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The Political Repression of the Radical Left in Crimea



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Russia's annexation of Crimea was purportedly an exercise in free political expression, a watershed moment in history when a historic part of Russia returned to the motherland against the backdrop of a fascist putsch in Ukraine. Indeed, Crimea's "reunification" (in Kremlin lingo) with Russia was sold, at least in part, as a humanitarian operation to restore order, secure Russia's strategic interests, and protect the rights of Russians in Crimea.

And while no one can deny that Russia did indeed protect its strategic interests (e.g. Black Sea naval fleet), the claim that Crimea's return to Russia brought political freedoms is

tenuous at best. Russian media may portray Crimea as a tranquil and politically free region of the Russian Federation, but the reality is that serious political repression of leftists is ongoing there. And there is barely a whisper about it in international media, even among the radical left.

Anarchists, Marxists Targeted by the Russian State

On the morning of November 14, 2017, Valery Bolshakov, Chairman of the Workers' Union of Sevastopol and member of the Russian United Labor Front awoke to his front door being kicked in by Russian authorities, with the inscription of "Berkut" on one sleeve, and the chevron of "Rosgvardia" emblazoned on the other. That these were Russian internal security forces was self-evident. He was beaten before being detained, with even an examining doctor recommending he be hospitalized for his injuries; he was refused further medical attention. During this time, the officers seized Valery's phone and computer, as well as a trove of documents related to political activities that he, his organization, and their contacts were involved in.

Naturally, were this simply an isolated incident, it would likely be of minor note. However, what has taken place in the intervening period amounts to a significant push by Russian authorities to repress, if not totally destroy, active leftist communities, especially of anarchists who have only tenuous connections to Bolshakov and other Marxists.

Alexei Shestakovich, an anarchist from Sevastopol, was detained by Russian authorities on March 1, 2018 for posting two songs from the rock band "The Ensemble of Christ the Savior" on Russian social media platform VKontakte (VK). Shestakovich received treatment that could be described as torture – he was suffocated repeatedly with a plastic bag over his head, humiliated by being forced to cry out "I am an animal," and subsequently beaten while in police custody.

As Shestakovich [explained to the Mediazone website](#), officers of the special force of the Russian security services (FSB) known as "Alpha Group" came into his apartment at 7:45 am, beating him and causing injuries to his nose, chest, and throat. When they found his red and black anarcho-syndicalist flag they questioned whether it was, in fact, the fascist paramilitary group Right Sector flag (both are red and black, though the anarchist flag has a diagonal line while Right Sector has a horizontal line). When Shestakovich explained the difference, noting that "Black represents liberation and red for communism" he was beaten once again. He notes that after being forced into a waiting bus, he was suffocated with the plastic bag and beaten all over his body. He was ultimately sentenced to 11 days in jail for "dissemination of extremist materials."

Ivan Markov, a Marxist organizer in Sevastopol, was also arrested on March 1 for dissemination of extremist materials. Despite having no relation to the Anarchists of Sevastopol group which allegedly posted “extremist” content online, Markov and the Levoradikal (Left Radical) group were targeted for arrest and intimidation. Upon being detained, Markov’s phone and laptop were confiscated, with his social media accounts being compromised.

CounterPunch has learned that both Markov and Shestakovich were convicted under article 20.29 of the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses (dissemination of extremist materials). Additionally, at least four other leftists were searched by Russian authorities: Igor Panuta (Marxist, formerly of the Socialist Party of Ukraine) and Sevastopol-based anarchists Alexey Prisyazhnyuk, Alyona Vorobyova, and Atryom Borobyov.

Similarly, and well beyond the confines of Crimea, activists associated with the Left Bloc in Moscow were harassed and ultimately [detained by the authorities](#) on March 14, 2018.

Law enforcement officers, joined by representatives of the so-called “E Center” (The Center for the Struggle Against Extremism), burst into the apartment of activist Vladimir Zhuravlev, seizing his laptop, telephone, and “prohibited literature”. The authorities claimed that Zhuravlev was a “witness” in the case against anarchist Elena Gorban, arrested in February on charges of vandalism in connection with a January 31, 2018 action by the “Moscow Anarchists” in which United Russia party offices had a window broken. While in custody, Gorban was pumped for information about support for anarchist and anti-fascist actions in February 2018.

Along with Zhuravlyov, three other Left Bloc activists were also detained: Vadim Timergalin, Grigoriy Sineglazov, and Denis Avdeev. All four were ultimately released after E Center authorities and police broke into a safe, stealing information about Left Bloc activists.

A source with intimate knowledge of the situation explained to CounterPunch that aside from radical leftist politics, the detained individuals in Crimea do share another common thread: providing various forms of support for Yevpatoria-based anarchist Yevgeny Karakashev, including participating in a demonstration in support of his release. [Karakashev was arrested on February 1, 2018](#) under the charge of inciting hatred or enmity (the infamous Article 282 of the Russian criminal code) and calling for terrorism through the internet (Article 205.2 of the Russian criminal code).

His crime? He allegedly posted two videos in a group chat; one depicting statements from the Primorye Partisans, a radical youth group from Russia’s Far East who, in 2010,

engaged in guerilla-style attacks on corrupt local police; the other about grenade attacks on state offices. While the Russian authorities have used the opportunity to paint Karakashev as some violent radical bent on inciting violence against the state, Karakashev's comrades claim that he was doing precisely the opposite, providing the videos as examples of the sorts of actions anarchists should NOT undertake as they are counter-productive and lead to state repression.

Karakashev remains in the custody of the authorities. CounterPunch cannot confirm the sort of treatment he has received or his current condition.

The Goal of the Repression?

In examining the commonalities in all the arrests, it becomes clear that this was a coordinated campaign by Russian authorities to both intimidate, and most especially gather intelligence on, the radical left in the country. One obvious motivation would be an attempt to stifle any public dissent on the Left ahead of presidential elections on March 18, 2018.

While this would seem obviously intuitive, sources in the Marxist and anarchist groups are increasingly skeptical that that's really the motivation. As a Marxist comrade explained:

“Of course, we think the searches aimed to collect data about Crimean leftists in general, regardless [sic] the case of Karakashev. I also have my own idea. Last weeks I have read a lot of texts about political arrests and searches in Russia and I see coordinated [sic] campaign against anarchists all over the country. Recent attacks in Moscow and in four other big cities prove somebody put state security task [sic] to destroy Russian anarchist movement.”

But why? What threat do the anarchists and Marxists pose?

To answer this question, one must see some of the material those anarchists and Marxists are accused of posting and/or disseminating. According to [news reports](#) quoting his attorney, Valery Bolshakov was accused of holding a protest sign calling for “the removal of the existing powers” and the “overthrow of the Putin regime,” and the establishment of a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” According to Russian authorities, however, these slogans constitute a “persistent, hostile, intolerant attitude to the State authorities.” But all this for a few signs?

Similarly, Markov was brought into court on trumped up charges of violating the criminal code by allegedly having posted on VK the phrase “Orthodoxy or death,” a religious fundamentalist slogan deemed extremist by Russian courts in 2010. Of course, Markov, the atheist and Marxist, explained that it was posted to mock and reject the fundamentalist

nature of the slogan, not to justify or propagate it. He was subsequently released and charges were dropped, not before being beaten and tortured of course. In the meantime, however, Russian state authorities got their hands on all content stored in all devices owned by various members of these groups.

As CounterPunch's sources note, it seems the opening salvo in a broader attempt to undermine, if not totally destroy, the radical left in Russia. Moreover, it points to the extreme influence that reactionary institutions like the Orthodox Church and political intelligence services wield in Russian society.

There has been an appalling lack of interest from both the Ukrainian and Russian left on this matter. A number of Ukrainian pro-Maidan leftist organizations were notified of the repression but chose to stay quiet in hopes that leftists in Crimea who were not supportive of Maidan would be encouraged to agitate for a return to Ukraine afterward. The anti-Maidan communist organization in Donbass, Borotba, was notified of the arrests and detentions and chose to publish nothing. There has been near silence from the Russian left as well. Why?

Perhaps it is fear underlying this seeming lack of interest from quarters who would normally call themselves comrades? It's possible that the chilling effect intended was successful, and these organizations do not want to run afoul of the authorities on the eve of a presidential election.

It's also likely that the Kremlin wants to have total control over the Left in much the same way it does the right wing. While ethnic supremacist, fascist forces were once ascendant in Russia, many of those parties and organizations have been outlawed, their leaders imprisoned, exiled, or killed, their rank and file scattered to the wind. And now, Russia maintains a Kremlin-friendly, compliant fascist right wing that can be counted on to defend the Kremlin's positions from Ukraine to Syria and beyond.

Similarly, on the Left, the Kremlin may seek to smash the far left that, unlike the official Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) – a deeply reactionary communist organization that upholds chauvinist social policies combined with worship of Stalin and obedience to Putin – is not under the thumb of Putin and his clique.

Putin continues to enjoy overwhelming support in Russia, mostly due to his foreign policy and carefully crafted image. That he has maintained that support in the midst of sanctions and a sagging economy, is a testament to both his political acumen and the lack of a viable political alternative in Russia. And perhaps it is precisely that viable alternative that Putin and his oligarch cronies fear most.

Russian opposition figure (and distasteful social-chauvinist) Alexei Navalny can be dealt with. Pussy Riot and the Russian liberal scene are divided and impotent, not to mention cast as puppets of Washington. The anti-Putin far-right fascists have been mostly sidelined and destroyed.

It would seem then that a move against anarchists and Marxists is yet another move by Putin & Co. to consolidate power by smashing any potential for a radical political alternative.

The international left must speak openly and honestly about what is happening to our comrades in Russia, despite the rather predictable charges of “parroting the mainstream media” and being “neo-McCarthyite Russophobes” and all the other usual nonsense.

If we fail to uphold this most basic act of solidarity, then we risk being little more than cynical political actors more interested in point-scoring and upholding any force sometimes opposing the United States than in genuinely defending our people and our ideals.