



## STORIES

# **‘I want to live — and that’s why I’m writing’** Russian journalist Elena Kostyuchenko recounts surviving an apparent poisoning attempt in Germany

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Фото: Elena Kostyuchenko

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Берегите себя и отправляйте этот материал  
только тем, кому вы доверяете

Elena Kostyuchenko is one of the finest and most intrepid Russian journalists working today. On day one of Russia's full-scale invasion, Kostyuchenko left for Ukraine to cover the war for Novaya Gazeta. Her reporting provided powerful testimony about the war crimes the Russian military committed against Ukraine's civilian population. But in late March 2022, faced with the threat of criminal prosecution in Russia, Novaya Gazeta was forced to suspend publication. Kostyuchenko's wartime dispatches were also removed from the newspaper's website — and she hasn't published a story since. Unable to return safely to Russia, Kostyuchenko moved to Germany and began experiencing health problems shortly afterwards. Instead of getting better, as she'd initially expected, her symptoms grew worse over time, until it became apparent that she might have been poisoned. Now, a new investigation from the independent outlet The Insider has revealed what most likely happened to her. In her own words, Elena Kostyuchenko recalls covering the 2022 invasion and surviving an apparent poisoning attempt, carried out in Europe.

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I put off writing this text for a long time. Doing it still feels revolting, frightening, and shameful.

I cannot write about everything I know, since I must protect the people who saved my life.

On February 24, 2022, my country invaded Ukraine. On that day, I left for Ukraine on an assignment from Novaya Gazeta, the paper where I had worked for the past 17 years.

I crossed the Polish–Ukrainian border on the night before February 26. Over the next four weeks, thanks to the incredible help of Ukrainians, I produced four reportages: from the border, and then from Odesa, Mykolayiv, and Kherson.

Kherson was under occupation. To get there and to leave the city later, I had to cross the frontline twice. At the time, the Russian military was abducting and torturing people in Kherson. I was able to track down people who had endured that torture. By comparing their reports, and also through fieldwork, I found the place where they'd been kept. It was a former detention center located at 3 Teploenerhetykiv Street. I also managed to find out the names of 44 abduction victims, together with the circumstances in which they were captured. I published the reportage and handed over the information about abductions to Ukrainian Prosecutor's Office.

The next city I was going to was Mariupol.

Mariupol was still trying to defend itself. There was heavy fighting. Many days would go by without an open

humanitarian corridor. The only sometimes passable access road went through Zaporizhzhia. It came under fire regularly, and Russian checkpoints would start appearing along the way as you got closer to Mariupol. Still, people trying to save their families from a city that was being destroyed used that road almost daily. Volunteers worked to organize them into convoys, and I decided to go with them.

I arrived in Zaporizhzhia on March 28. While I waited at the checkpoint (where members of the territorial defense were checking my passport and press credentials), a flurry of messages from my friends began coming in: “Bastards,” “Hang in there,” “Let me know if you need any help,” I read. This is how I found out that Novaya Gazeta had suspended its work. After receiving its second warning from the state censor (Roskomnadzor) in one year, the paper was in danger of losing its license. I had been expecting this since the start of the invasion, but I didn’t realize it would hurt so much.

I decided to go to Mariupol anyway, and to publish the resulting text wherever I could.

On March 29, I met with volunteers and with some of the people who were going to Mariupol to try and save their loved ones. I found someone who was willing to take me in his car, despite my Russian passport. We agreed to leave on March 31.

The day before the departure date, I was at the hotel, trying to rest and recharge, when one of my colleagues from Novaya

called and asked if I was going to Mariupol. This took me off guard: only two people at Novaya knew about my going there: the editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov and my own editor, Olga Bobrova. “Yes, I’m going tomorrow,” I said. Then she said: “My sources got in touch with me. They know you’re going to Mariupol, and they’re telling me that Kadyrov’s men have been ordered to find you.”

Kadyrov’s National Guard formations were taking active part in the siege of Mariupol. They also stood at the checkpoints outside of the city. I knew this. But my colleague said: “They’re not going to detain you. They’re going to kill you. It’s all been settled.”

It was like hitting a wall head-on. My ears got plugged, and the world became all-white for a moment. “I don’t believe it,” I said. She said: “I also told them I didn’t believe it. They just played me an audio recording of you discussing this trip to Mariupol with this person. And I recognized your voice.”

When she hung up, I sat down on the bed. My mind was blank. I just sat there.

Forty minutes later, my own source from Ukraine’s military intelligence called. He said to me: “We have information about a plan to murder a Novaya Gazeta journalist in Ukraine. Your description has been forwarded to every Russian checkpoint.”

An hour later, I got a call from Muratov. He said: “You cannot go to Mariupol. You must leave Ukraine right now.”

But I couldn't make myself leave.

The next morning, I woke up to a message from Novaya. The Russian Prosecutor General and Roskomnadzor had demanded that Novaya remove my Ukrainian reporting from its website, unless the editors wanted the whole site to be blocked. Novaya had stooped to their demands. For some reason, this absolutely crushed me. I burst into tears and couldn't stop crying. But then, instead of tears, I was overcome with rage.

Next I tried to find some new way to get to Mariupol while avoiding the Russian checkpoints. But there was fighting everywhere, and there was no road apart from the one that went through Zaporizhzhia. And on that road, they were waiting for me.

I couldn't come to terms with my own helplessness. Rational arguments failed me. The one thought that stopped me was the question of what would happen to the person who'd agreed to take me in his car. If they kill me, I thought, they won't spare him either.

I left Ukraine the night before April 2.

By the time I left, I was in very poor shape. I had lice, as well as both mumps and PTSD. My friends took me in. Then my girlfriend Yana came and started caring for me. She made sure

that I ate and slept. I wanted to shake myself up, finish the book I was writing, and go back home, to Russia. My work, my whole life, my mom and my sister were all there. The more terrible the news from my home country, the more I felt that my place in life was definitely there.

The more I thought about the plans to have me murdered, the more my mind settled. As I think about what went on inside my head at that time, it seems both silly and embarrassing.

I didn't know who had given that order. In my mind, my would-be killers were simply "they."

It must have been an emotional decision, I thought. The war wasn't going the way they'd expected, and everyone was on edge. I had just come back from Kherson, slipping right under their noses. This must have upset them. They must have started wondering what I would do next. They found out I was about to go to Mariupol — which is to say, to a city that had been turned into one big war crime — and so they tried to prevent this, using their own infernal methods. There were several kilometers of no-man's land between the last Ukrainian checkpoint and the first Russian one. The Russian military could have said that I never even made it to their checkpoint. People disappear all the time during a war. Who knows, they could have said, maybe it was the Ukrainians who killed me? I'm a Russian journalist, and "everybody knows that Ukrainians hate Russians."

## **Poisonings and break-ins** Investigative journalists report multiple attacks abroad against Russian oppositionists in the months ahead of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine

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But they didn't kill me, I thought, and so everything was fine.

In the evening on April 28, I got a call from Muratov. He spoke very gently. "I know you want to go home," he said. "But you can't return to Russia. They would murder you here." When I hung up, I screamed. I stood in the middle of the street, screaming.

Muratov and I met a month later. He said that if I was murdered, "it would look like a hate crime." "The right wing hates lesbians, and you're a lesbian."

Next, I worked on my book. Writing left me no headspace for anything else, and those were wonderful days.

In late September, I got in touch with Muratov once again, asking him to check whether I could now come back to Russia. He called me several days later with an answer: "No. No. And once again: No."

I rented an apartment in Berlin. September 29 was my first day of work at Meduza. We had decided that my first reporting trip would be to Iran. I had been there before and knew how to



work there. I found myself some helpers in the country, got a visa, and bought some clothes. After Iran, we thought, I would go back to Ukraine. Meduza asked me to apply for a Ukrainian visa before leaving for Iran.

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The site where you can normally apply for a Ukrainian visa and get an appointment at the embassy was refusing to let me do either of those things. When I called the Ukrainian Foreign Service hotline, they told me that the site had been hacked and nothing could be done until it had been fixed. I started looking for contacts in the embassy. Finally, I was able to get an appointment at the consulate in Munich.

Inexcusable as it is, I booked my appointment in Munich via Facebook Messenger. I knew very well this wasn't considered a secure messenger, but I was in Germany, not in Russia, and not a single thought of the basic security measures I'd practiced for years crossed my mind.

I left for Munich on October 17, in the evening, taking an overnight train. Traveling in the economy car, I curled up across the seats and fell asleep. Other people walked past me. They brushed against my feet, and I pulled them up and kept sleeping.

By morning, I was in Munich. I went to a friend's place and tried to take a nap before going to the consulate. Once there, the staff asked me what I was going to do in Ukraine. They accepted my documents, but their own computer system had also crashed, like the website, and I couldn't apply for a visa on the spot. I would have to come back a second time.

My friend picked me up from the consulate and we went to lunch. We sat outside, and different friends of hers, a man and two women, stopped by our table twice before we finished eating. What a small city Munich is, I thought: everyone there seemed to know each other. I would get up, go to the restroom, come back to the table, and think of nothing except my visa. The chance of getting it was slim, but maybe it would all work out.

The same friend was going to take me to the train station. When we were getting near it, she said: "You know, you don't smell good. I'm going to look for some deodorant." But she couldn't find any. I remember feeling surprised by what she said. She is a tactful person and wouldn't have said anything unless I really smelled awful.

On the train, I found my seat and went straight to the restroom. I got some paper towels and started to wipe myself all over. It turned out, I was very sweaty. The sweat smelled sharply of rotten fruit.

I returned to my seat and started proofreading my book manuscript. After a while, I realized I was rereading the same paragraph over and over again. I listened to my body and noticed that I had a headache.

This was three weeks after I had Covid, and I worried I might be getting it again. I called Yana and told her I was feeling sick. “I hope it isn’t Covid,” I said to her, “otherwise how am I going to go to Iran?”

Then I tried to get back to proofreading, but I was falling apart quickly. The headache was getting worse. Sweating, I went to the restroom to wipe myself with more paper towels.

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When the train arrived at the station, I realized that I couldn’t figure out how to get home. I knew I had to take the U-Bahn, but I didn’t know how to do it. I thought about going out into the street and hailing a ride, but the thought of using an app with a map and trying to square it with real streets terrified me. It’s too complicated a task, I thought. I won’t be able to manage.

I spent a long time looking for the U-Bahn platform. Once on the platform, I couldn’t understand which train direction I should take. I burst into tears. Some other passengers helped me to the right train.

My apartment was five minutes away from the subway station. It took me forever to get there. Every few steps, I put my bag down to take a break. The bag seemed unbearably heavy.

On the stairs, I was suddenly short of breath. Fuck this Covid, I thought. Once in the apartment, I went straight to sleep, hoping I'd feel better after a nap. Instead, I woke up feeling worse.

What woke me up was a strange pain in my abdomen. It wasn't sharp, but it was intense, and felt as if someone turned it off and on by throwing a switch. I tried to sit up, but lay down again right away. The room seemed to be spinning around me, and I grew more nauseous with its every turn. I managed to walk to the bathroom and threw up.

I wrote messages to Iran and wept. It was going to be my first assignment on a new job, and now this, I thought.

My stomach was hurting more and more. It even hurt to touch my skin. I hardly slept that night or several nights that followed. Whenever sleep got the better of me, I was immediately awakened by the pain. When I tried to sit or stand, my head would spin. After three days of this, it became clear I wasn't going anywhere. And this wasn't COVID-19.

When you live in Berlin, it's not easy to go and see a doctor right when you need it. My first appointment took place 10 days after I got sick, on October 28.

This was an ordinary local clinic. The two doctors who saw me told me right away that I was having some delayed post-Covid symptoms. “They can last up to six months,” one of them said. “If you still have them after half-a-year, come again.” An abdominal ultrasound looked fine. I persuaded them to do some bloodwork and left the clinic feeling encouraged. It wasn’t anything serious after all, and I would soon feel better.

But the bloodwork came back looking grim. My ALT and AST liver enzyme levels were five times the norm. My urine sample showed traces of blood.

The doctors weren’t taking this lightly anymore. I was sent to another specialist, who said it might be some type of viral hepatitis. I could easily have brought it back with me from the war zone, she said. “Let’s just confirm this so that we can treat you.”

But the hepatitis test came back negative.

The symptoms were changing. My abdomen wasn’t hurting as much, and my head was spinning less than before. I had zero energy. My face began to swell up. Next, my fingers. After a struggle, I managed to get my rings off, only to realize that I couldn’t put them on again. My fingers looked like sausages. My feet also began to swell. The swelling made my chin vanish. It wasn’t my face anymore. I needed time before a mirror to find myself in it. Now and then, my heart began to

race. My hands and feet would sometimes start burning. When they did, they looked red and glossy.

Everything made me exhausted. I had trouble walking down the stairs. Sometimes, Yana and I tried to take a walk, but after 15–30 minutes I'd feel so exhausted that we had to go back. I stopped sleeping, but not because of pain. Now it seemed as if my brain had forgotten how to fall asleep. I lay in bed for hours trying not to wake up Yana, gazing at the ceiling and wondering what was happening to me.

My liver enzyme levels kept rising. There was still blood in my urine.

I kept seeing doctors, who ventured different theories, tested them, and proposed new ones. Autoimmune conditions, kidney failure, systemic disorders were proposed and ruled out. Meduza put me in touch with a physician the editors trusted. He suggested repeating the hepatitis tests. They came back negative a second time. On my way back home from his clinic, I saw that he had messaged me. “Is there a chance you might have been poisoned?” he wondered. “No. I’m not that dangerous,” I replied.

At home, I told Yana about his idea, and we had a good laugh. “Of course, if you’re a Russian journalist, surely it must be poisoning!” We thought this was very funny.

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On December 12, I was at the clinic once again. A new round of tests, all worse than before, the ALT levels now seven times the norm. The physician was silently leafing through the papers on her desk. Then she said: “Elena, there are just two possibilities. One is that the antidepressants you’d been taking started to affect you in a completely unforeseen way. But you’ve recently switched medications, and your symptoms and bloodwork still look the same. So here’s the other possibility. Please try not to get upset. You may have been poisoned.”

I laughed, but she remained silent. “It’s impossible,” I said. “We have ruled out everything else,” she replied. “I’m sorry. You have to be seen by toxicologists at Charité.”

For the next three days, I lay at home thinking. I can’t remember my own thoughts, but Yana says that for the first day I talked about how stupid it all was and how the doctors had simply given up on diagnosing me and wanted to pass me on to another clinic. Next, I was silent. Then I got in touch with Meduza and we started thinking about the next steps.

In Germany, if you suspect you’ve been poisoned and want to have a toxicology report, you must contact the police. I contacted the police and got a hospital referral. The detectives followed me to the clinic, where they questioned me as well as the physicians.

My first round of questioning with the Berlin criminal police lasted for nine hours. The detectives wanted to know everything: what I had been working on, what I was planning to work on, who my contacts in Ukraine were, and which of my colleagues I was in touch with. Everything that happened on October 17 and 18 had to be reconstructed minute-by-minute.

My apartment and belongings were checked for radiation. I was checked for radiation. The clothes I had worn in Munich were taken away. The police assessed the security of my apartment. “How can you live without drawing the curtains? You could be shot from the balcony in the opposite building,” an officer said.

The detectives told me I had to follow the safety rules. I wondered what they were. “Move to a different apartment. Use multiple routes for getting home. Don’t hail a ride from one address to another, get out of the car a block away from your destination. Wear sunglasses when you’re outside.” “Will this be enough, then?” “Let’s say it’ll improve your chances.”

The detectives were angry with me. They kept this to themselves, but three rounds of questioning made them talkative too.

It turned out that the lead detective had solved the murder of the former Chechen field commander Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, who had been shot at the Kleiner Tiergarten in



2019. Thanks to the witnesses and the security cameras, it didn't take long to arrest the killer. Although his passport identified him as Vadim Sokolov, journalists and police investigators uncovered his real name, Vadim Krasikov, and his links to the FSB. Krasikov was given a life sentence in Germany, where a judge found that, by committing a state-commissioned murder, Krasikov had engaged in state-sponsored terrorism. In 2022, Russia made two requests to include Krasikov in the list of convicted criminals subject to international exchange, but Germany has refused to do so.

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#### BELLINGCAT ON THE FSB OPERATIVES' TRAIL

**The FSB's busy, busy bees** 'Bellingcat' and its partners release a new investigative report tracking the Russian agents who allegedly tailed and tried to kill Alexey Navalny

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A year earlier, the same detective investigated the poisoning of Pyotr Verzilov, the publisher of Mediazona and a member of the Pussy Riot collective. Convulsing and delirious, Verzilov had been flown to Charité from Moscow by a private jet. In Berlin, Verzilov's friends realized that the clinic was under surveillance. The police offered him protection and started to investigate, but couldn't find anything. "We couldn't even find the substance," the detectives told me. "Why not?" "Because you can't ask a lab to tell you if someone has been poisoned. You can only ask them whether there's such-and-such a

substance in his system. And there are thousands of possible substances. Which makes this a very popular murder technique.”

Our conversation went on like this:

“I don’t understand why it took you so long to contact us. You should have called the police on the same day when you got sick on the train. We would have met you at the station.”

“But I didn’t think I had been poisoned. I’m not even sure of it now.”

“And why didn’t you think so?”

“It seemed too wild an idea. I was in Europe.”

“So what?”

“I felt that I was safe.”

“This is exactly what bothers us. You come here and think you’re on vacation. You think you’re in some kind of paradise. No one even considers taking security precautions. We have political murders happen here. Russia’s secret services are active in this country. And your recklessness, yours and your colleagues’, is just beyond the pale.”

The police didn’t tell me anything about the progress of the investigation.

On April 2, during a journalism conference, the editor-in-chief of The Insider, Roman Dobrokhoto, pulled me aside. “Lena, I have a personal question for you. But first, let me tell you something. Christo Grozev and I are investigating a series of poisonings in Europe. The victims are all female Russian journalists. So I want to ask you. The fact that you haven’t been writing for such a long time — does it have something to do with your health?”

What I told him then was the story that I’m telling you now.

On May 2, a letter from the Berlin prosecutor’s office informed me that the case opened in connection with my attempted murder had been closed. The detectives couldn’t establish “any indication” that I had been poisoned, since “available blood tests do not point clearly to poisoning.”

The physicians who consulted The Insider, however, said that the likeliest cause of my symptoms was poisoning with a chlorinated organic compound. I passed this information to the police, and on July 21 the case was reopened.

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What’s happening with me now? The pain, nausea, and swelling are gone. My energy has not come back. I have left Meduza, since I’m very far from traveling on assignment. Right now, I can work three hours a day. This interval is

getting longer, but only slowly. On some days, I can't do anything at all, apart from lying still and trying not to hate myself.

When writing this text, I was trying to reconstruct the chronology of the events and not to lose any of the important details. But which details are important?

Last November, a friend of mine came to visit me in Berlin. He is neither a political activist nor a journalist. He came to see me and was horrified by the way I looked. "Do you realize you may have been poisoned?" he said. "Did you mention this to the doctors?" I told him that I didn't and wasn't going to, because this is ridiculous. "And please try not to infect me with your paranoia," I said to him.

I hadn't been forthright with the police detectives. Of course it wouldn't have been a "wild idea" to think about poisoning. In the time that I worked at Novaya Gazeta, four of our employees were killed. I attended the funeral of my friend, the journalist Mikhail Beketov. I knew that journalists get killed, but I didn't want to think about someone trying to kill me. It was a mixture of revulsion, shame, and exhaustion that turned me away from this idea. I found it revolting to think that there might be people who wanted me dead. I felt ashamed to speak about an idea like this, just as I feel ashamed in front of my loved ones for involving the police. And I also felt too tired to have to run, yet again.

In a few weeks, my new book will be released. In it, I write about Russia's path to fascism. The book is going to be released in several languages. The police detectives think that it could trigger the people who tried to kill me in Ukraine, and possibly in Germany, to make another attempt.

But I want to live — and that's why I'm writing this text.

I also want my colleagues, my friends, political activists, and refugees who are now abroad to remember to be careful. More careful than I have been. We are not safe, and we will never be safe until the political regime changes in Russia. Our work is what hastens its end, but the regime will defend itself.

If you suddenly feel sick, please don't rule out the possibility of poisoning, and tell the doctors about it, too. Advocate for yourself. And if this does happen to you, please get in touch with the investigators at The Insider or Bellingcat. They're looking for those who are trying to kill you.

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THE INSIDER'S POISONING INVESTIGATION

**'The most likely explanation'** At least three Russian journalists and activists appear to have been poisoned abroad since fall 2022

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**Elena Kostyuchenko.** Translated by **Anna Razumnaya.**

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Мы говорим как есть не только про политику. Скачайте приложение.

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