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I first met Aleksandra Krylenkova in 2015 in Simferopol. We sat in a café opposite the FSB building, and I asked her, “What was it like here before the Crimea was annexed?” Sasha answered that there was the [SBU (Security Service of Ukraine)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Security_Service_of_Ukraine), and that the people who work at the FSB now are the same people who used to work for the SBU. Aleksandra told me a lot about the human rights situation after the Crimean Peninsula was annexed. I was very struck by her knowledge and determination. After this, we chatted sometimes and I followed her work with interest.

Yesterday [Putin had a meeting with members of the Presidential Council for Human Rights](http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62285). It’s now chaired by Fadeev, who’s replaced Mikhail Fedotov. As usual, my impressions of this meeting are depressing.

Here’s how Sasha Krylenkova described her experiences on Facebook:

“At our meeting yesterday, there was one notable – but unnamed – changed reality. At our previous meetings we hardly managed to raise the subject of any of our ‘pressing problems’. It was a struggle to get the chance to say anything. Yesterday, though, we managed to mention almost everything. We talked about the [supposed terrorist organisation] Network, about the [supposed extremist organisation] New Greatness (Novoe velichie), about torture, about the ban on Hizb ut-Tahrir, and much more. When he replied, Putin mixed up [Hizb ut-Tahrir](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hizb_ut-Tahrir) with the [Jehovah's Witnesses](https://jw-russia.org/en/index.html), the Network with [New Greatness](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%94%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BE_%C2%AB%D0%9D%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE_%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B8%D1%8F%C2%BB), the [Moscow protests](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9C%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B5_%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BE) with [those in Paris](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_vests_movement). It doesn’t matter.

There’s no news about political clampdowns in our country. There’s no news about how people and their lives are meaningless. There’s no news about how the authorities are dealing with the court cases to do with Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, New Greatness, the Network, and this summer’s street protesters. Words have simply stopped having meaning. That’s the news.

Until people are afraid to tell the truth, and the authorities try to hide the truth, the truth has meaning. Words have weight.

We say that it not 1937 now. These days there’s the internet, Novaia Gazeta, Dozhd’ and Ekho Moskvy [independent media]. Today we’re able to talk. We can still do that. But it doesn’t have meaning any more. The words we say have lost their weight.

In 1956, after the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [at which Khrushchev denounced Stalin], heaps of people said: ‘But we didn’t know anything about it! It’s dreadful!’, but these very people knew of neighbours, or their friends’ relatives, or their co-workers, who’d been sent off to prison camps. But that didn’t mean anything.

That’s what it’s like now. We can say words, but they don’t have any meaning. And in something like 2037 or 2053 everyone will be saying, ‘There were a thousand political prisoners in 2019?? Tens of thousands of innocent people charged under article 228 of the Criminal Code??? Tortures committed by the FSB?? Falsified court cases about terrorism? It’s dreadful! But we didn’t know anything about it...’

There is strength in words and the truth. But only when words have meaning.”