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Russia

# Campaigning to free Kagarlitsky: why and how.

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**On Wednesday, 26 July 2023 the news broke of the arrest of Boris Kagarlitsky by Russia's federal security service, the FSB, which quickly transferred him from Moscow to Syktyvkar, in the far north, charged with "apology for terrorism", with a trial announced for September, where he faces seven years in prison.**

The Russian regime, whether Putin's loyalists or other networks, has no legitimacy and no historical right to try anyone – not even the criminal torturer Girkin. Boris Kagarlitsky has nothing to do with "terrorism" and is a celebrity on the international "radical left". Aplatsoc therefore associates itself with the statement circulating in the RESU and this regardless of the issues addressed in the rest of this article. [1]

"On 25 July last Boris Kagarlitsky, a well-known intellectual and socialist activist, was arrested by the FSB on charges of "justification of terrorism" and immediately transferred to Syktyvkar, 1300 km from Moscow. There, the court decided, during a hearing behind closed doors without the presence of his lawyer, to keep him in detention until his trial to be held in September, at the end of which he could be sentenced to seven years in prison.

Kagarlitsky's prosecution and detention comes in the context of a repressive campaign by the government trying to silence all voices opposing both the invasion of Ukraine and its domestic policies. Since last year, the Putin government has focused on prosecuting, imprisoning or forcing into exile many well-known political figures, intellectuals and activists, who have spoken out publicly against the war as ordinary citizens through social networks. Kagarlitsky's was classified as a "foreign agent" in May.

We express our solidarity with Boris Kagarlitsky and demand his immediate release and that of all those detained for political motives."

That said, a campaign for the release of Boris Kagarlitsky must for us, and, we believe, for the RESU if it were to engage as such, be well understood politically in order to be effective. This undoubtedly requires full information for all activists. That is the purpose of this article. To make it clear that there may be a problem, let us point out two press releases from Russia.

The first of these communiqués is that of the Angry Patriots, the fan club of Igor Girkin alias Strelkov. [2] Girkin-Strelkov, well known in Russia and sordidly known in Ukraine, Bosnia and Moldova, is a high-level FSB and GRU cadre, present in Transnistria in 1991, Bosnia in 1994, and leading the establishment of the "People's Republics" of Donbass and Luhansk in 2014. He then organized the shooting down of the MH17 plane (298 dead), for which he is the subject of international condemnation. For several years, he has denounced the inadequacy of the means implemented by Putin to Russify half of Ukraine, and he has become an "opponent", undoubtedly right-wing for ultra-nationalists, "left" for those who made him look like a "red soldier" wanting to "fight imperialism", most prominently, Kagarlitsky. Representing the critical ultra-nationalist wing hostile to Prigozhin, he was arrested a week before the latter.

His Angry Patriots movement calls for the unification of Kagarlitsky's cause and that of Girkin and there is no doubt that if, in the international left, there is much talk of Kagarlitsky's defence as that of a "Marxist sociologist", in Russia itself, perhaps more people hear about it from the Girkin side and other red-browns, monarchists and "patriots".

A completely different statement comes from the anarchist Telegram feed Netchaievitchina. [3] These comrades,

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because they are comrades, do not question the principle of demanding Kagarlitsky's release, but see in him the key figure of the "dangerous myth of revolutionary Donbass" and deplore the fact that the many activists threatened with death in prison, "ordinary activists" like Yevgeny Karakashev, threatened with dying of brain disease, do not have influential networks: in fact, it is clear that these comrades fear that even less will be said about these now that an ecumenical campaign of the "amnesiac left" in favour of Kagarlitsky could begin.

Let us repeat we must campaign for him. But is the terrible question of these Russian anarchist comrades legitimate? Yes, it is! Boris Kagarlitsky, born in 1958, joined Samizdat, or dissent, around 1980, and was arrested in the final months of the Brezhnev era, then was "pardoned and released in 1983" according to the English Wikipedia article on him.

During perestroika, he was the best known leader of the Moscow New Socialists group, which, acting jointly with an anarcho-syndicalist group and with a sector of the CPSU that was to form the "Marxist Platform" current in 1990, was at the origin of the Moscow Popular Front, an "informal" movement which, more or less beyond the control of its initiators, would support the election of Boris Yeltsin to the Congress of People's Deputies and to the mayor's office.

It was during this period that Kagarlitsky became highly prized by the radical left and far-left press in the West, such as *New Left Review*. The book he had been working on for years, "The Thinking Reed: Intellectuals and the Soviet State from 1917 to the Present", which is by far his richest, most original and most remarkable work, appeared in English in 1988.

These years ended with the end of the USSR. During the August 1991 putsch, he and his group, like their anarcho-syndicalist and "CPSU Marxist" allies, adopted an abstentionist attitude, not supporting the mass movement that opposed the putschists and that Yeltsin would benefit from.

At the end of 1993, during the armed confrontation between the President of the "Russian Federation", Boris Yeltsin, and his "parliament", they sided with the latter and engaged in the fighting on the losing side – Kagarlitsky then served a brief prison sentence where he was molested. This second choice places its authors alongside the so-called "conservative" or "national-Stalinist" or even "red-brown" forces.

In these events and by these choices, their project of building a "Party of Labour" in Russia was aborted. Some retired, others began successful careers, like the hitherto "anarcho-syndicalist" leader Andrei Isayev who became leader of the official trade unions (and still is today) and a supporter of Putin.

Kagarlitsky began a career at the Russian Academy of Sciences and his international contacts played on his status as a "Marxist sociologist", though in fact, his most original work remains the first, on the Russian-Soviet intelligentsia. From the beginning of the Putin years, Kagarlitsky ran an "Institute for the Study of Globalization and Social Movements", then with the rise of the Internet, the *Rabkor* website.

Their activity consists in denouncing US "imperial" hegemony and highlighting Russia's integration under Putin into global neoliberalism and the hegemony of finance. Kagarlitsky takes up formulas from authors of a completely different calibre such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin and gives some confirmation to Naomi Klein for the chapter of her book on the neoliberal "shock strategy" in Russia after the 1991 putsch. There are no truly original analyses here.

In the lively debates among Russian activists in recent days, one of them, while convinced of Kagarlitsky's "collaboration" with the "authorities", nevertheless considers him, like many others, ideologically quite sincere and explains that "this is the fundamental problem: ideologically, Kagarlitsky represents the vestiges (just relics?) of the movement for global justice of the 1990s - the first half of the 2000s, when planet Earth was enveloped in the

tentacles of Euro-American capital, compared to which everything is secondary (...). Regimes like the Russian or Iranian ones, of course, do not represent anything really good either, but in principle they are a lesser evil compared to planetary financial neofascism. I think this is the most toxic idea that has circulated in the current left-wing milieu, and not only there.” Thus, in 2008, as Vladislav Starodubtsev, a Ukrainian activist in *Sotsialnyi Rukh*, recalls, Kagarlitsky welcomed Putin's Georgian war: “The blow to the United States opens up new perspectives of struggle.”

Then, during the massive demonstrations against Putin's re-election in 2011-2012, he observed, according to the aforementioned Russian comrade, a “sceptical” posture, speaking of a “petty-bourgeois and well-fed middle class” too far from the real “social movements”.

Then, we arrive at the decisive moment: 2014. There, Kagarlitsky was the emblematic figure of what the Ukrainian Vitalii Kulik calls “pink Putinism”. [4] He denounced the Maidan as “fascist” and told anyone who would listen that hundreds of thousands of workers rose up in the Donbass – a total fabrication – calling for a “capture of Kiev by Donetsk”.

His Institute and its website then had large resources – 3.2 million roubles according to Ukrainian sources – coming from the Russian government. [5] They irrigated Western political relays, in particular the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation of the German party Die Linke, and Britain's Stop the War movement, conferences and biased information, including on the alleged “pogrom of the House of Trade Unions in Odessa” on 2 May 2014. A conference was organized in Crimea in November 2014, with the participation of Kagarlitsky and Western activists including Richard Brenner from Britain. The general line then was that Russia must help the “Donbass uprising” to wrest all “Novorussia” – this is what Putin had said in his speech of 14 April 2014. The promotion of the Borotba group, a real Potemkin party to make Western leftists believe that revolutionary communists with Che T-shirts were fighting “Ukrainian Nazis” in the “Donbass”, was also organized from the same centre – Kagarlitsky. [6]

His relationship with Girkin-Strellkov was clear, Kagarlitsky's website interviewed him. Contacts and meetings with the Eurasian extreme right in Dugin also grew in this campaign for Novorussia. According to V. Kulik, during the summer and winter of 2014-2015, Kagarlitsky helped organise a “school for social activists” in Belgorod which sent its students “to work in the governmental apparatus of the people's republics”, where strikes, trade unions and the Ukrainian language were banned, and the torture chambers were full.

It is clear that between the warmongering line covered with vague “revolutionary” verbiage, which played a key role in 2014 to cover up Putin's counter-revolution, and Kagarlitsky's orientation in 2022 when, from February, like the No. 2 of the Russian “Left Front”, Alexei Shakhin, who emigrated to France (and unlike its No. 1, Sergei Udaltsov), he condemned the “special military operation”, there is a change.

However, a Russian comrade specifies that Kagarlitsky claims that he was right in 2014 as well as in 2022: ultra-warmongering imperialist in 2014, opposed to the “special military operation” in 2022, for him it is a continuity. Clearly opposed to the war from 24 February 2022, Kagarlitsky was not however defeatist from the Russian point of view (even considering the obligation to express himself in veiled words). His condemnation of the war was mainly based on the denunciation of a dictatorial drift in Russia of which it would be the means.

The most hostile Ukrainian analysts relate his position to the fall of a long time Putin ideologue and master of propaganda operations around the “Donbass” and the “Ukrainian Nazis” in 2014, Vladislav Surkov. This is not contradictory with the premise of a sincere position, where Putin, after turning his back on a phantasmatic “people's war” in 2014, would have fallen into a trap allowing him to march to dictatorship.

So, the “Angry Patriots” supporters of Girkin defend Kagarlitsky, and since his arrest he has received two

expressions of public support in the upper echelons, which indicates that there is a crisis at the top, debate in the state apparatus, and that what happens to him is part of this “Russian crisis” which has opened especially since the Prigozhin putsch.

Thus, there has been support from Margarita Simonyan, a fearsome TV presenter who called, for example, for starving the Ukrainians, whose Telegram channel, linked to a TV channel, described his arrest as “shameful, unnatural and disgusting”. [7]

There are also the statements of Sergei Markov, a Putinite figure who has led various parapublic bodies of foreign policy and state control of “history”, denouncing his arrest as a “very serious political error” and, in passing, presenting him as an immense figure of the “international socialist movement of the left” (sic), calling on the “presidential administration” to collaborate again, and closely, with him and what he represents. [8]

Fred Fuentes, a Green Left activist from Australia, author of numerous articles and with an active role in internationalist support for Ukraine, circulated an article defending Kagarlitsky against repression in which all the elements just presented here are either ignored or euphemized as past differences that do not alter the necessary solidarity. [9] Fuentes points to Sergei Markov’s support for Kagarlitsky by calling Markov “a prominent pro-Kremlin intellectual.” It’s a bit short: it was Markov who, on Russian TV, called in the autumn of 2022 for the nuclear bombing of European capitals, London in particular.

Girkin, Simonyan, Markov: it is clear that representatives of sectors of the Russian state who are supporters of the war have come forward in opposition to Kagarlitsky’s arrest, but probably finding it badly conducted and lacking in scope.

The question is therefore legitimate: is it a question of defending a militant of the left, of the workers’ movement, or of the “forces of progress” as we sometimes say, in the broad sense, whatever the differences, or are we facing a factional struggle? If Girkin is not a “political prisoner” for us, is Kagarlitsky one?

This question is inescapable, as is the answer that was given at the beginning of this article. But the worst thing would be to forbid this questioning, to dismiss it as what we do not want to hear – moreover, this would lead to not hearing, again, what the Ukrainian comrades tell us!

Only the truth is always revolutionary. And the golden legend of an eternal dissident who would have made only one big misstep, in 2014, is a golden legend, an insipid porridge unrelated to the truth, however harsh it may be.

To question this golden legend is to revisit the entire history of the relationship of the “radical left” to the USSR, which has been Russia for more than three decades now. The Kagarlitsky question is not a problem of persons, but it opens up a historical, political, and even moral questioning of great significance.

Perhaps this is why it is painful, and why a false facility would be to rush without conscience or reflection into an ecumenical cause with the campists. Nothing would be worse because it would muddy the waters when the global reality since 24 February requires them to be clarified.

No, we will not defend the “Russian anti-war and anti-Putin socialist” with Mélenchon or Corbyn, who have never taken a stand to save people like Igor Kuznetsov, Daria Polyudova, Yevgeny Karakashev or Maksym Butkevitch; yes, we must stick to the truth.

And yes, we must demand in all conscience the release of Boris Kagarlitsky, because it is not up to Putin or some

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faction of the mafia oligopoly in power in Russia to judge him, and because he belongs to our history in its most painful aspects, and we also have the duty to clarify it, to have a future by assuming the past, all the past – the real past.

PS:

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[1] Aplutsoc (Arguments Pour la Lutte Sociale) publishes the blog [aplutsoc.org](http://aplutsoc.org), from which this article has been taken.

[2] <https://t.me/KRPRus/147>

[3] <https://t.me/nechaevereverywhere/3951?fbclid=IwAR3OwFd6n3LHQo97bVr4uaqIBwxZCkwL1nKVfJNevHeRHnNr2Bn-ioAdyKU>

[4] <https://politcom.org.ua/kagarlitsky-as-a-mirror-of-pink-putinism>

[5] <https://www.nihilist.li/2015/03/31/kagarlitskij-vojna-i-politicheskaya-korrupsiya/?fbclid=IwAR2sKslj18hRiMO2eRyBrf-fxhcSUFzyYxjVzppnxz4k7b-B C9rPQKn4zHc>

[6] <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article33625>

[7] <https://t.me/russica2/52942>

[8] <https://t.me/logikamarkova/7471>

[9] <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/solidarity-needed-russian-anti-war-socialist-boris-kagarlitsky>