

Russia's Penal Empire

As of 21 August 2018, the Federal Penal Service (FPS) in Russia was exercising *some form of control* over more than a million of the country's citizens.

That is the picture revealed by the Service's website, the official data of FSIN, the Federal Service "for the Implementation of Punishments" – a literal translation of the Penal Service's title (see table, p. 3).

1. More than half of this number (587,111) are serving sentences for crimes that carry a term of imprisonment.

Alongside China and the United States, Russia imprisons more people, per 100,000 population, than anywhere else: approximately 10 times as much as the UK, for example, while the Russian population is only 3-4 times greater than that of the British Isles. Few (1,325) are held in Russia's eight prisons. The majority (481,300) are prisoners in the Russian Federation's 708 penal or **corrective-labour colonies**, as the forced labour camps of the Stalin-era Gulag are known today.

2. Many others, not yet convicted of a crime, are held by the FPS under a prison regime, confined to their cells all day except for an hour's exercise (103,104).

They have been detained for pre-trial investigation or during their trial in one of Russia's 309 Investigative Isolators (SIZO), usually called **detention centres**. Custody in such institutions is the most common "measure of restraint" imposed by criminal courts in Russia today. In August 2018, only 7,102 were under house arrest.

3. The inhabitants of the penal colonies, detention centres and prisons are overwhelmingly adult males. There are 46,924 women in FPS-run institutions and 1,382 juvenile offenders in Russia's 23 reform colonies.

The largest group of offenders are serving 5- to 10-year sentences. A small number (2,032), held in seven of the country's penal colonies, have been imprisoned for life or a minimum of 20 years.

Those under FPS Control or Supervision

4. Apart from the 587,111 inmates of FPS institutions – convicted prisoners and detained suspects – the Service exercises a degree of supervision over a further 513,176 individuals.

They were sentenced to forms of punishment that **did not involve deprivation of their liberty**: they were serving suspended or non-custodial sentences; a small number (7,102) were subject to pre-trial house arrest.

Nikolai Shchur's 2017 volume *Russia's Penal Empire*, modestly subtitled a "Short Guide" (it is 286 pp. long), begins with a valuable compendium of official statistics and laws. These are then set against the realities of the penal system, observed over 20 years by Shchur and his wife Tatiana as they have defended the rights of those "isolated from society".

Among more than one hundred and fifty prisoners of conscience in Russia today, citizens of foreign countries are particularly vulnerable. At different times over the past ten years, citizens from neighbouring countries (Estonians, Georgians) have been detained and convicted. Since spring 2014, the largest contingent of foreigners has been made up of citizens of Ukraine, from the mainland and from Crimea.

Film-maker **Oleg Sentsov**, for example, was arrested in Crimea on 14 May 2014 and detained for months in Russian detention centres, including that in Chelyabinsk (Urals Federal District). In August 2015 he was convicted of terrorist offences and is today serving a 20-year sentence in a strict-regime penal colony near Labytnangi, a small town on the Arctic Circle in Northwest Russia (Yamalo-Nenets District).

On 14 May 2018, the fourth anniversary of his arrest, Sentsov declared an unlimited hunger strike, demanding the release of 65 compatriots currently held in Russia's jails and camps. Under the threat of forced feeding by prison staff Sentsov ended his hunger strike on 6 October 2018. Observers fear that his prolonged refusal of food might have already done irreparable damage to his system.

John Crowfoot

Those under FPS Control or Supervision

THOSE UNDER THE CONTROL OR SUPERVISION OF THE FEDERAL PENAL SERVICE (as of 21 August 2018)

Convicted offenders [1-3]	
1. Penal Colonies	
<i>1.1 – Number of corrective colonies</i>	708
Inmates of corrective colonies, serving sentences for crimes committed	481,300
<i>1.2 – Number of penal settlements (most lenient regime)</i>	123
Inmates of penal settlements, serving sentences for crimes committed	35,275
<i>1.3 – Number of corrective colonies for those serving life sentences</i>	7
Inmates of corrective colonies for those serving life sentences	2,032
2. Prisons	
<i>2.1 – Number of prisons</i>	8
Inmates of prisons serving sentences for crimes committed	1,422
3. Juvenile offenders	
<i>3.1 – Number of reform colonies (correctional institutions)</i>	23
Inmates of reform colonies serving sentences for crimes committed	1,382
4. Detainees under investigation or on trial (prison regime)	
<i>4.1 – Number of investigative isolators or detention centres</i>	212
<i>4.2 – Number of premises serving function of detention centres</i>	97
Inmates of the two aforementioned	103,104
TOTAL HELD IN FPS INSTITUTIONS (1-4)	
All inmates of FPS penal colonies, prisons and detention centres	587,111
of which – women prisoners and detainees	46,924
5. Those subject to other measures of punishment or restraint	
Citizens serving non-custodial sentences	506,074
Citizens under house arrest	7,102

FPS statistics – <http://fsin.su/opendata/7706562710-statistics/>

retrieved 15 October 2018