

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	845
Land:	Rusland
Kilde:	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
Titel:	Surviving Russian Prisons And The 'Frightening' Food They Serve
Udgivet:	14. oktober 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	16. december 2024



Document #2116752

RFE/RL – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Author)

Surviving Russian Prisons And The 'Frightening' Food They Serve

• By [Elya Novopashennaya](#)

Maria thought she knew a lot about life when, at age 35, she was [jailed in Moscow](#). But she did not yet know about Russian prison food.

"I didn't know people could be fed such things," said Maria, who was [incarcerated](#) for 17 months in 2021-22 on what the human rights group Memorial said were politically motivated charges.

But every day, the hundreds of thousands of inmates in Russia's [prisons and pretrial detention centers](#) are fed such things: uncooked porridge, unbaked bread, rancid meat, and more, former inmates [told Current Time](#), the Russian-language TV and digital network run by RFE/RL. At the same time, they said, a lack of vegetables and limited options for preparing or acquiring healthy food are standard.

Maria, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, tried to replicate prison porridge, which she called "snot," as an experiment after she was released. She couldn't do it.

Across Russia's vast system of jails and prisons, it's not just a matter of taste. The question is whether the food is even edible and can keep prisoners healthy, [in accordance with](#) the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. Current Time's reporting indicates that it often is not.

'You Won't Get Far On Breadcrumbs'

The menu at a prison in the Arctic former Gulag city of Norilsk looked "very delicious," former inmate Ivan Astashin remembered: With rules that prohibited feeding prisoners the same dish more than two or three times a week, it promised a variety of meals such as ragout, roast meat, and potato stew. But what came out on the plate was always the same: potato with venison, a common meat locally.

Astashin, a prisoner rights advocate, spent nearly 10 years in [three Russian prisons and five detention centers](#) due to terrorism-related charges that he and supporters say were politically motivated. He was released in 2020 and left Russia with his wife in 2022.

His memory of the prison food has not faded.

Breakfast was always wheat, oat, or barley-groats porridge with water or milk, and sometimes with so little grain that it was "just water," Astashin recollected.

Lunch was "most often a potato" but sometimes with cabbage or barley groats and a mystery meat or something "meat-like." Compote or a sort of sour berry jelly made with grain was the side.

Dinner was again either a potato, cabbage, or barley groats, alongside "a piece of fish or a fish cutlet."

Russia's Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) stipulates that prisoners receive 100 grams of meat, Astashin noted, but the black, frozen venison in the Norilsk facility looked "frightening," often stank, and "was impossible to eat," he said. Fellow inmates and staff said it had been kept in freezers "for decades" before being sent to the prison.

Astashin said his overall daily [calorie count](#) -- officially, set at 2,600 to 3,000 calories -- in prison was "more or less enough because they give (prisoners) pretty big pieces of bread." But he claimed they were not always properly baked.

At Moscow's infamous Matrosskaya Tishina jail, where Astashin spent several years, squeezing a bread crumb made it shrink "like plasticine," he recalled.

"We cut off the crusts and dried them so that it could be eaten and then our stomachs wouldn't swell," he said.

However, the former Moscow detainee Maria said, "You won't get far on breadcrumbs. You're craving vegetables."

FSIN regulations also require 500 grams of fresh, frozen, or canned

vegetables per day, but Maria said she could only get vegetables if someone brought them to the jail.

"I never knew that there can really be a state of withdrawal, when you crave vegetables so much that you're climbing the walls," she commented. "God willing that there's a teaspoon of sauerkraut once a week. If you get it, that's such a celebration."

In June 2024, FSIN told the [Moscow tabloid](#) Moskovsky Komsomolets that the "nutrition" for all inmates "meets the requirements of a balanced diet in terms of energy content and the ratio of proteins, fats and carbohydrates."

Maria begs to differ. "If a woman doesn't have someone on the outside, of course she won't survive on this prison food," she said. "Because it's not edible."

A Bucket Of Soup

Getting food from the outside, though, does not necessarily result in a good meal.

Former inmates said prisons and detention centers have almost no cookware available for prisoners who try to make meals for themselves. Nor do they usually allow access to stoves.

If a prisoner wants to make "a decent soup," Astashin said, he'll buy a plastic bucket in the commissary and then "boil the soup in the plastic bucket" with a collapsible water heater.

Knives for preparing ingredients are not available, but, Astashin noted, prisoners can find workarounds; in pretrial jails, bribed guards will bring whatever is wanted, he asserted.

"[I]f there are corrupt employees, they can bring a knife. If there aren't any, you can sharpen an aluminum spoon or some other object yourself."

A Captive Market

FSIN, however, realizes demand for different food exists. In Moscow and its suburbs, detention centers offer the Sidim, Yedim restaurant -- a pun of a name that roughly translates as We're Eating In Jail.

But the prices for FSIN food reflect their customers' lack of ready alternatives.

Commissary stalls sell cookies, dried bread, "and, if you're very lucky" a bit of sausage, but the higher prices signal that inmates are "paying for their

sins," Maria said.

Online prison stores, such as FSIN's [Zona Mag](#) and an e-store for temporary detainees, [Peredai v Sizo](#), offer prepared meals, vegetables, fruit, canned meat, and various confectionery items, but their prices, too, tend to be higher than at regular grocery stores.

Prisoners use personal accounts to pay and access to these items can vary. One defendant from a Moscow case in the 2010s said that getting decent food in his jail was "very difficult."

"[A] large number of people didn't have the option [to receive] any deliveries. They had to eat what they were given," said the man, who requested anonymity. "For that reason, people who only ate prison food looked bad. This is food that's not digested well."

Suffering In Solitary

Access to edible food worsens if a prisoner is put into solitary confinement, according to the accounts of political prisoners, including the late opposition leader [Aleksei Navalny](#).

One former solitary-confinement prisoner who now works for the prisoner rights group Russia Behind Bars alleged that guards put food in dishes that had been used by inmates who had been raped or otherwise abused. Eating from those dishes conferred the same status, the lowest in prison culture, claimed the activist, who requested anonymity.

In solitary, he said, he ate only bread and lost 42 kilograms.

Kevin Lik, a German-Russian student [sentenced to four years](#) in December 2023 on a treason conviction and designated a political prisoner by Memorial, got by with the help of packets of instant noodles his mother sent. When he was released in the August [prisoner swap](#) involving Russia, the United States, and other countries, Lik, who is 19 and nearly 2 meters tall, weighed 72 kilograms.

He doesn't recall what he ate first after his release, but he said one thing's for sure: "Normal food gave me a lot of happiness."

Written by Elizabeth Owen based on reporting by Elya Novopashennaya for Current Time

- [Elya Novopashennaya](#)

Elya Novopashennaya is a contributor to Current Time, the Russian-language digital and TV network run by RFE/RL.

ecoi.net description:

Article on the situation in Russian prisons and prison food

Country:

Russian Federation

Source:

[RFE/RL – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#) (Author)

Published:

14 October 2024

Original link:

<https://www.rferl.org/a/prison-food-struggle-survive-russia-jail/33155146.html>

Document type:

Media Report

Language:

English

Available on ecoi.net since:

30 October 2024

Document ID:

2116752