

Russia: Socialism outlawed?

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On April 5, 2024, the Russian Socialist Movement was declared “foreign agent.” What has been its role in Russian left-wing politics? What is the reason behind its “foreign agent” status? Together with its members, Posle.media recalls the history of the movement in the past decade

On April 5, 2024, the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM) was declared “foreign agent.” This became the first precedent when the Russian authorities de facto banned a left-wing organization: it is quite obvious that Putin’s oppressive, antidemocratic law eliminates any opportunity for political activity under that name. However, if we see the foreign agent status as a kind of recognition by the regime, it is well deserved. During the 13 years of its existence, the RSM consistently opposed military aggression, dictatorship, and the disenfranchisement of the working majority. Posle.media’s team talked to three members of the organization in order to trace the stages of its evolution, which in many respects mirrors the political history of Russia in the past decade.

Ilya Budraitskis, political philosopher and historian

The founding congress of the Russian Socialist Movement took place in the spring of 2011. It was a moment before the decisive political events that would change the course of the country’s history: Putin announced his return to the presidency in September, and in December, the Bolotnaya Square protests began in Moscow. It is emblematic that the congress of the new organization merging several socialist groups into one was hosted by the Sakharov Center eventually closed down by the authorities.

The RSM manifesto, which was adopted at the congress, stated the following: “The Russian left has found itself in a situation... of a deepening crisis of the political system, a growing demand for a political alternative across the society.” Thus, the newly created movement was not claiming exclusive possession of a true revolutionary program, nor did it regard its own organizational construction as an end in itself. Our goal was to initiate the process of creating a broad left coalition, which in the future will become an independent socialist pole of a broad opposition movement. This analysis was proven valid by what followed soon.

The RSM was represented by a large column at the first massive protest at Bolotnaya Square on December 10, 2011, and a special edition of our newspaper went within minutes. In the months that followed, the RSM actively participated in all the key events of the evolving protest movement: members of the organization spoke at rallies in Moscow and Saint Petersburg; we printed a daily newspaper during the two weeks of the famous “Occupy Abai”, participated in the elections for the Opposition Coordination Council, and even made activist raids into rallies in support of Putin (which were then, as they are now, largely attended by coerced employees of the public sector). The composition of our organization changed a lot during that time: on the heels of the protests many new comrades joined, while some old ones quit, unconvinced by the tactics of active participation in the democratic mass movement. Our stance that the struggle for social change is inseparable from the struggle for basic democratic rights already stood out from the background of Stalinist and

dogmatist groups that underestimated the risk of succumbing to outright dictatorship.

After the annexation of Crimea and Russian involvement in the Donbas, the RSM unequivocally opposed the imperial gambling of Putin's regime, whose victims were not only Ukrainians but also ordinary Russians. At the anti-war march in Moscow in the spring of 2014, the RSM column marched under a banner that read "The people always pay for war": a slogan that rings even more true today, in the third year of a full-scale war that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. In 2014-2015, while the authorities were whipping up chauvinist hysteria, the RSM was not afraid to go against the tide and kept repeating its message: "the main enemy is in the Kremlin."

Kirill Medvedev, poet, translator and musician

The year 2017 marked a municipal and electoral turn for the RSM. We participated in the municipal elections in Moscow in 2017 and joined the campaign of Sergei Tsukasov for the Moscow City Duma. A democratic leftist with several years of experience in local politics, Tsukasov was at the time the chair of the opposition-controlled Ostankino local council. Sergei was supported by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and had a good shot at winning, which is why, just before the polling day, he was removed from the race on fabricated grounds. We held large rallies in Moscow demanding that he and other withdrawn opposition candidates be reinstated. Eventually, Sergei's campaign endorsed the Yabloko Party candidate who turned these consolidated efforts into a victory over his government-backed opponent. This was a good example of intra-opposition cooperation in the district. Since then, we have been participating in local activist actions in Ostankino.

In 2021, we joined Mikhail Lobanov's campaign for the Moscow City Duma. Our activists were involved in a variety of things, from preparing the agenda and editing local newspapers to field work. Lobanov's campaign proved that a socialist who gathered various like-minded people in his campaign can become a leader who unites the opposition at large in a huge district with a population of one million. We worked with other left-wing politicians, for example, Vitaly Bovar in St. Petersburg, and nominated our own candidates, for example, Kirill Shumikhin in Izhevsk. In 2022, we supported the Vydvizhenie ("Nomination") initiative.

Elections are an opportunity to work on a project with a timetable and achievable results. This is a necessary experience for leftist groups, which usually operate in an emergency, reactive mode, trying to respond to well-planned, well-resourced initiatives of the authorities. In addition, elections are an opportunity to get in touch with residents who, despite massive depoliticization, have much more trust and interest in someone who runs for office and their campaign than in outside activists whose goals and motives are most often seen as unclear and suspicious.

Becoming a public politician, running for elections, and fighting to represent the people is a personal decision, a serious life choice that is usually irreversible. Russian left-wing organizations hardly ever produce politicians. People join them in search of something else: a group identity, a collective struggle for a grand revolutionary program. High stakes in the absence of adequate means often lead to burnout and disappointment.

This is why it is so important when left politicians, who have practical experience with elections and the media, work together with activist groups, who have theoretical, historical, and ideological horizons. Elections are the main platform for such cooperation and something we will have to keep doing in one way or another, but of course, it is not an end in itself. The result should be the formation of a shared environment and ultimately an organization that unites politicians, activists, and experts; those who benefited from cooperation with the CPRF and those who were always determined to create an alternative leftist infrastructure. The full-scale war disrupted many plans,

but it also accelerated the consolidation of healthy - anti-war and democratic - left forces. The RSM has always been at the forefront of this process and now plays a special role in it.

Sasha Davydova, RSM activist

On the day the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, members of the RSM took to the streets to protest the war. I remember how we hastily printed leaflets to distribute them on the streets and stood in solitary pickets. Some were detained. The protests are over now, but even on that day, it was already obvious that the war was a radical game changer. Political changes in the system put any organized political action in a more repressive framework than ever before.

We were forced to adapt to the new reality of wartime legislation, within which we had to exist. Since February 24, our priorities have shifted towards ensuring security, not compromising our comrades, and preserving the organization. The question arose as to how to act, but the RSM remained true to itself during the war. Members and participants of the movement made the choice to leave Russia or not, but most of them remained in activism.

The RSM has grown as a leftist media since 2022, and our agenda has expanded as well. We started to think and talk about decoloniality more often in an attempt to shift the discourse within the opposition as a whole to the left. We continued with our efforts in the field of trade unions and supported independent trade unions. Our activists have been vocal in pushing for the social feminist agenda: we have created a zine on motherhood, organized actions against gender violence, and campaigned against conservative attacks on women's bodily autonomy. In the educational sphere, the RSM held schools for supporters and organized reading groups. We have been doing our best not to stay isolated and closed in on ourselves, aiming instead to shift the oppositional discourse to left democratism. Thus, we have been speaking out about gross inequality, writing about strikes and violations of labor rights, campaigning against ultra-right violence, and so forth.

There were also horizontal alliances in different cities with other initiatives and organizations for things like fundraising for women and Russian prisoners or writing letters to political prisoners. In Saint Petersburg, we kept participating in campaigns against gentrification and real estate development in green zones.

The RSM has been building international solidarity ties with left-wing organizations abroad. Outside Russia, activists could afford to openly march with slogans against imperialism, stand in line with trade unions on May 1, and organize anti-fascist demonstrations and solidarity actions with Russian political prisoners.

But it was the Just World campaign during the presidential "elections" that brought revenge in the form of "foreign agent" status. It was simultaneously a campaign against all candidates and a socialist minimum program that united the left into a coalition (and uniting the left is a success in itself). The campaign for a just world combined legal political action and active field campaign that avoided the mistake of legitimizing the so-called elections, which were completely staged by the Kremlin. I believe that their outcome shows that our position proved to be the best available because a bet on one of the fake candidates (Davankov in particular) could never be an expression of protest. The Just World campaign was about uniting and politicizing the voices of those demanding peace, equality, and justice. This potential will not be lost.

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