



Maksym Butkevych 📷: Emile Ducke

Call Me Maks

The Stronger We Become feat. Lemez Lovas, Yuriy Gurzhy, SneakyBeats, Maiya James

Call Me Maks is the first release for **#TSWB (The Stronger We Become)** – a campaign for the release of the thousands of Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilians in Russian captivity.

See the latest [MIHR briefing sheet on Ukrainians in Russian captivity](#).

Call Me Maks

This song is a story of two friends: British musician Lemez (Oi Va Voi) and Ukrainian journalist and peace activist, Maksym Butkevych - a former BBC World Service presenter, co-founder of [Human Rights Centre ZMINA](#) and founder of independent media organization [Hromadske Radio](#). Maksym is a human rights activist, who, along with thousands of others, [volunteered to join the Ukrainian army](#) when the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine started on 24th February 2022. He was sent to the front line and captured a few months later. He was held in the occupied Luhansk region of Ukraine and sentenced to [13 years of imprisonment](#) under trumped-up charges including “shooting at a residential building”.

The two friends first met in London in 2003 when Maks was working for BBC World Service Radio, Ukrainian Section, and Lemez was running Oi Va Voi, the ground-breaking world music band (NY Times Top Ten Albums of 2003). When Maks left London in 2006, they followed each other's work online.

“One day I saw that his social media accounts had disappeared,” says Lemez, “and I contacted our friend Svitlana to ask if she knew what was going on. A few days later she told me: Maks has been captured. In shock, I asked her what we could do. She said, do what you know. Music was the way that we met, so I tried to write something based on his personality, his courage, the bands he loved. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever tried to write.

As the months went past, and news about Maks became worse, the fact that I couldn't finish it weighed heavily on me. The first two verses came out in a day: the last verse describing his life in prison took over 6 months."

With the help of longstanding collaborators Yuriy Gurzhy (RotFront, Zhadan/Gurzhy), producer SneakyBeats (Jem), vocalist Maiya James (Kyoto Jazz Massive, Mark De Clive Lowe) and guitarist Tom Welham (Thirteen Senses), the track was finally completed in October 2024.

That week, as part of a prisoner exchange with Russia, and without warning, [Maks was suddenly released](#) after two years and four months in captivity. Now released from the army, Maks is continuing his human rights work, helping to spread awareness about the many thousands of detainees, both Ukrainian POWs and civilians, that remain in Russian captivity.

"Hearing the song for the first time," says Maksym, "it was probably the second time since my release [from prison] that I felt tears filling my eyes and rolling out when I listened to it. With a few minor exceptions, everything is so precise, not only about the circumstances, but also about the mood of it and what went on, not only outside, but also inside of me. It's every human being's essence to be free. I really feel it now, especially, and I understand that it is possible only due to all these people who fought for my release. And now, I am going to join with all my heart and all my force in the fight for those who are still in captivity, for my brothers and sisters that I had to leave behind. They are not left behind, we'll get them out as soon as possible, they really need it and their families need it. So the third part of the song is also very, very much to the point. A lot of people in Ukraine, families and friends of our POWs and captured civilians, they are waiting for it."

About the campaign

#TSWB The Stronger We Become is a media and arts campaign, to raise international awareness of Ukrainians in Russian captivity, coordinated by Ukrainian human rights organizations [Human Rights Centre ZMINA](#) and [Media Initiative for Human Rights](#).

To support the detainees themselves and their families, we call on musicians and artists around the world to recognise them through songs, so that they know they have not been forgotten. **Join the campaign and share your original beats!**

Tetiana Pechonchyk, head of the Human Rights Centre ZMINA, said: *"The release of Maksym Butkevych gives hope to many Ukrainians who are waiting for their loved ones, friends and colleagues to return from Russian captivity. Music crosses borders and speaks a universal language, reaching the hearts of many people in Ukraine and abroad who demand the release of Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilian captives. These voices should become stronger, and it is people, not minerals, that should be the first thing to be discussed during any political negotiations on the Russian-Ukrainian war."*

Tetiana Katrychenko, head of the Media Initiative for Human Rights, said: *"MIHR has interviewed dozens of released Ukrainian POWs. We see how Russia uses music as a tool of pressure and torture — forcing Ukrainian captives to learn and sing the Russian national anthem and other propaganda songs. But while in captivity they are being broken, in freedom, artistic initiatives can become their voice. Songs can remind the world about those still in captivity and fight for their return."*

Get Involved #TSWB

Journalist?	Interview artists / partners about the song + campaign
Producer / musician?	Write a song / perform on a track / send us original beats
Well-wishers	Share / donate to ZMINA / MIHR

Call Me Maks	https://bit.ly/call-me-maks-reel
Instagram	@the_stronger_we_become
Youtube	https://youtu.be/RaT--aTp83Q

Press Pack (images / documents / audio)
<https://bit.ly/TSWB-press-pack>

Available for interview:

- **Yelyzaveta Sokurenko** -- Head of International Crimes Documentation, Human Rights Centre ZMINA.
Documentation of Russian war crimes, illegal detention, abduction and torture of Ukrainian civilians by Russians, violation of the right to a fair trial.
- **Mariia Klymyk** -- Documenter at the Media Initiative for Human Rights
Specializes in prisoners of war, in-depth research on the locations and conditions of Ukrainian POWs in Russia, collecting testimonies
- **Anastasiia Pantieliieva**, Head of Documentation, Media Initiative for Human Rights
Expert on civilian detainees, maintains verified captivity records
- **Maksym Butkevych** -- ex-BBC reporter, co-founder Human Rights Centre ZMINA, released PoW
- **Lemez Lovas** -- songwriter, performer
- **Yuriy Gurzhy** -- songwriter, performer

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The press release is also available [in Ukrainian](#).