

# Russia Policing and Repression Prisons The Persecution of Azat Miftakhov Is Designed to Silence Russia's Left

Thursday 7 September 2023, by [MEDVEDEV Kirill](#) (Date first published: 6 September 2023).

**Russian anarchist Azat Miftakhov is spending his fifth year in jail for “hooliganism” — and now faces being framed on fake terrorism charges. His persecution is part of the Russian state’s campaign to intimidate the Left and silence opposition to the war.**

On July 12, news arrived that Russian political prisoner Azat Miftakhov, mathematician and anarchist, had been transferred to a punitive isolation cell. The reason was his refusal to write an explanatory note about the discrepancy between the contents of his personal belongings and the inventory provided. The previous month, his supposed “violation” had been keeping deodorant on his bedside table. In the isolation cell, he was obliged to sit on a bench without a backrest all day, until it was time to sleep. This caused the prisoner considerable pain — but he was then sent for a month’s solitary confinement for breaking the rule against lying down during the day. Kirill Medvedev tells us why Azat is being kept in prison for a fifth year — and how it is connected with Vladimir Putin’s ongoing war and dictatorship.

It seems that a new case is being fabricated against leftist youth in Russia — the case of the so-called Moscow cell of the “Network” organization. For five years, the case against the supposed Network cells in Penza and St Petersburg has been the most high-profile case used to intimidate anti-fascists in Russia. Today, it is part of a campaign to intimidate the antiwar part of Russian society.

Despite the billing, there are no young leftists in the said cell — and nor does any such cell exist at all. Official reports mention only the name of Azat Miftakhov.

Miftakhov is a thirty-year-old Russian mathematician and anarchist of Tatar origin. He graduated magna cum laude from the faculty of mechanics and mathematics at Moscow State University (MSU). He was engaged in science, took part in political actions, and participated in anarchist campaigns against unscrupulous employers and corporate raiders throwing tenants out of apartments and dormitories. Winner of the All-Russian Mathematical Olympiad, at the time of his arrest, he was about to defend his PhD thesis.

On the night of January 30, 2018, unknown people smashed a window of the Moscow district headquarters of the pro-Putin United Russia party, throwing a smoke bomb inside. No one was in the headquarters, and accordingly, no one was hurt. It was a protest action against the simulated presidential election. Anarchists took responsibility for the action.

Miftakhov would be hauled before the courts one year later. Outside of this case, twelve people were arrested on February 1, with the state’s Federal Security Service (FSB) connecting them with the

anarchist movement People's Self-Defense. Miftakhov was among them. The same day, all except him were released. He refused to testify against himself and the others, so the security forces reopened the old case and pinned the broken glass in the United Russia headquarters on him. Using fabricated testimony from anonymous witnesses, Miftakhov was sentenced to six years in prison. (The term was reduced because of the two years spent in the detention center: one year inside counts for a year and a half from the sentence).

### **What Is the Network Case?**

There are strong suspicions that the security forces do not want to release Miftakhov after the end of his sentence. Now, the FSB is apparently trying to prove that he belongs to the "Moscow cell of the terrorist community Network." In 2020, based on confessions obtained by officers through beatings and the use of tasers, a court convicted ten anti-fascists from Penza and St Petersburg to sentences ranging from three-and-a-half to eighteen years in prison. The siloviki, or special services, believe that the Network was planning terrorist attacks ahead of the Russian presidential election and the 2018 FIFA World Cup to destabilize the country and carry out an armed takeover.

The law enforcement agencies recently decided to add a new chapter to the case of the so-called terrorist organization: the fabricated case of the Moscow cell. There is a great danger that its figurehead will be made out to be Miftakhov. This may be due to the old scores to settle with him, which did not enter into deals with the investigators. But perhaps it is just easier to accuse an already known "criminal" than to look for a new one.

The testimony on Miftakhov that may form a basis of a new case was given by Igor Shishkin, one of the defendants in the Network case. After his release and political asylum in France, Shishkin recounted how the FSB had beaten him to testify against his comrades using terrible torture. In addition, according to the official TASS news agency, some of those convicted in the Network case pointed to Miftakhov as one of the members of the Moscow cell.

If Miftakhov is convicted, he faces many more years in prison.

### **Who Supports Azat?**

The campaign in Miftakhov's defense has been supported from the outset by the Initiative Group of Moscow State University (including socialist activist and politician Mikhail Lobanov), DOXA student magazine, and Russian mathematicians.

In December 2020, mathematicians from the United States, Canada, and Europe supported Miftakhov, urging their colleagues not to participate in the International Congress of Mathematicians in St Petersburg.

Miftakhov's persecution and sentence were condemned by Human Rights Watch, the London Mathematical Society, and the International Mathematical Union. The intellectuals and politicians who have spoken out against the persecution of Miftakhov in recent years include Slavoj Žižek, Noam Chomsky, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the late David Graeber, and many others.

There is a support group FreeAzat in Russia; its international branch Solidarité FreeAzat is now collecting signatures in support of Miftakhov.

### **Cases Against the Left**

The Miftakhov case is one of many current legal frame-ups against oppositional, left-wing, and anti-fascist youth in the Russian Federation.

Young anti-fascists from the city of Tyumen were tortured to get their testimony: they were beaten, strangled with a bag, electrocuted, and threatened with mop rape. They were accused of creating a terrorist association, preparation for a terrorist act, and intending to blow up military and police stations and sabotage the railroads that carry trains of Russian military equipment to Ukraine. They face fifteen to thirty years in prison or life imprisonment.

Teenagers from the city of Kansk were detained in 2020 for posting flyers in support of Miftakhov. They were accused of preparing terrorist attacks. Sixteen-year-old Nikita Uvarov was sentenced to five years in an “educational colony.”

Two Chelyabinsk anarchists were sentenced to one year and nine months in a penal colony for hanging a banner on the fence of the FSB building with the inscription “FSB is the main terrorist.”

Repression on grounds of supposed terrorism hits not only young anarchists and anti-fascists, but also communists. Dmitry Chuvilin, a member of the State Assembly of Bashkortostan and a former member of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), was accused alongside his comrades of “terrorist” organizing just for participating in a Marxist reading group. In fact, local law enforcement was reacting to their active participation in ecological, anti-developer, and other local protests.

Kirill Ukraintsev, a leader of the Courier union of delivery workers, spent a year in jail. One of the charges was a post on social networks with an appeal to come to the trial of Miftakhov. This was qualified as “organizing a rally outside the court.”

The editors of the student magazine DOXA, which became the main mouthpiece of radical students’ protest, spent a year under house arrest and were convicted and sentenced to compulsory labor for “calling minors to participate in rallies.” In April, twenty-six-year-old feminist-linked Darya Trepova was detained for her alleged involvement in the murder of far-right propagandist Vladlen Tatarsky. In connection with this, a new campaign against feminists has been launched. A law equating feminism with extremist ideology has been seriously discussed in the State Duma.

On July 25, Boris Kagarlitsky, a world-renowned sociologist and Marxist theorist, was arrested in Moscow. He is accused of “justifying terrorism” for his statements against Putin’s aggression in Ukraine and faces up to seven years in prison.

## **Antiwar Dissent**

Since the invasion of Ukraine, the role of nonstate combatants in Russia has been growing, both in military operations and in strengthening terror inside the country. The response to the fictional extremism of which civil society is accused became real extremism on the part of men in masks, among whom it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between state security officers and paramilitaries.

The recent prevention of the mock coup headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, and the partial disbandment of his private military company notorious for brutal executions of “deserters,” do not mean that the dominant power structures are returning to the framework of law and transparency. On the contrary, they are even more likely to take actions demonstrating extremism of their own, which becomes more and more legitimate.

The competition among far-right groups, in one way or another connected to the government and the FSB, is also on the rise. Some of them are still counting on the apathy of the population, while others are hoping for a politicized mobilization of the top-down, fascist type, which, in their opinion, is the only way to ensure Russia’s victory in the war.

The fiercer this competition, the stronger will be the demand for a grassroots, antiwar, democratic agenda, including a leftist one. People of left-wing views, anti-fascists, feminists, members of socialist groups, and Communist Party sympathizers largely constitute the framework of civil society and protest society today, forming a great many visible and invisible connections within it. At the same time, they largely lack the visibility characteristic of many liberal politicians. “The mass demand for a left-democratic alternative in society is combined with the dominance of right-leaning people among the opposition’s public speakers,” Mikhail Lobanov commented in an interview.

Lobanov, a democratic socialist politician and MSU professor, once again had his home raided by law enforcement officers on May 18 in another fabricated case. After new threats and the de facto deprivation of his right to teach in Russia, Lobanov left in July this year on what he called a “long-term business trip abroad.” He sees its purpose as participating in “the formation of a mass political force focused on direct participation in the transformation of the Russian regime and on supporting social movements within the country.” For him, this also means “working with progressive political forces in other countries to form a set of proposals and guarantees for ordinary people in Russia and Ukraine.”

Unfortunately, public opinion around the world still heavily leans into the stereotype that only the liberal opposition in Russia is fighting Putin. This perception is often shared by Putin’s own opponents and sympathizers internationally, including leftists who believe that Putin is building a “multipolar world” and is thus some sort of tactical ally of the Left. Putin’s multipolarity means, among other things, the right to state homophobia in the name of so-called traditional Russian values. Imposing these “values” from above is one of the tools of a brutal repressive control.

Elena Gorban, Miftakhov’s wife, recently revealed that he had been attributed a lower status among the informal hierarchy of prisoners because of his bisexuality, after the FSB distributed some old pre-prison pictures of him among other inmates. Gorban believes that through this action the agency officials wanted to put pressure on Miftakhov.

Azat Miftakhov is already known as a political prisoner and mathematician supported by many people worldwide, so we have a real chance to secure his release. And that’s why we have to concentrate on his case — because in standing for Miftakhov, we also stand for other less-known comrades. But the support of the aforementioned activists does not only have a human rights or humanitarian meaning. As Lenin put it a century ago, today Russia is becoming the weakest link of world capitalism. Left-wingers in Russia fight and risk their lives for a project that challenges not only the current authorities in Russia but the entire neoliberal order. The more support and publicity they receive today, the more likely it is that their project of reorganizing Russia will be at the top of the agenda after the collapse of the current administration.

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