

Zoya Svetova

The struggle for Sergei Magnitsky continues

Zoya Svetova is a journalist from the The New Times and author of the book "Finding the Culpable Guilty". Zoya was a winner of the National Prize of the Russian Union of Journalists and Amnesty International in 2003, winner of the 2009 "Free Press Eastern Europe" prize and was honoured with the Andrei Sakharov Prize for "Journalism as Action" in 2003 and 2004.

Today, over 700,000 prisoners are held in prisons and labour camps across Russia. Based on various estimates, between ten and 30 percent of them are innocent. Despite dozens of appeals, their sentences have been confirmed by higher courts, and they have been serving their sentences from start to finish.

How is it possible that so many innocent people have ended up behind bars?

It is possible in Russia, where the number of acquittals is less than one percent.

I have been writing about the Russian judicial system for over ten years and I have attended hundreds of trials and talked with dozens of people in prison in recent years. I have talked with their relatives who, like the prisoners themselves, suffer from the actions of investigators, prosecutors and judges who serve not the law but a repressive regime.

So many crooked judges. So many broken families.

A great example is the story of the 20-year-old Chechen girl Zara Murtazaliyeva, sentenced to eight and a half years in prison for attempting to commit a terrorist act that she never committed and never planned to

commit. She spent eight and a half years in a Mordovian labour camp, and upon her release was forced to leave the country, fearful that they would put her in prison again on another trumped-up charge.

However, Zara Murtazaliyeva is not as well known in Russia and in the West as Sergei Magnitsky, who became a symbol of the lawlessness of the Russian judicial and prison system. Thanks to his letters and appeals sent from prison to the outside world, the horrid and inhumane conditions under which Russian prisoners are confined became known. Thanks to the hue and cry that Sergei's friends raised all over the world after his tragic death in the detention facility, attention was turned to the condition of prisoners, and several seriously sick prisoners were actually released from custody. Sergei Kalinin, a former bank employee arrested under the same article of the criminal code has told me: "I'm alive thanks only to Magnitsky." He all but died in prison, and was freed through the assistance of human rights activists.

The struggle for Sergei Magnitsky continues even after his martyr's death in a Moscow prison. The lists of those involved in his persecution and death should also be published in Europe. Only in this way can an end be put to the lawless activity of Russian investigators, prosecutors and judges, for whom human life is worth nothing.