

“A simple choice” Andriy Movtxan

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In 2015, it was difficult to read, listen to and watch Kagarlitsky - the feeling of heavy lead-like cringe arose from the very first seconds of familiarising myself with his new work. That's why even to read his texts at least to the middle was sometimes unbearable for my psyche. I remember how in one of his articles of that period he claimed that “the civil war in Ukraine should end with the hoisting of the flag of Novorossiia over the Verkhovna Rada”. There was such a thing.

I think the change erupted somewhere from 2017 onwards. In particular, when Kagarlitsky came into conflict with the security circle [which by that time already considered him “theirs”] by opposing Puchkov. The latter, in his typical cop manner, had just welcomed the OMON's crackdown on “juvenile morons” - youth opposition rallies. I think it was around that time that Kagarlitsky realised that he was in an extremely disgusting campaign and that it was time to distance himself from them, if not to break with them decisively. From then on he began his gradual but steady drift towards the opposition.

After a while, Kagarlitsky began to make quite unambiguous speeches about the need to bring down the irremovable top leadership and the supreme ruler personally, and he was already exposing the “fortress under siege” as justification for the regime. My eyebrows raised slightly when, in 2020, Boris supported the Belarus protests and urged Russians to learn from their neighbours. The very next year he supported protests in defence of the arrested Navalny and called for his release himself. It was noticeable that his dislike of the current system and Putin personally had grown so great that he was prepared to devote entire programmes to discussing rumours about the health of the “main patient”, with the ill-concealed hope that the wait would not be long.

In the first days of the full-scale attack, Kagarlitsky took a very specific stand against the aggression, calling it a sinister adventure by the regime, doomed to failure. When asked about his attitude to Ukraine, which he had so crushingly criticised five or six years earlier, Kagarlitsky replied: “A victim may be a bad person, but it is still a victim. Pan Poland was a very dark reactionary state, but when Germany attacked it was a victim of aggression and had every right to support and sympathise in repelling the attack.” That is, he did not hesitate to compare Russia's actions even with the darkest aggressors of the past.

All the year and a half of the Rabkor channel's broadcasting was quite good anti-war content, and from Marxist positions, reaching an audience different from the liberals. Kagarlitsky's broadcasts began to feature other anti-war leftists and even liberals - those with whom eight years ago he was on completely different sides of the barricades. As another anti-war blogger, Alexander Stefanov, noted, Kagarlitsky's activities became dangerous for the authorities, because they created an assembly point for a broad spectrum of anti-war opposition, specifically targeting those who remained in Russia.

Some time later, the authorities honoured him with the title of foreign agent for these activities, hinting that it was time for him to get out of the country. Kagarlitsky did have the opportunity to do

so, but he decided to stay in Russia despite the imminent risk of going to prison, which he eventually did. Undoubtedly, this is an honourable act.

Has Kagarlitsky acknowledged his misconceptions of the past? No, no self-criticism from him. Boris put forward a curious theory of an “absolute event”, which nullifies both previous blunders and former merits, for only the attitude to this event and actions after it matter. Be that as it may, I believe that even if a person finds it difficult to publicly acknowledge past mistakes, but at the same time does a lot to correct them, this can only be welcomed. It would be worse if it was the other way round: when the position is perfect but the actions are nil.

Moreover, Kagarlitsky’s activities over the course of a year and a half have shaped the anti-war views of thousands of people in his audience. His imperial background may even have played a certain positive role, for it allowed him to reach people of moderate-patriotic views, whose trust agitators with an ideal past and a crystal-clear position would never have won. The Russian environment of “kraskons” and “left-wing imperialists” was formed as a consequence of a whole complex of objective factors many years ago. Yes, Kagarlitsky at one time poured water on the strengthening of these tendencies, although his influence in this process was not at all decisive. But I know of no other figure from the Russian left who has done more than he has to instil in a language they can understand a simple idea in thousands of people like him: this regime is criminal, this invasion is criminal, there is no justification for it, it must be fought against.

Finally, I urge everyone to realise a simple thing. Without an anti-war movement in Russia itself, it will be colossally difficult or even impossible to achieve an end to the war and withdrawal of troops. The Russian society from which this war came is, to put it mildly, not ideal. And only from this non-ideal society and non-ideal people with non-ideal biographies can an anti-war and anti-government movement emerge. Whoever alienates this perspective is doing harm. And Kagarlitsky’s activities over the past year and a half have brought it closer.

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