

Russia: The Freikorps of Tomorrow

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In Russia, right-wing extremists have succeeded in forcing the resignation of the chairman of the State Duma's Nationalities Committee, Gennadij Semigin. The episode shows how influential Russian fascists have become, especially in the military.

At first glance, Gennady Semigin's resignation was hardly worth mentioning. At the end of May, the politician was removed as chairman of the Duma's Nationalities Committee – an important office in Russian politics. Semigin is co-chairman of the pro-Kremlin party "Just Russia – Patriots – For Truth" (SR). His resignation was sold as a long-planned rotation of office.

However, the history of the incident shows its political significance. Semigin had previously taken the soldier Yevgeny "Topaz" Rasskasov to court. The latter is a former fighter in the notorious Russich volunteer corps, which consists of neo-Nazis, and fights in Ukraine as part of the Russian army.

In February, Semigin filed a defamation suit against Rasskasov. The reason for the lawsuit was a post by Rasskasov on his Telegram channel in which he insulted Semigin over a message from his party.

On September 29, the SR website published an article about Adam Kadyrov, the son of Chechen head of state Ramzan Kadyrov. The 15-year-old son of the dictator had himself filmed beating a defenseless 19-year-old in a prison in Grozny. The prisoner was Nikita Zhuravel, who was imprisoned for filming himself burning a Quran in front of a mosque in Volgograd.

The SR article very blatantly justified Adam Kadyrov's actions. "If every Russian soldier stood up for his ideals as uncompromisingly as Ramzan Akhmatovich's son, then perhaps the Akhmat battalion would no longer have to push Russian soldiers onto the battlefield," it says. The "Akhmat battalion" refers to Chechen units fighting in Ukraine.

Desperate rant

The article later disappeared from the SR website; Semigin claimed that hackers had manipulated his website and published the text in the name of his press office. This was an obvious excuse. In his Telegram channel, Rasskasov picked up on this and unleashed a furious and largely incoherent tirade at Semigin. He called Semigin a "lying, Russophobic worm" and a "silly market fraudster" who had published the "commissioned article" for money – after which the latter sued him for defamation.

Rasskasov was wounded in the spring of 2022 and initially returned to Moscow. Since then, he preferred to fight on the internet and has become one of the so-called military bloggers with his Telegram channel. But at the end of March, he went back to the front. This time, he did not return to the Russich group but joined the ranks of the Española unit, which is recruited from far-right soccer hooligans.

Although his lawyer argued that the defendant had actively participated in the war, which would justify his attacks on Semigin, Rasskasov lost the case. On April 15, the verdict was handed down in favor of Semigin, who demanded 500,000 rubles (the equivalent of 5,200 euros) in compensation.

Won in court but lost the PR war

But Rasskasov did not give up. He was supported, in particular, by far-right nationalists, the so-called Z-patriots, especially within the army. Nikita Mikhalkov, a famous filmmaker known for his conservative views, also stood up for him. Rasskasov's lawyers managed to arrange a meeting with the chairman of the SR party, Sergei Mironov. On May 6, he recommended that Semigin withdraw the lawsuit. The influential politician Semigin had won the battle in court but subsequently lost the PR war against the 29-year-old private. A few weeks later, Semigin had to give up his influential post in the State Duma.

Semigin's departure encouraged Rasskasov. He announced that his next target would be another SR politician, the nationalist writer Zakhar Prilepin. In May 2023, Prilepin had been seriously injured in a bomb attack claimed by the Ukrainian Crimean Tatar partisan group Atesh. Since then, Prilepin had hardly appeared in public.

Rasskasov accused him of inaction and announced a large-scale "cleansing" campaign on Telegram: "Russia will become cleaner and more honest," he wrote. "This is not a fight against the authoritarians but against the creatures who exploit the authorities and the people to line their pockets. If we are determined to win and unite the country, we must imprison all the scum and confiscate the spoils and replace them with people who have proven their loyalty to the fatherland with blood and sweat." He went on to write: "The leadership of our organization," apparently referring to his Española unit, "is made up of people who have already proven their bravery and loyalty with their own blood." He then asked: "Don't you think this is a perfect model for the occupation of government bodies in Russia?"

This text helps to understand how right-wing extremists are gaining influence. Many nationalist soldiers are convinced that they have earned their claim to power with their own blood: They are young, they feel legitimized, they claim to act in the name of the people and neither lie nor steal - in contrast to the old functionaries, who are completely corrupt and who almost lost the war.

Rasskasov's rhetoric is reminiscent of the popular right-wing populism that is on the rise in several countries. Right-wing populists claim to represent the interests of the "true people" as opposed to the corrupt "elites" and bureaucracies. They promise to clean up state institutions and bring order back to the country.

In today's Russia, this kind of right-wing populism is represented by young fascists who are closely linked to the military. They oppose the half-silken old bigwigs with double chins who enrich themselves, take bribes, and ruin the army - people like Semigin.

Rasskasov called for prisoners of war to be castrated.

Behind the young fascists lies something even more dangerous than the usual brutality of the Putin regime. Rasskasov became famous in Russia because he publicly admitted that he felt sexual arousal when he imagined the suffering of the relatives of the people he killed. He called for prisoners of war to be castrated and their lips cut off, and he fantasized about enslaving children from Ukraine. In November 2022, he was sentenced to two years' probation for a brawl in a Moscow bar. On April 20 - Hitler's birthday - he congratulated "our comrade-in-arms and friend" on his Telegram channel, who was no longer among the living. Still, he was spurring them on to "defeat the Ukrainian-

Bolshevik scum.”

The fact that Semigin was deposed under pressure from the extreme right is a worrying sign. Especially because Russia is characterized by a “power vertical,” all power in the state emanates from the top - from Vladimir Putin. It is extremely rare for pressure from below to be yielded to. Russia’s fascists are enjoying increasing prestige as a result of the war, they are supported by the ultra-Orthodox billionaire Konstantin Malofeyev, they have battle-hardened activists and experienced spokespeople. Should the regime falter at some point, they are ready.

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