

Political Repression in Russia

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THE FULL IMPLICATIONS of the extraordinary drought that struck the European part of Russia this past summer became apparent only in the third quarter of 2010, when accurate statistics on the human casualties and economic losses became available. But from the outset a solid foundation on which to base projections emerged from amongst the potpourri of facts and expert opinions.

Many farms will be ruined — and not just because government aid will go primarily to large agricultural enterprises, but also because of the insurance market. Russian insurance companies are clever in their refusal to pay claims. Further, statistics indicate that only 50% of the living space burnt down and 20% of the crops destroyed by the drought even have coverage. The exception this year was Tatarstan, where the authorities have managed to effectively support crop insurance programs.

The drought and its consequences, especially fires, exacerbated processes already at work by virtue of the inner logic of the global economic crisis: the ruin of small farmers, rising inflation, increased imports of certain goods and job cuts. Most experts do not doubt that the drought and fires fueled inflation. The debate over the immediate prospects for the Russian economy can be summarized with a question: Will there be a decline or simply a deep-going stagnation?

Drought in Russia — like the drought in Portugal and the floods in several regions of Europe — is thought by many scholars to be closely related to global climate change. Some experts do not rule out the repetition of the disastrous summer. The possibility of forest fires in the Bryansk region, where the radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl accident was massive, remains worrisome.

A peek into the Bryansk online internet forums found residents recounting in great detail how the radiation in some areas was higher than that reported by officials. If the Bryansk region flared up in the same way the Nizhnyi Novgorod region did this year then, along with the smoke of burning forests and peat bogs, radioactive particles will be released into the atmosphere — and who can predict how far they will fly?

A Deepening Crisis

Market-based reforms in the late 1980s-early '90s resulted in the collapse of a fairly effective system of forest fire detection and prevention Russia inherited from the Soviet Union. This system remained in Belarus so the summer's fire spared the forest. Far-right nationalists — including those mimicking

the leftwing wreckage left by the Communist Party — will use this fact to advocate support of Lukashenko's dictatorship.

But if capitalism confronts exploited workers with the choice of either tyranny or forest fires, then capitalism itself must be destroyed and society reorganized on a collectivist basis. Only a collectivist society will be able to cope with fires without succumbing to tyranny.

Russian President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin have been very active in demonstrating their determination to fight official corruption and the speculative rises in the prices of bread and milk. But few seriously believe they will be effective in their struggle — people understand that there is more self-promotion than actual effort at play here. Prices continue their rapid rise notwithstanding reports of punishing officials and assurances by politicians that there will be no famine in Russia.

Perhaps there will be no famine, but the lives of ordinary people will become much worse, and the gap between rich and poor, already quite wide, will widen further. According to the Ministry of Economic Development, in most Russian regions the prices of buckwheat, flour, wheat and salt rose by more than 30% alone during August.

This gives the government the right to initiate price controls, but the government does not intend to rush. An official told one of the authors that the cabinet would approach price controls with utmost caution — claiming that such an extreme measure could provoke a deficit.

Some regions are beginning to take measures. Local authorities motivate these decisions as a response to panic hoarding by consumers as well as by the reluctance of the federal center to help them overcome the consequences of a disaster.

The Omsk Security Council pioneered this approach when it decided to tighten controls on exporting agricultural products outside the region. The council argued that given the bad harvest in the European part of Russia, an increase in the demand for agricultural products and soaring prices for grain were inevitable.

During the first half of August prices for flour and cereals soared. In Togliatti, prices rose by one and a half to twofold, while in Samara the retail price of buckwheat rose from 19 to 50 rubles.

Governor Vladimir Artyakov, speaking at the opening session of interdepartmental working group on drought said that “the region requires support from the federal treasury to the amount of 7 billion rubles.”

Repressive Response

It is unlikely that the President and the Prime Minister will take this calmly: Most likely, Medvedev and Putin will further strengthen the “vertical hierarchy of power” by “tightening the screws.” They will apply the same method to hold the impoverished workers in subjection. We can confidently predict an increase in repression and provocation by the police and the FSB [the former KGB — ed.] against militant workers, participants in protests and movements, and against the political opposition of any color — whether liberals, fascists or the left.

At the same time propaganda will be released through the media. It was no coincidence that in August, when the heat wave, drought and fires reached their peak, various Russian television channels broadcast all sorts of conspiracy theories. Actually such broadcasts have been clogging all popular Russian TV channels, except perhaps that of the music and sports channels, for a decade. Some of these broadcasts featured Vladimir Zhirinovskiy [noted far-right demagogue — ed.] and “the

opposition Islamist” Heidar Jemal, whom the publicist Mark Deitch exposed in his book *Brown* as a KGB provocateur since Soviet times — and to whom the most popular Russian TV channels have been very willing to give air time.

In the current environment it is not difficult to find capable and willing people to fabricate false cases of “terrorism.” Islamist fundamentalists have been carrying out high-profile attacks for 15 years. Now, under the pretext of saving Russia from terrorist threat, the Kremlin once again seeks to deprive people of their political rights and freedoms.

Unfortunately, the wretched political opposition in Russia today is the perfect field for all sorts of provocations. Generally among the present-day Russian opposition it is very difficult to distinguish leftists, liberals and fascists from one other. Often they forge unprincipled alliances. Among them the ideas of Russian nationalism and various forms of xenophobia are so popular that only a small minority of contemporary Russian “left” and “liberals” can really be classified as either left or liberal.

When someone in Russia today calls himself a Communist, in most cases it will turn out that what you have is a particular version of a National Socialist; all too many anarchists turn out to be “national anarchists.” If you try communicating with contemporary Russian “liberals” you find you have become immersed in a medium consisting mainly of admirers of Stolypin [Tsarist-era minister of police — ed.] and Pinochet, homophobes, supporters of the separation of ethnicities, subcultures and often races, as well as religious fanatics and violent mystics.

There are so many examples of this that can be adduced (one of the most well-known was the long-term, sustained collaboration of a number of “liberal” and “communist” organizations with the openly fascist National Bolshevik Party of Eduard Limonov), one article can accommodate only a very small proportion of them.

One of the co-authors of this article — Vladislav Bugera — is now in the process of completing a book (to be published at the website <http://www.scribd.com/sshenfield>) with the active participation of another co-author, Vladimir Sirotnin. Its sequel will be an “Anti-fascist Diary,” which will be administered by several activist sponsors. One of the main themes — though certainly not the only one — of this book and the “Anti-fascist Diary” will be an analysis of why in the former Soviet republics people completely have forgotten how to distinguish right from left, and a proposal of ways out of this sorry situation. (One can find a number of texts published in 2000-2005 at <http://www.scribd.com/sshenfield> by the Group of Proletarian Revolutionary Collectivists devoted to this theme.)

State Despotism

The Russian authorities and the opposition present a stark picture today: Their ideologies, historical mythologies, and often their symbolism and political rhetoric are so like each other in their eclecticism that it is downright impossible to discern what differences there are. The government and the opposition are each other’s mirror images. However, the fact that Putin’s regime cultivated its own opposition does not restrain it from being cruel in the persecution of its clones. Of course, the regime no less cruelly represses the few leftists who have continued to take seriously such concepts as “internationalism,” “libertarianism,” “antistatism” and “anti-patriarchalism.”

Many examples of the cruel despotism of the Russian bourgeois state are already widely known, while others are still waiting to be told to the broad masses of readers. We list a few examples.

- On 10 September, 2002 the then Minister of the Interior (now the speaker of the Duma) Gryzlov

issued the notorious Interior Ministry Order 870, the CPD, enclosure number 1 (for action in emergency situations). It authorized the use of firearms against participants in mass actions and holding citizens at “filtration points” (renamed after protests as “temporary verification points”).

These documents became known to human rights defenders during a public inquiry into the mass beatings by riot police of residents of Blagoveshchensk in the Bashkortostan Republic (December 2004). Later, human rights activists discovered that the Interior Ministry and Federal Security Service, under the pretext of fighting “extremists” and “terrorism,” issued internal instructions and orders authorizing a large-scale surveillance of oppositional activists.

- In the summer of 2002 a law was hastily passed on combating extremism, construed to include demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience. The principle was introduced that an organization was responsible for the statements of its leader. That is what happened when, after the sentencing of the journalist Stanislav Dmitrievsky, who published the letters of Maskhadov and Zakayev, the human rights organization “Society of Russian-Chechen Friendship Society,” which had been under his leadership for many years, was banned.
- In 2006 a new version of the law so broadened the concept of “extremism” that actions of public figures or journalists strongly critical of the authorities, or an ordinary user of the internet who has made incautious statements, can now be included.
- One common form of repression used against political and civil activists is preventive harassment. Before a public event that the authorities consider undesirable, the FSB or MVD directly threaten potential participants. That is what happened to Larisa Osina, a member of the City Council Nefteyugansk. In June 2006, an FSB officer demanded that she abandon a trip to St. Petersburg to the Russian Social Forum II.
- In January 2009, Olga Nesinova, a member of the Solidarity movement of the Republic of Komi, was subjected to open surveillance. She was twice detained on a trip to Moscow. Prosecutors explained that she is under “steady watch,” which is done only by special request of law enforcement agencies.

An activist who did not listen to the “warnings” would be detained on boarding a train or plane. The arsenal of preventive tools included internment in residences outside the city, administrative arrest on false charges of disturbing public order or holding unauthorized demonstrations or meetings, and planting narcotics and weapons.

- The regime has installed by degrees a system of total control over civilian activists, members of opposition parties, non-commercial and public organizations and movements. Control of civil activists was taken over by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and in particular the Administration for combating extremism (the “E” administration). This was all accompanied by warnings of the danger of sociopolitical instability during a period of economic crisis.
- At the Forum “A week of Socialism” that took place in April 2009 in the city of Orenburg, eight persons, all activists in left-wing organizations were subjected to harassment, tailing and illegal detentions. There were attempts to recruit [police informants — ed.].

Lawyer, Journalist Murders

On 19 January 2009, the civil rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and the journalist Anastasiya Baburova were shot dead in the center of Moscow. Stanislav Markelov used to take on the most

risky criminal cases, including defense of peaceful Chechens who had been victims of the violence of the Russian Federal authorities and the [Russian-installed] Kadyrov regime. These included the family of Elza Kingaeva, who was kidnapped and killed by the Russian Colonel Yuri Budanov. Markelov also represented the interests of relatives of murdered and persecuted antifascists. He achieved worldwide renown after he became the attorney in the investigation of the beatings inflicted on the peaceful residents of the city of Blagoveshchensk in the Republic of Bashkortostan. It is worth mentioning that Markelov had received repeated threats from law enforcement agencies and was secretly tailed and assaulted several times in the course of his investigations. Anastasiya Baburova was walking together with Markelov the day he was murdered. Some accounts say she tried to protect him and hence was murdered as well. Anastasiya was an anarchist activist in the Antifascist movement "Autonomous Action" and a free-lance correspondent for *Novaya Gazeta*.

There have been four murders of journalists from *Novaya Gazeta* in the past eight years including Yuri Shchegochikhin, Anna Politovskaya and Igor Domnikov.

Novaya Gazeta is one of the most well-known opposition hardcopy publications in Russia. On account of the frequent murders and beatings of reporters from this publication, the rule was introduced that meetings with people who contacted the newspaper must take place under the surveillance of a security service.

In April 2009, OMON arrested a group of antifascists in Moscow and fined them for attempting to hold a demonstration.

The beatings of young anarchists in the Moscow district of Sokolnik had a unique resonance throughout Russia. On 4 April 2008, activists were beaten up at the district police station (five persons, two under 18). The policemen who carried out the beating made no secret of their hatred of their victims and even made anti-Semitic remarks. One of the youth plead that he had heart problems but he was severely beaten all the same. Doctors were called, which helped secure the release of the young people.

Aleksei Gaskarov and Maksim Solopov, two activists in the antifascist movement, were arrested on 3 August, on the decision of the Khimki Municipal Court in the Moscow region and charged with hooliganism. Shortly before, on 28 July, a crowd of young people, among whom were antifascists and anarchists, attacked the building of the Khimki Municipal administration in protest against the utter corruption, numerous crimes, and open banditry plaguing the Moscow-St Petersburg toll road.

After throwing stones at the building and scribbling slogans in defense of the Khimki forest, the demonstrators managed to leave. Aleksei Gaskarov and Maxim Solopov were arrested the next day, 29 July. The charge rested solely on the circumstance that they were well-known media luminaries taking part in the antifascist movement. The prosecution had no other evidence, and to jail the suspects they had to falsify the arrest order.

The defenders of the Khimki forest are an example of the eclectic mix of "leftism" with "rightism" in political life today in Russia: They operated under the nationalist slogan of "Protecting the Russian forest!" Generally speaking the forest is not Russian, American, Jewish or Aztec: The forest is for all and those who would divide it up by national borders are nationalists.

Activists of the Anarchist organization KPAC have correctly pointed this out, and you have to see what bedlam ensued when this appeared on the internet. A crowd of national anarchists descended on this small group of internationalists and began to taunt and heap scorn on them! The Russian anarchist bunch has shown itself to be scarcely less disgustingly nationalist than the Russian "liberals" and "Communists."

Arbitrary Arrests

Totally innocent people suffer from the repressive police measures directed against oppositionists. A flagrant example of this is the case of Sergei Mokhnatkin. On 31 December last year he walked past a square where a march of dissidents was being dispersed. He made some comment to a policeman who was roughing up a woman.

A conflict ensued, and Sergei himself was arrested. They released him but he was re-arrested and on June 9 was sentenced by the Moscow Tverskii district court to imprisonment for clashing with the police.

The refined nastiness of the business shows through in at least two aspects. First, he was detained after requesting a policeman abusing his authority to identify himself, but was instead arrested on the spot. Second, although he was given a two-and-a half-year sentence, the paragraph under which he was charged provides for imprisonment for from 5 to 10 years!

One of the authors, Vladimir Sirotin, lives in Lyubertsy in the Moscow region. He has had the police on his back for a long time. For several months the local police inspector has been paying him regular visits, with interrogations and chats.

On 27 July a police officer told him he was “was heading in the direction of extremism and terrorism!” “The trail goes back many years” (at the very least since 1995, when the police detained him for his long sojourn among the ranks of the Moscow anti-Fascist Center), and if such activity were to continue and there were even one political detention he would be arrested or sent to a psychiatric hospital.

The officer then advised him to “be careful” — to which Sirotin replied, reasonably, that the situation and the system ought to be such that there was no need to “be careful.”

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P.S.

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