

Russia targets dissidents with punitive psychiatry

For Dr. Ilmi Umerov, the Soviet-era practice of punitive psychiatry is alive and well. The former deputy chairman of the indigenous Crimean Tatars' self-governing body in Crimea, publicly spoke out against Moscow's annexation of the peninsula from Ukraine in 2014. Shortly after, Russian authorities charged Umerov with "separatism," and in August of this year forced him into a psychiatric hospital for a month of observation. He was released after three weeks thanks in part to international pressure — and with no mental health diagnosis to speak of.

Speaking to Reuters during his detention, Umerov described how the entire experience reminded him of the Soviet-era practice of punitive psychiatry, when dissidents and activists were locked away under trumped-up mental health diagnoses in an effort to intimidate them and other dissidents into silence.

"It is all an attempt to keep the population in a constant state of fear," he told Reuters. "If the Mejlis [self-governing body] deputy chairman can be charged and punished, then everyone else should just shut up."

A number of other dissidents and activists have had experiences like Umerov's. Activist [Mikhail Kosenko](#) was sent to a psychiatric hospital for eight months after he was convicted of taking part in protests against Vladimir Putin in 2012. Others have been confined for [denying the existence of God](#) or for holding silent, solitary pickets. One activist was kidnapped from his home earlier this year by psychiatric hospital orderlies posing as meter readers.

But Human Rights Watch, a non-governmental research and advocacy organization, cautions against concluding that the use of punitive psychiatry is on a demonstrable rise in Russia.

"It wouldn't be correct to say that the use of punitive psychiatry has increased," says researcher Tanya Cooper who is based in the organization's Russia/Ukraine office. Instead, she stresses, punitive psychiatry is used to target specifically very outspoken critics



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of the Russian government, intimidate them into silence and, above all, associate dissent with mental illness in the public's mind.

"It's a tool to demonize someone's views, to make their opinion less credible."

Dr. Yuri Savenko, the head of Russia's Independent Psychiatric Association, agrees. "A significant change has occurred," he said in an interview from Moscow. "Punitive psychiatry has ceased to be used on a massive scale, but now it is used in a more targeted way."

However, he notes it is difficult to evaluate the extent of the use of punitive psychiatry. "Most of the political and other high-profile cases are usually hidden," Savenko says. "We only find out about them when we're approached by their lawyers."

Whatever its extent, it seems clear that Russian psychiatrists and medical professionals themselves have little love for punitive psychiatry.

Psychiatrist Dr. Alexander Kotsyubinsky, writing in 2013 in response to Kosenko's confinement, [argued](#) that very few Russian psychiatrists would willfully

harm people with unnecessary treatment.

"If a responsible psychiatrist sees that the patient who has been sent for compulsory treatment is not actually ill," he wrote, "then he simply goes through the motions, as it were, so as not to damage the health of this person."

Cooper agrees. "It's as if the medical community just goes along, because there's a zakaz — an order from the authorities. They're not ready to condemn a healthy person with no mental health issues to treatment they don't need." She points out that Umerov was not forced to take any drugs during his confinement.

For his part, Umerov holds no ill will toward the medical staff at the psychiatric hospital where he was confined, stressing that they were polite and professional as they followed the authorities' orders.

"There are attempts to revive to methods of punitive psychiatry," he told a [German journalist](#) after his release, "but, fortunately, not on the part of medical personnel." — Michael Colborne, Edmonton, Alta.