camp was the forced sterilization of prisoners. Every Monday, all the women in the camp were given unknown pills. Police officers made sure the prisoners swallowed them — sticking fingers into their mouths to check that no one had hidden a pill under their tongue. No one knew what exactly they were being given, but after a while, the women's menstrual cycles completely stopped.

"I remember a young girl, about 18, crying: 'Will I never become a mother?'" Kalbinur recalls. The most terrifying thing she ever saw there was leaving the classroom one day and spotting the body of a girl being carried out of her cell. Her eyes were open — they hadn't even bothered to close them. Later, a camp staff member told Kalbinur that the pills had caused a strange side

effect in this girl: bleeding that didn't stop for a month and a half. During that time, she wasn't taken to a hospital — no one paid attention until she died.

The camp employed two nurses whose job was to hand out these pills. No medical care was ever provided — neither in the women's nor the men's camp. The only thing they did was remove bodies and report that the person had "died on the way to the hospital."

At some point, the internal pain tearing through Kalbinur became unbearable. It manifested in similar physical symptoms: bleeding, a drop in blood pressure, and loss of strength. Her husband — the only person who knew the truth about where she was working — took her to the hospital. Her contract remained unfinished. Kalbinur underwent a long recovery and only returned to school in February 2018.

She was met with little enthusiasm: the party secretary and the HR officer claimed she had failed to fulfill her assigned duties and insisted that she submit her resignation. Kalbinur asked for permission to continue working for another two years — then her total experience would reach 30 years, qualifying her for a pension. But one does not argue with the party; nothing can be proven to it. The teacher resigned.

She tried to share with her husband what she had witnessed in the camps, but he refused to listen. "He turned out to be a weak man, my ex-husband," Kalbinur Sidik now says.

"On May 5, 2019, I turned 50. On May 20, the party secretary of our district called me and said that I was required to undergo sterilization. The thing is, in July 2018, all Uyghur women aged 18 to 50 were forced to have intrauterine devices — this was a government directive. Naturally, I had no choice but to do it too. But when I ended up in the hospital with continuous bleeding, the doctors removed the IUD. And now, without the IUD, I was being sent for sterilization! I explained that I had just turned 50 two weeks earlier, and I no longer fell into the age group of women subjected to forced sterilization.

Still, the party secretary insisted that I go to the police to see Officer Li Wen Yang. 'Can he help?' I asked. 'No, he'll tell you the same thing. We can't do anything,' she replied.

At the clinic where I was summoned, there was a huge line. People were called by their last name. When it was my turn, I entered the room and saw the doctor, a very elderly woman. I thought: perhaps they specifically brought back retirees to quickly and efficiently sterilize Uyghur women. The doctor said, 'Don't worry, sterilization doesn't hurt. It's no more painful than getting an IUD.'

After recovering from anesthesia, I received a stamped certificate: 'Sterilized.' I don't even remember how I got home by taxi. Once there, I locked myself in the apartment and couldn't bring myself to go out. But I still had to take the certificate to the party committee — it meant that I had carried out the government's order and could expect a reward. In my case, the reward was a passport, which allowed me to travel to my daughter in the Netherlands.

For myself, I had already made my decision: to escape and tell the world, from any platform I could reach, what was happening to the Uyghurs in the camps in Xinjiang. I was able to fly to the Netherlands for treatment and never returned.

In China, no one speaks out loud. The security services have long instilled in everyone the idea: 'If three people are gathered, at least one of them is our informant.' But everyone understands perfectly well what that means. When the door of the neighbor across the street was suddenly sealed, Kalbinur immediately knew: he was in a camp.

Pushing for an international investigation into crimes against the Uyghur population in China, speaking out from every available platform, reliving her tragedy again and again, telling aloud about the humiliations and forced sterilizations, helping those who managed to get out — this is Kalbinur Sidik's mission today. She has testified before the U.S. Congress, the United Nations, and at numerous human rights conferences. Kalbinur is a victim, but she is also a prosecutor.

The People's Tribunal Speaks and Shows

"We spoke with everyone who managed to leave and get out of China," says human rights activist and Vice President of the World Uyghur Congress, Erkin Zunun. "People were in different camps, each telling their own story, giving approximate numbers of prisoners in the camp where they had been. We then cross-checked their testimonies against satellite imagery and performed the calculations. The numbers are staggering: between two and three million people. The U.S. State Department, which has officially declared a genocide against the Uyghurs, cites two million. The UN says over a million people are locked up in re-education camps. We are talking about three million. But no one can give the exact number."

According to Erkin, those typically released from the camps are individuals with foreign or dual citizenship, often through the intervention of their countries' foreign ministries. In Kazakhstan alone, more than a thousand

citizens have passed through the camps. Most, like Gulbahar Jalilova, had traveled to China for business trips and disappeared one day. It could take years before they were found and released. Those without another passport have no one to protect them.

If both husband and wife are taken at the same time, their children are placed in boarding schools, given Chinese names, and taught to be Chinese rather than Uyghur. Adults have a chance of surviving the camps only if they speak Chinese fluently, did not wear a beard before arrest (a beard is seen as a sign of being an imam in China), and did not pray or attend mosque. Even wealth does not guarantee safety: Gulbahar Jalilova had wealthy and successful cellmates, but that did not protect them from being detained. Some may have managed to "buy back" relatives, but everyone involved in such deals remains silent.

"The precursor to the genocide was Xi Jinping's visit to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in 2014," explains Erkin Zunun. "It was then that he saw Xinjiang was not like the rest of China. People spoke Uyghur, signs were bilingual, and interpreters were often required since many locals did

not speak Chinese. Xi Jinping appointed a party leader for the XUAR who had previously carried out repressive policies in Tibet: Chen Quanguo, who had led the Communist Party in Tibet since 2011, took over Xinjiang in 2016. He began applying the same methods he had tested on the Tibetan population.

Initially, those imprisoned were mainly entrepreneurs who traveled abroad to instill loyalty to China. Then came those who performed the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Afterward, 74 prohibitions were introduced, including bans on wearing beards, giving children Muslim names, praying publicly, and, for women, wearing headscarves. In Ürümqi, for example, checkpoints were set up every few hundred meters to inspect phones: a tracking app had to remain active at all times. It could detect forbidden music, Quranic surahs, and Muslim symbols. Even the Turkish national football team's symbol was banned.

"Interestingly, in Germany, where I live, many young Chinese people support us. They told me:

> "We were taught from childhood that Uyghurs are a barbaric people!"

Everything happening in Xinjiang to the Uyghurs seemed so fantastical that at first, Uyghur human rights defenders and former detainees struggled to make the world take notice. Satellite images showing both existing and under-construction camps, complete with guard towers, helped provide undeniable evidence. International human rights organizations reporting on the horrific crimes against Uyghurs in China also played a crucial role. The Uyghurs hoped for an international tribunal similar to the one for Yugoslavia, but that proved impossible: China has not ratified the Rome Statute. So they decided to establish a people's tribunal.

In June 2020, then-president of the World Uyghur Congress, Dolkun Isa, approached Sir Geoffrey Nice — a British barrister and Queen's Counsel

who had been the lead prosecutor in the trial of Slobodan Milošević — and invited him to lead the Uyghur People's Tribunal, tasked with "investigating ongoing atrocities and potential genocide." He agreed. Preparations began for hearings where witnesses and victims would testify. Around the same time, the United States passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act. The law also imposed sanctions on Chinese officials, including Chen Quanguo, the party leader of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. On January 19, 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that China was committing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang.

That was a strong show of support, no less significant than the 2019 Sakharov Prize awarded by the European Parliament to Uyghur activist Ilham Tohti, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of separatism. Following the United States, the genocide of the Uyghurs was recognized by the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Lithuania. The Czech Republic, Belgium, and New Zealand, meanwhile, called China's policies crimes against humanity. Even a UN report, traditionally cautious in its wording, states that the scale of arbitrary detentions of Uyghurs "may constitute serious crimes, in particular crimes against humanity."

Of course, the people's tribunal cannot impose sanctions or issue verdicts. Its role is to document and preserve evidence, which, supporters hope, will one day be presented to other courts with full judicial authority. That is why Gulbahar Jalilova and Kalbinur Sidik continue to speak out.

They speak of things they would rather forget.

MUHAMMAJON KABIROV

Tajikistan
Journalist

A Tajik journalist and human rights defender currently serving as editor-in-chief of Azda.TV, a Tajik-language news network based in Poland that works to promote freedom of expression and democratic values.

He is also president of the board of directors of the Foundation for Intercultural Integration, which assists refugees with resettlement in Poland. In 2014, he founded the NGO Eurasian Dialogue in Lithuania and launched the independent news channel Central Asian TV the same year.

He has worked extensively to advocate on behalf of refugees, immigrants, and political prisoners in Tajikistan, Russia, and the European Union. He has also worked with the UN Human Rights Committee, the European Parliament, and the OSCE, to advance the rights of Tajik political prisoners.

A REBEL WITH A PENCIL

A Tajik Journalist Built a TV Studio in Europe. In Response, Rahmon's Regime Took Away His Father's Passport and Property. The Story of Muhamadjón Kabirov

Inside an ordinary office building in Warsaw, there's a tiny TV studio. When the news is being recorded there, people in neighboring offices have no idea what's being said: the anchor speaks Tajik. That is Azda TV, an independent Tajik television channel operating in exile.

"Come on in, let me introduce you. That is our anchor, Firuz Khait. His father is serving a life sentence. We're about to start recording — want to see how we work?" That's how I'm welcomed to the studio by the head of Azda TV, journalist and human rights defender Muhamadjón Kabirov.

The studio has four young staffers and equipment that's more old than new — ancient, in fact. They don't even have mixing devices—neither audio nor video. A USB stick is inserted into the camera, and once the recording is finished, that same stick is used in a computer for editing. That's their entire workflow. But they record the news every single day. Once a week, they record in Russian, with a Ukrainian anchor coming in to host. The rest of the time, the broadcasts are all in Tajik.

An Exile in Absentia

Muhamadjón Kabirov never dreamed of living abroad, reporting on Tajikistan from a safe distance, or knocking on every European door to speak about repression and political prisoners. He was born into a religious family that deeply loved its homeland. He studied first in Iran, then in the United States,

and later in Moscow, but he always knew his journey would ultimately lead back to Tajikistan. That was where, as an educated young man with both Western and Eastern training, he could bring real value to his country.

Many think this way — whether they leave to study or work abroad, or flee with nothing but a backpack to escape the security forces waving an arrest warrant.

Still, not every broken plan is the work of the security forces. Muhamadjón's life might have turned out very differently if his wife had received a U.S. visa. But she was refused. While he was pursuing his master's degree in America, his wife was unable to join him. So he decided to complete his studies in Russia, since no visa was required.

The Kabirov family settled in Moscow. Muhamadjón studied political science and international relations, but before he could even finish his master's degree, he was offered a job in journalism. At the end of 2014, a new pan-Central Asian television channel, Central Asia TV, was being launched in Moscow. Journalists from across the region were invited to join. The idea was that the project would not only cover news, traditions, and culture from Central Asian countries, but also help reshape public attitudes toward migrants from those nations.

In February 2017, Muhamadjón flew to Turkey to visit relatives for the weekend. On Saturday, when only one staffer was present, security forces arrived with a search warrant and seized all the equipment. Central Asia TV rented two small offices in the same building — one on the second floor and another directly above it on the third. The second floor had a sign with the channel's name, but the third floor didn't. They had just expanded and hadn't put it up yet. Since the raid skipped the third floor, they were able to preserve a small part of the equipment.

Since the vast majority of the channel's staff were Tajik, the Tajik security services had likely ordered the raid.

> "I became a refugee in absentia—in Turkey," Kabirov recalls. "The security forces came to the TV office, and while I was trying to figure out what to do, my wife went to the local administration (we were living in the Tula region, and we had residence permits in Russia) over a minor issue. An employee there told her, 'It's strange—your documents are all in order, we know your family, and I just can't understand why the FSB is interested in you.' That's when I realized I could never go back to Russia. And definitely not to Tajikistan—by then, my colleagues and I were already considered enemies of the people, simply for reporting as a normal media outlet, not as propagandists. Rahmon doesn't forgive that. Journalists and bloggers are his personal enemies."

From Kebab Shop to the Airwaves

Muhamadjón had a Schengen visa, and he flew from Istanbul to Warsaw. He didn't want to go too far west—like many other refugees, regardless of their country of origin or the source of persecution, he hoped he might need to lie low somewhere safe for a while. He filed for refugee status a year after emigrating — only then did he fully realize that there was no home to return to.

His wife and children had no visas. His daughter was two, his son just eight months old. Khadjar Kabirova, his wife, undertook an extremely hazardous journey: with the little kids, she made it to Brest and boarded the Brest–Terespol train. At that time, there was no pandemic with closed borders, and no war with sanctions. Trains ran regularly between Brest in Belarus and Terespol in Poland. The two cities are only seven kilometers apart — the train ride took 21 minutes. Belarusian officials didn't check visas at boarding. But upon arriving in Terespol, Khadjar applied for political asylum. Her application was rejected, and she was sent back. (Later, hundreds of

Chechens traveled the same route every day, hoping to claim asylum, often living right in the waiting hall of the Brest train station.)

The Kabirov family "traveled" like this for exactly 14 days. They returned to Brest, rented a room for the night, and then went back to the station. All the while, Muhamadjón was calling and writing to every authority he could. It felt like hitting a brick wall. Then, after two weeks, a door suddenly opened: the authorities accepted the Kabirovs' application and let them enter Poland. In the end, his wife and children received refugee status even before Muhamadjón.

Working on human rights issues in exile became easier: he started speaking at conferences about repression and political prisoners in Tajikistan. Journalism, however, proved more complicated.

Before long, a small group of Tajik activists escaping repression had gathered in Warsaw. Those who hadn't been journalists before — it didn't matter, they could learn. Muhamadjón and his colleagues started working together. Or rather, volunteering: after their regular jobs, they would gather and record programs "on the fly." Muhamadjón worked in a kebab shop, a vegan restaurant, and on construction sites. Everyone else had similar day jobs. So journalism was limited to the evenings.

Initially named Central Asia News, the project soon became too ambitious; after a year, they realized they didn't have the time or resources to cover the entire region. They decided to focus on their homeland — Tajikistan. That's how the YouTube channel and website Azda TV were born, broadcasting in both Tajik and Russian.

The Tajik-language news anchor, Firuz Khait, had been arrested in Dushanbe while still in school. His father, Mahmadali Khait, the deputy chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), was arrested in 2015. At that time, all party leaders and around 200 supporters were detained, accused of involvement in an attempted military coup. The party was declared

a terrorist organization. Mahmadali Khait and another deputy chairman, Saidumar Khusayni, were sentenced to life in prison.

At the time, Firuz photographed all the pages of the verdict and sent them to Tajik opposition figures abroad. They, in turn, made the verdict public. But the state security officers traced the photos back to their location by a fragment of carpet visible in the shots. Authorities detained Firuz and his mother. Three days later, they were released — with threats and warnings. Firuz had no choice but to leave. His mother stayed behind: she is allowed a brief visit with her life-sentenced husband every six months and can deliver supplies for him.

Meanwhile in Tajikistan

You can go years living in exile and slowly start to believe you're safe. But if a dictator still has your relatives back home, they automatically become hostages the moment the regime declares you an enemy.

Muhamadjón's father was a farmer: orchards, fields, machinery, livestock, back-breaking work from dawn to dusk. But when his son launched a studio in Poland and started broadcasting programs about events in Tajikistan, the regime seized all the family's property. The authorities confiscated the land, the farm equipment, Muhamadjón's apartment, and property registered in his mother's name. The authorities left his father with the old family home, where he has lived under house arrest for the past two years. He is under strict orders not to communicate with his son.

> "My mother managed to leave. We were really hoping to get my father out. Two years ago, he received a visa. But at the airport, they took his passport and annulled it. They even revoked

his driver's license. He's a hostage in the classic sense. And he's completely prohibited from communicating with me. There was only one time — that was before the passport was seized, in 2017, before my speech at the OSCE — when a call came from my father's number. I didn't answer. I knew immediately something was wrong. A couple of minutes later, my aunt in Moscow called: 'Muhamadjón, your father's in the police station, they've taken him. They want you to stop speaking. They forced your father to call you.' I went ahead and spoke anyway. I couldn't miss the chance to talk about what's happening in Tajikistan. You have to understand, it feels like Tajikistan no longer exists on the map. As if Tajikistan doesn't exist: no dictatorship, no Rahmon, no repression. Rahmon travels on official visits to Western countries without anyone demanding that he frees political prisoners. At best, the UN Human Rights Committee softly "recommends." Sometimes I'm overwhelmed with such despair! I think: what can I accomplish with a pencil in my hand? I should've picked up a rifle and become a basmach (bandit), honestly."

Safar Kabirov, Muhamadjón's father, was held in handcuffs for two days without any charges, threatened with prison and torture. Then he was released. But can it really be said that Safar Kabirov is free? Without family, without property, without the work he had built over the years, and now even without a passport or driver's license.

Before becoming a farmer, Safar Kabirov had worked as a bus driver. He also lost his first job as a bus driver, along with his driver's license. At the same time, the relatives of another Tajik activist in exile, Islomiddin Saidov, were evicted from their home. The Saidovs were told, "This is punishment for your son."

A year later, the same thing happened to the relatives of human rights activist Shabnam Khudoiddodova. Shabnam herself was granted political

asylum in Poland after being detained in Belarus under an Interpol red notice issued at the request of the Tajik authorities. She spent nine months in a Belarusian detention center before being released and allowed to travel to Europe.

In 2018, ahead of another conference appearance, Shabnam's mother, daughter, and brother were taken to the police, had their documents confiscated, and were warned that all of them were "under surveillance." After Shabnam's speech at the OSCE conference, Tajik security forces sent a crowd of "outraged citizens" to the school where her daughter Fatima studied. The "citizens" followed the girl all the way home, calling her a terrorist. The family's documents were returned only a year later — and then confiscated again a year after that, when Shabnam's mother, daughter, and brother tried to leave Tajikistan.

Arrests and threats are a common experience for the relatives of many Tajik activists who remain in the country. Taking hostages as revenge is a typical and striking feature of the Tajik regime.

Muhamadjón still communicates with his father—rarely, cautiously, without direct calls — through several relatives, across multiple countries, using different messaging apps.

Transnational Repression and Article 307

Besides using the stick in the form of detaining relatives and issuing threats, Rahmon's regime actively employs the carrot: promises of amnesty or pardon in exchange for returning. Muhamadjón recalls that in 2020, this tactic brought opposition figure Sobir Valiev back to Tajikistan. Valiev is the deputy chairman of the opposition movement Group 24.

> "It turned out Sobir had studied in the same class as the president's son. Well, his classmate persuaded him to return. However, authorities soon opened a new criminal case against him. That is also standard practice for Rahmon: 'We'll grant you amnesty, come back,' and then they open new cases and imprison you. And if they abduct you—well, then you get a long sentence."

Tajik opposition activists are also targets of abduction in Russia. That country is often the easiest destination for Tajiks trying to leave, and in the past, many sought safety across the border there.

Russian security services have never commented on the sudden disappearances of Tajik activists, only for them to later appear in Dushanbe prisons. Tajik authorities, in turn, claim that these individuals returned to the country voluntarily.

From Europe, Tajiks are deported after being denied asylum. Blogger Farhod Negmatov, who has resided in Sweden since 2019, is the latest example. Despite multiple asylum applications and appeals, he was ultimately deported to Tajikistan, where authorities recently sentenced him to eight years in prison. Last November, opposition figure Dilmurod Ergashev was deported from Germany and immediately taken into custody in Dushanbe. Activist Farukh Ikromov, expelled from Poland last year, was sentenced to 23 years in prison.

Those who cannot be abducted or persuaded to return can be killed. Back in 2015, one of the opposition leaders, Group 24 founder Umarali Kuvvatov, was shot dead in Istanbul. Tajikistan demanded his extradition, but Turkey refused to hand him over. A bullet proved far more effective than paperwork demanding his return. Istanbul police arrested the main organizer of the killing, and he ultimately received a life sentence. The other four suspects managed to leave Turkey.

Incidentally, it was in Turkey—long considered a relative haven for Central Asian emigrants — where, last March, Group 24 leader Sukhrab Zafar and his colleague Nasimjon Sharifov went missing.

It later turned out that they had been mysteriously transported from Turkey to Tajikistan. In November, Zafar was sentenced to 30 years in prison, and Sharifov to 20 — both under Tajikistan's most commonly used charge against dissidents, Article 307 of the Criminal Code: "incitement to violently overthrow the constitutional order using the Internet."

> "Last fall, I got a call from someone I'd known about 20 years ago," recalls Muhamadjón Kabirov. "He said Tajikistan's security services had approached him with an offer to go to Poland and assassinate me. They promised that after carrying out the job, he and his family would be well off and never need anything again.
>
> According to him, he told them he needed to think about it—and that very night, he fled Tajikistan. Of course, I reported the call to the police. Honestly, I didn't expect it to affect me so profoundly. We all know that Tajik security services hunt down journalists, human rights defenders, and activists. We know about the kidnappings and killings outside Tajikistan. We know you have to stay vigilant and never let your guard down anywhere in the world.
>
> But when someone tells you so casually, 'I was supposed to kill you,' it's paralyzing. For two months, I couldn't work normally. The police, naturally, explained how to behave, what to avoid, and where to call if I noticed anything suspicious. Still, the fact that the authorities are aware of the threats doesn't make things any less stressful. Over the past year, I've had to change apartments twice after noticing strange people near my building. We were also forced to move our office because we detected surveillance."

Enemy of Turkmenbashi

That is how the dictatorship transformed an ordinary mechanical engineer into a fighter against the regime. It took an accusation of conspiracy, prison, a life in exile, and even a death threat.

I visited Azda TV just as they were settling into their new office. Only the equipment was still old.

> "Sometimes even Tajik opposition figures in exile refuse to give us interviews," Muhamadjón laughs. "They call us 'grant eaters.' Want me to tell you about grants?"

He explains how Azda TV operated on a volunteer basis for two years. Then, one of the international foundations supporting civil society offered Muhamadjón the chance to apply for a grant. He did—and received $45,000 for a year. A third went to rent, and the rest covered operating costs and staff salaries. The salaries were roughly equivalent to what cashiers earn at Żabka, a chain of small, low-cost stores in Poland.

The workday at Azda TV is over: the program has been recorded and edited, and everyone can head out. And the "grant eaters" disperse—back to their other jobs. Some get behind the wheel of a taxi, others make deliveries for courier services.

CARINE KANIMBA

Rwanda
Spokesperson of the WLC

Carine Kanimba is a resilient survivor of Rwanda's 1994 genocide, where her father, Paul Rusesabagina, heroically saved over 1,200 lives in his hotel, a story later immortalized in the film Hotel Rwanda. In a harrowing turn of events, her father was forcibly taken to Rwanda in 2020 and unjustly imprisoned for speaking out against the tyranny of the Rwandan president. As a dedicated global human rights advocate, Carine, alongside her family, led the #FreeRusesabagina campaign, shedding light on her father's wrongful detention and ultimately securing his release in 2023 after almost 3 years as a political prisoner.

Carine was honored with the Heroes of Democracy Award from the Renew Democracy Initiative in April 2023 and the Global Magnitsky Justice Award for Outstanding Young Human Rights Activists in November 2023. Carine remains an active advocate for justice, human rights, and global liberties.

HOTEL RWANDA

Her parents were killed during the genocide, and her foster father — who later became the protagonist of a Hollywood film — was kidnapped by intelligence agents. That is the story of Rwandan human rights activist Carine Kanimba.

When Carine was seven and her sister Anaïse was eight, their parents showed them photographs of strangers and said, "Girls, these are your biological mom and dad. They were killed in the genocide because they were Tutsi. We adopted you."

By that time, Carine already understood what genocide was and what had happened in her homeland. She was born in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, in 1993. In 1998, her family moved to Belgium. Carine didn't remember the genocide — she was only a year old when Rwandans from the Hutu tribe killed her parents, along with nearly a million fellow Tutsis.

But she grew up living with the shadow of the genocide, because everyone her family interacted with carried this unbearable trauma. The genocide followed Rwandans wherever they went — through memories of lost loved ones, recurring nightmares, and the paralyzing fear of what they had endured.

More than a Thousand Saved in the Hotel des Mille Collines (Hotel of a Thousand Hills)

Carine's adoptive parents, Paul and Tatiana, told the girls what had happened. Their biological parents had been warned to leave their home in Kigali — it was too dangerous. But when everyone — their mother, father,

the two girls, and their nanny — stepped outside, gunfire erupted. It was a trap. Their father was killed instantly and left lying in the street.

Their mother, the girls, and the nanny ran back into the house and stayed hidden there quietly until evening. That night, the killers returned, breaking into houses in search of survivors, intent on leaving no one alive. Their mother hid the girls in a closet. She was dragged from the house and shot dead.

A few days later, the nanny took one-year-old Carine and her two-year-old sister to an orphanage. Within days, relatives — Paul and Tatiana — came to take them in. Carine and Anaïse's father was Tatiana's brother. Tatiana's husband, Paul Rusesabagina, was Hutu.

"I remember Mom sitting us down on the bed, sitting between Anaïse and me, and showing us the photographs," Carine recalls. "At first, I didn't understand who these people were. My sister started crying. Mom explained several times that these were our biological parents and told us how they had died. And then I started crying too. I couldn't stop for days — my tears wouldn't end. And then I began to hate. I hated the extremists who had killed my parents and hundreds of thousands of others. I didn't know the killers by face, I had no idea what they looked like, but I hated them."

It took me ten years to piece together the story of my family. I had to find out everything: which refugee camp we had ended up in, how long we had stayed there, which organization had helped the refugees, and who had fed my sister and me in the camp. And the moment I learned the truth about my biological parents, it was a shock — a deep pain. Perhaps, had I discovered it later, it would have been an even greater trauma.

Growing up in a mixed family, with a Tutsi mother and a Hutu father, Carine learned from an early age the importance of national reconciliation in a country still deeply divided. Her foster father, Paul Rusesabagina, spoke of this repeatedly. Yet the Hollywood film Hotel Rwanda, which would later tell the story of Paul's heroism, was still years away. Fame and global

recognition were far from his mind. During the genocide, his priorities were clear: to save his Tutsi wife, her relatives, and as many people as he could.

The final tally: 1,268 lives saved, all thanks to Paul. Not only Tutsis, but also Hutus who opposed the genocide and could have fallen victim to reprisals. Paul welcomed everyone seeking refuge into the Hotel des Mille Collines in Kigali, which, for a time, became a citadel in the midst of the genocide. Paul bribed security forces and militia members from the Interahamwe to leave the hotel alone and not storm it. He offered them generous drinks — alcohol stocks at the hotel were untouchable, serving as currency for bribing killers.

The Hotel des Mille Collines held firm. Those who took shelter there survived.

"We had been living in Belgium since 1998, but I always knew I wasn't Belgian — I was Rwandan," Carine recalls. "At home, we always spoke Kinyarwanda. From an early age, my foster parents told me about the genocide. Even though I didn't immediately learn the full truth about my own family, I still understood what genocide was. I knew how it unfolded. I knew how Tutsis hid. I knew how ordinary people helped many of them survive. But I could never comprehend the level of hatred that drives one person to pick up a machete and kill another. There is simply no acceptable explanation for that — perhaps only a historical context for the divisions."

Carine speaking at a WLC event with the portrait of her father, Paul Rusesabagina, in the background

“When Belgian colonizers arrived in Rwanda in 1914, the Hutu and Tutsi coexisted peacefully. The Tutsi primarily raised livestock, while the Hutu farmed the land. The Belgians noticed the two ethnic groups and placed the Tutsi in power. Essentially, the Tutsi supported the colonial administration and the subjugation of the Hutu. That marked the beginning of the historical divide, when colonial authorities started favoring one group over the other.

Later, a Hutu uprising targeted both the colonial rulers and the Tutsi, who had supported their policies. When Rwanda gained independence and the Hutu came to power, the process reversed — the Tutsi were oppressed. Many were forced to leave the country. And in April 1994, when the plane carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi was shot down near Kigali, the genocide began.”

Not Just Reconciliation, But Justice

Carine emphasizes repeatedly: it wasn’t Hutu killing Tutsi — it was a well-armed extremist group. Her father, the famous Paul Rusesabagina, always stressed that Rwanda’s foremost need was national reconciliation. Raised by a Hutu father and a Tutsi mother, Carine understood this from an early age.

When Paul Rusesabagina began speaking publicly about the need for reconciliation, he became a target for the new regime. President Paul Kagame took charge of Rwanda’s new regime. Kagame, a Tutsi born in 1957, fled with his parents to Uganda when he was two years old. He grew up in Uganda, joined the National Resistance Army, and played a role in the rebellion that ultimately secured the rebels’ victory. In exile, Kagame also founded the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which included Tutsi émigrés. In 1994, the RPF, led by Kagame, entered Rwanda — after several failed attempts in previous years — and stopped the genocide.

Kagame has ruled Rwanda ever since, although he formally became president in 2000. Since then, election results have been highly predictable: on average, 95 percent of the vote in his favor, and in 2024, a staggering 99.18 percent.

The guerrilla hero who entered the country as a liberator eventually became a typical African authoritarian leader. Arrests of opposition members, secret prisons, torture, and the mysterious deaths of political opponents have all become the modus operandi of the Rwandan government. In those early days after the genocide, however, a Tutsi hero like Paul did not need yet another Hutu hero.

Kagame did not want anyone — especially a Hutu — to be seen as a savior during the genocide. Any reminder that Hutus could save lives, or do anything good, had to be erased. Kagame and his RPF came to stop the genocide, but in the process, they killed many innocent people — both Tutsi and Hutu. And those who dared speak about their murdered or missing relatives also disappeared — taken away, never to be seen again.

My father, however, always said that Rwanda needed not just reconciliation, but justice. Justice not only for the Tutsis, but also for the Hutus. He called for investigation and accountability, and for this reason, he became an enemy of the new regime almost from the start.

That was just the beginning. Then the people who had taken refuge in the Hotel des Mille Collines and survived began to tell their stories. Kagame realized that he could not erase this history, could not make it forgotten, could not pretend it had never happened.

He offered my father positions in the government. “You could be a minister, an ambassador, anything you want,” he said, “just join my team.” But my father stood firm and principled: only reconciliation and justice. He insisted that the current government, too, is accountable for its crimes, and that it was time to bring this chapter to a close. Kagame was furious, and after threats to my father’s life, we had no choice but to flee Rwanda.

A third source of Kagame's animosity toward my father was the Hollywood film Hotel Rwanda. The hero of the movie about the Rwandan genocide was hotelier Paul Rusesabagina, not guerrilla leader Kagame. He could not tolerate that. Especially after the film, people around the world began to learn about my country. University students everywhere studied the genocide through my father's book. And the proverbial cherry on top: the United States awarded my father the Presidential Medal of Freedom, one of the country's two highest honors.

Imprisoned on a Private Plane

The Rusesabagina family moved from Belgium to the United States. Carine lived a relatively privileged life — she attended university and later worked as an investment banker in New York. Paul Rusesabagina, meanwhile, immersed himself in politics. In exile, he founded the Rwandan Movement for Democratic Change, published a book, and gave lectures at universities and international human rights conferences. He spoke out about the situation in Rwanda, human rights violations, and the country's dictatorship.

Then he was kidnapped. The plane Paul was supposed to take from the UAE to Burundi departed from Dubai, only to land in Rwanda, where he was arrested.

That was not the first attempt on his life or liberty. Carine recalls that in 2006, her father was pursued by a car in Belgium in what appeared to be an assassination attempt, and in 2018, while in the U.S., he was targeted with poisoning. In the intervening years, the Rwandan authorities repeatedly tried to fabricate criminal charges and discredit him.

Paul was, of course, vigilant. But he is a devoutly religious man. When all other attempts to reach him — through criminal or judicial means — failed, they sent a priest.

It wasn't until after my father's arrest, during the campaign for his release, that we learned the full details. For two years, a bishop from Burundi had been visiting him. My father is a devoutly religious man, and the doors of his home were always open to a clergyman. He could never have suspected that a man of the church could be involved with the Rwandan intelligence services.

For two years, the bishop gained my father's trust. He said that because Burundi and Rwanda share a similar history and the same ethnic groups — Hutu and Tutsi — Burundi also needed reconciliation. And it would be valuable if my father could fly to Burundi and speak there. He said:

> "You must come. Together, we will address the people of Burundi. That will be a vital humanitarian mission."

My father agreed. It never crossed his mind that this was a carefully planned operation by the Rwandan intelligence services that had been in motion for two years. Still, he told the bishop that he could not fly to Burundi — it was too close to Rwanda and therefore too dangerous. The bishop replied, "You won't have to take a commercial flight — it's really too dangerous. I'll arrange a private plane for you. I have many friends who can safely get you to Burundi. You'll fly to Dubai first, and from there, a private plane will take you to Burundi."

Being a religious man, Paul Rusesabagina trusted him. On August 29, 2020, he flew from Houston to Dubai. There, he boarded a private plane operated by a Greek company. He asked the Greek pilot, "We're flying to Burundi, right?" The pilot confirmed: yes, to Burundi. Just to be sure, he asked a flight attendant. She said, "Of course, to Burundi," and offered him a drink. After that, Paul drifted off.

When he came to, he saw Rwandan soldiers boarding the plane. Through the window, he recognized the familiar Thousand Hills, the land of his birth. Paul shouted, hoping to get the attention of the pilot and the flight attendant — he knew he needed at least some witnesses. But the pilot stepped out of the cockpit and calmly wished him luck. The crew was part of the operation.

Paul Rusesabagina was handcuffed, removed from the plane, and thrown into the back seat of a car. From the airport, he was taken to a prison in Kigali, where he was charged with terrorism and then tortured for four days. Under duress, he signed a confession.

American Bar Association representatives, George Clooney's "Not On Our Watch" foundation, and other observers were allowed into the country for the trial. "The trial was staged like a show trial of the century," Carine recalls. "They even had translators into English, but their task was to frame my father as a terrorist for the Western observers. Yet no one could produce a single piece of evidence."

"Maybe it's just a nightmare?"

After three months of hearings, the court delivered its verdict: 25 years in prison. Carine's life flipped upside down, shattering the routines and schedules she had known for the second time. She left her successful career as an investment banker and threw herself entirely into securing her father's release — and that of other political prisoners. Many human rights defenders come to their work this way: when your own life falls apart, you start saving others — first your loved ones, then strangers. And you never return to your old job.

"I used to hear my father speak a lot when I was a child," Carine recalls. "When he talked about dictatorship, about how the current regime crushes

dissent, I didn't really take it that personally—I lived in New York, I had a successful career. Then one morning, I turned on CNN and saw my father in handcuffs. The headline read: 'Paul Rusesabagina, hero of Hotel Rwanda, arrested and charged with terrorism.'

He looked exhausted, his eyes red as if he hadn't slept in days. I thought: this can't be true — this couldn't happen! My father couldn't possibly be in Rwanda; he had already survived assassination attempts in Belgium and the U.S., and there was no way he would have gone there willingly. The phone rang nonstop — friends, colleagues, relatives calling: 'Did you hear? They're accusing your father of terrorism.'

I knew I had to set the record straight, to explain to everyone who my father really is, what he has done, and what the Rwandan regime does to those who speak out. But above all, I had to bring him home.

At first, Carine reacted unusually: the shock was so overwhelming that she decided to climb back into bed and try to sleep, hoping it was just a nightmare — and that when she woke again, Paul would be home in Texas. She fell asleep. But thirty minutes later, when she woke again, she realized the truth: this was no nightmare. Paul Rusesabagina was in a Rwandan prison.

At that moment, she knew nothing yet about the priest, the Greek pilot, or the Rwandan intelligence operation. She understood immediately that she could not go to work or interact with clients as if nothing had happened — her father needed to be rescued. She had to assemble a rescue team. The first members were relatives and friends, who immediately asked: "What can we do for Paul?"

The first step was to reach out to the U.S. State Department and the Belgian authorities, since Paul Rusesabagina is a citizen of both countries. Then they contacted international human rights organizations, seeking support and advice on how to proceed. Carine could think of nothing else. She kept imagining her 67-year-old father, handcuffed in a prison cell of a state that

had already tried to kill him multiple times. She envisioned the worst that could happen to him in that place.

"I knew the trial was a sham, and that legal avenues were useless — especially since my father wasn't even allowed to hire his own attorneys," Carine recalls. "The state provided attorneys, so my job became shaping public opinion. I reached out to the media, who covered the trial and highlighted its illegality. I called on parliaments and governments around the world to speak with one voice, demanding the immediate release of my father and other Rwandan political prisoners. I testified before the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress. I spoke with representatives of legal associations across Europe and Africa. I reached out to everyone I could, trying to get the charges against my father recognized as unlawful. Meanwhile, they kept torturing him in prison."

A happy ending doesn't mean it's truly over

The public campaign to free Paul Rusesabagina lasted two and a half years. Carine received support not only from Western governments and human rights organizations, but even from the actors of Hotel Rwanda, who wore T-shirts calling for Paul's release. Rwandan intelligence tried to intimidate or discredit her — the main argument from regime propagandists: "She hasn't lived in Rwanda since childhood; what could she possibly know about our country?"

Rwandan agents infected Carine's phone with Pegasus spyware, tracking her every move in real time as she moved from one government office to another, rallying support. Officials tweeted that Carine Kanimba "deserves a golden machete." Yes, she was scared—but she knew her father was far more frightened and in far greater danger.

Finally, Carine Kanimba efforts helped to get the United States to block aid to Rwanda. She proved that much of the money intended for humanitarian purposes actually went toward strengthening and supporting the ruling regime. The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee blocked the funds allocated for aid to Rwanda. The message was clear: no money would flow until Rusesabagina regained his freedom. And dictators' hearing works peculiarly — they only pick up signals like this; other warnings tend to go unnoticed.

In August 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to Rwanda to meet with President Paul Kagame. After the talks, Kagame promised that Rusesabagina would soon be released. He was finally freed from prison in March 2023, along with twenty other political prisoners.

"In prison, everyone knew my father's story. Before his release, they told him, 'You've seen everything that happens here. You know that many of us are prisoners — not just of politics or journalism, but even of our own thoughts. Don't stay silent — use your voice. Speak for those of us who remain.'

My father walked free, but nothing ended — Rwandan prisons still hold political prisoners, and we continue to fight for them, now together. Every day, I receive dozens of messages pleading for help.

I learned so much during the two-and-a-half years I spent fighting for my father's release. I gained invaluable insight. While he was in prison, I stayed in contact with three Rwandan journalists who provided me with invaluable support. Today, two of them are in prison, and the third was killed. In Rwanda, speaking out, thinking freely, and sharing information can be deadly. That means my voice must be even louder. I have a duty to speak for those who cannot be heard."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Belarusian journalist *Iryna Khalip* has faced severe persecution for her courageous coverage of political and social events in Belarus since the 1990s. She writes for the Russian independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta Europe* and the Belarusian outlet *Charter97.org*.

As a result of her work, Khalip has received numerous death threats directed at both herself and her family, including her young son. She has been arrested multiple times, interrogated, beaten by Belarusian police, and detained for over a month in a KGB prison. From 2011 to 2013, she endured two years of strict house arrest.

Khalip is the recipient of numerous international prizes and awards, including the **Courage in Journalism Award** from the International Women's Media Foundation. *Time* magazine named her one of its *Heroines of Europe* in the "Brave Hearts" category.

She was also honored with the **International Writer of Courage Award**, presented by Sir Tom Stoppard, as well as the **Hermann Kesten Prize**, recognizing her as "a journalist who has always been committed to the truth." In addition, she has received the **Henri Nannen Prize**, Germany's most prestigious award for outstanding journalism, among many others.

Due to ongoing threats and persecution, Khalip was forced to leave her native Belarus in 2020. She currently lives and works in Europe.

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