

“I am determined to continue, to do what I did, to stand up for justice”

On Sunday 26 February, prisoner of conscience Ildar Dadin was released from penal colony No. 5 in the city of Rubtsovsk, Altai Territory. He is the first person in Russia to be sentenced under Article 212.1 of the Criminal Code for repeat violations of the Law on Public Assemblies. He spent a total of 451 days behind bars.

Amnesty International spoke to Ildar Dadin about his experience in prison, standing up for prisoners' rights and his plans for the future.

Dadin already said that he is strongly determined to stay in Russia and that he will defend the rights of the prisoners many of whom, just like him, claim to have suffered torture.

His wife Anastasia Zotova campaigned for more than a year for her husband's release, knocking on doors of government authorities, prison chiefs in Karelia and beyond the Urals. Together with human rights activist Lev Ponomarev and a number of partner NGOs she launched a project “Territory of torture” dedicated to uncover torture and other official misconduct in penal colonies in Karelia and elsewhere in Russia. Since then dozens of cases of torture were reported.

“I am in good spirits but perhaps haven't yet taken in the fact that I am free. I am determined to continue, to do what I did, to stand up for justice.”

The research Anastasia undertook while campaigning on your behalf claims that the mechanism for preventing torture and abuse within the penal system is failing. Why do you see this as being so?

“The system terrifies people to such an extent that they are too afraid to speak out. Each part of this system is a mafia and each of these parts covers up for the others. At first I was so afraid, I thought that perhaps I should tell my lawyer that everything is fine and there are no complaints but at the same time try to show with my expression that it was not so. The system punishes those who speak out against abuse, beatings and torture, going as far as fabricating criminal cases against them based on false allegations. You have to be very strong to speak out.”

What mechanism exists to combat violence in prisons if it is so difficult for prisoners to make a complaint?

“The system is based on distrust and its main objective is to humiliate people. For example, back in April 2016 there were two attempts to transfer me to Karelia. At the time I heard a rumour claiming that there was a video where [Russian president Vladimir] Putin said that dissenters would be sent to

Karelia as they would be subjected to pressure there. And so it went on in a similar vein. [Deputy director of Russia's Federal Penitentiary Service Directorate in Karelia Alexey] Fedotov came to detention centre No.1 in Petrozavodsk with an inspection. Instead of saying that everything was fine and great I complained. Officials have to investigate such allegations formally but it was immediately obvious that he didn't like my words. He said: "We'll talk about the law in 'the Seven'". That's it, I thought, looks like I am totally done for.

And so it came to pass. No one even attempted to keep up the appearances of lawfulness. What made me really nervous was that everyone — the medics, the prosecutors and penitentiary service officials — were just covering up the crimes. For instance, when I was taken to the office of Sergey Kosiev [the director of penal colony No. 7 in Karelia's Segezha], he openly told me that I wasn't beaten very badly at all, and if I complained again, they would bury me right here, by the fence. I was surprised at the time that he was not afraid of inspections.

It was the same with the medics. On 11th [of September 2016] after I was dressed in a boilersuit for inmates in the punishment cell and beaten, the medic didn't like my complaints about the beating, she didn't even help me. The same thing happened the next day when I was handcuffed and suspended by the wrists. In the mornings and during the evening roll call [when prison guards beat up the inmates] the medics hear the screams, they are always somewhere nearby, just around the corner, and they turn up to check for any marks as soon as the beatings finish. Prison guards know where to hit: they hit the inner thighs when you stand up with the legs insufficiently far apart. On one occasion when I was being beaten the medic shouted "Enough!" — not out of compassion but because the beating was taking too long.

When the row had broke out I faced the same attitude from Prosecutor's Office officials and investigators. Andrey Ivlev [an official of Segezha Prosecutor's Office] asked me: "So why didn't you say anything earlier?" He looked at me as if he was confused. And later, after our conversation had ended, he said as he was leaving: 'So Dadin, you want to be famous, do you?'. "

Dadin was later transferred to penal colony No. 5 in Rubtsovsk, Altai Territory, on December 2, with a stop at the detention centre in Novosibirsk.

"I believe that this was done to diffuse the situation around the torture row but also to stop me working on this whole situation with my lawyers. I surely couldn't afford to keep paying for them to fly 5,000 km just to share a few bits of paper."

Was your situation in Altai Territory different from that in Segezha?

"The conditions in the colony in Altai were completely different. I have already said on several occasions that it was like chalk and cheese. This was another

striking example illustrating that even though in the majority of the Russian prisons inmates' rights are violated, there are also exceptions, one of them being penal colony No. 5."

Did you feel support of Amnesty International's activists?

"I am grateful to the people who responded. Letters of support came from Sweden, France, the Netherlands, Germany — one from each of these countries — and three from Canada. They were roughly the same in terms of content: 'We are campaigning on your behalf'. This is what made me realise that civil society exists not in Russia alone, even though it is quite weak, but that Russian civil society is part of the global civil society of decent, caring and honest people who campaign so that people remained humane. To me this was a revelation."