

# **'Freedom for Boris Kagarlitsky': Activists Globally Extend Support to Jailed Russian Intellectual**

Monday 18 September 2023, by [SEETHI K.M.](#) (Date first published: 16 September 2023).

**A prominent figure in the Russian Leftist intellectual sphere, a distinguished social scientist and prolific political writer, Kagarlitsky was arrested on July 25 for 'acts of terrorism' by the Vladimir Putin's government.**

In the complex realm of contemporary Russia, social life has become a challenging cauldron of ideas, dissent, and resistance. Under the regime of President Vladimir Putin, the nation's intellectual circles have traversed a disturbing path, marked by a delicate balance between self-expression and state control.

It has been several weeks since Boris Kagarlitsky, a prominent figure in the Russian Leftist intellectual sphere, a distinguished social scientist and prolific political writer, was arrested. On July 25, an unexpected turn of events unfolded for Kagarlitsky as he was hurriedly arrested and transported over 1000 kilometres away from Moscow to Syktyvkar in the Komi Republic.

On the same day, a local court ruled to detain him for a duration of two months, all emerging from allegations related to his purported support for 'acts of terrorism'. The potential consequences of this situation loom large, as a guilty verdict from the court could subject Kagarlitsky to the grim possibility of a prison sentence extending up to seven years.

## **Unwavering commitment to activism**

For Kagarlitsky this was not the first episode of incarceration. Way back in 1982, he confronted a hard time when he was jailed due to his association with a group of 'Young Socialists' who openly criticised the Soviet bureaucratic leadership. Notwithstanding this setback, Kagarlitsky remained deeply involved in the political sphere, particularly during Gorbachev's Perestroika era. Throughout these years, he undertook a parallel journey, producing intellectually stimulating works that delved into intricate social and political matters. Over the subsequent three and a half decades, his literary output thrived, resulting in a multitude of influential books and essays that have made significant contributions to the discourse on these critical subjects.

Kagarlitsky served as a professor at the Moscow School for Social and Economic Sciences and the editor of the influential left-wing media outlet *Rabkor*. Kagarlitsky's academic journey began with a focus on theatre criticism, but his involvement in dissident activities led to his expulsion in 1980. He served as the editor of the 'samizdat journal *Levy Povorot*' and was arrested on 'anti-Soviet' charges, eventually released in 1983.

During Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, Kagarlitsky resumed his studies and became involved in political activism. He played a key role in various political organisations, including the Moscow

People's Front, Moscow City Soviet, and the Socialist Party (USSR), and co-founded the Party of Labour (Russia) in 1992. In 1993, Kagarlitsky was again arrested for opposing President Boris Yeltsin during the constitutional crisis but was released due to international protests. His job and the Moscow City Soviet were dissolved later that year under Yeltsin's new constitution.

From 1994 to 2002, he worked as a senior research fellow at the Institute for Comparative Political Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and earned his Doctorate degree in 1995 for his thesis on "Collective Actions and Labour Policies in Russia in the 90s". He has also been associating with the Institute of Globalisation Studies and Social Movements, Transnational Institute, etc.

Earlier, Kagarlitsky's book [Thinking Reed](#) earned him the prestigious Isaac Deutscher Prize. He expanded his influence internationally with works like [Dialectics of Change](#) and [A Farewell To Perestroika](#), initially in English and later translated into Japanese and Turkish. [Square Wheels](#), among many other works, also received a wide readership. He later took charge as a professor at the Moscow School for the Social and Economic Sciences, enriching academia with his insights.

Of late, Kagarlitsky's unwavering commitment to activism has taken a toll on his personal life, exemplified by his ill-timed arrests and repeated legal penalties. His unyielding dedication to democratic principles has driven him to take bold actions. In 2020, he organised a rally to oppose constitutional changes that could potentially enable President Putin to seek a fifth term in office. Similarly, in 2021, he used social media to mobilise support for protests against alleged voter fraud. These principled actions drew the attention of authorities, resulting in legal repercussions for Kagarlitsky.

In 2022, Kagarlitsky faced yet another daunting hurdle as he was officially labelled a '[foreign agent](#)'. This designation, carrying significant legal implications, complicated his ability to freely express his views. It was a consequence of his steadfast internationalist stance on Russia's war on Ukraine, a position that had drawn the ire of the authorities. Remarkably, despite the increasing adversities, Kagarlitsky demonstrated steadfast resilience. He chose not to leave the country, and even more notably, he refused to retreat from the public arena. His determination to persist in his work and advocacy in the face of such challenges serve as powerful evidence of his resolute commitment.

Kagarlitsky's writings have played a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual development of successive generations of young Russian communists and adherents of Leftist ideologies. His scholarly contributions stand as a potent counterbalance to the enduring influence of [late-Soviet, Stalinist 'official Marxism'](#). Yet, Kagarlitsky's dedication to his cause transcends the realm of writing. He consistently extended intellectual support to fellow left-wing activists, offering his expertise whenever the occasion demanded. His commitment exceeded the boundaries of academic pursuits, as he rarely declined opportunities to engage in intellectual discourse with matching essences at various left-wing conferences and gatherings.

On March 21, 2023, [Kagarlitsky wrote](#) on the Ukraine war:

"For many years, I've criticised Western policies towards Ukraine and media myths about it. But today, both Ukraine and Russia face new and complex challenges. Russia's regime has shifted from moderate authoritarianism to a more totalitarian system. It's crucial not to conflate Ukrainian politics with the ongoing war...Ukraine has its issues, including controversial language legislation and problematic policies towards Donbas. Human rights violations have occurred on both sides since the 2014 conflict. However, these issues can't justify Russia's massive invasion of Ukrainian territory. Efforts to rationalize the Kremlin's decision as defending Russia's interests lack credibility and don't hold up to scrutiny."

[According to Kagarlitsky,](#)

“Ukraine is now a victim of aggression. And no matter what we may think of the Kyiv government, any attempt to deny it amounts to nothing but plain victim blaming. Poland in 1939 was not a nice place either and it really did discriminate against its ethnic minorities, including Germans, but this doesn’t justify or even explain Hitler’s invasion. Donbas was nothing but a pretext; most of the motives for the war in 2022 were purely domestic. It was an attempt to restore the shattered support for the regime in the face of mounting social and economic crisis. Growing popular discontent in Russia forced the regime to resort to massive electoral fraud in 2020 and 2021 and to step up repression. One anti-democratic law after another was passed, thousands of people were imprisoned and many were forced to leave the country. Universities were purged of liberal and leftist teachers, independent print media was shut down and attempts were made to impose Internet censorship. Critics of the regime were officially labelled “foreign agents” and deprived of political rights. This all happened even before the eruption of the war which was only used post-factum to justify and intensify these measures.”

[Kagarlitsky said](#) that the regime’s support continued to dwindle due to its own incompetence and the global crisis of neoliberalism affecting Russia and many other nations. The ruling elite desperately sought a remedy to reestablish societal cohesion. Moreover, concerns over the aging dictator’s health prompted discussions about a transition plan to maintain control over the political landscape. The idea of a ‘short victorious war’ appeared as a panacea to address these issues simultaneously. However, their calculations went awry. The blitzkrieg strategy faltered, and instead of a triumphant advance to Kyiv, they found themselves embroiled in a protracted, unwinnable war. He said that the war had fuelled radical nationalism, now the Kremlin’s dominant ideology.

Putin’s circle and propaganda openly advocate for the elimination of Ukraine, politically and physically. This poses a growing threat, not just to Ukraine, which defends itself with Western support, but to Russian society itself. Defeating the Russian army is the only solution to counter the encroachment of reactionary forces destroying education and human rights in Russia. Putin’s victory would be catastrophic for modern Russia. Fortunately, his army is facing defeat, opening the door to revolutionary change, he said. [Kagarlitsky further noted](#) that what troubles him about Western liberal pacifism was its failure to acknowledge the diverse interests, opinions, and rights of Ukrainians, Russians, Crimeans, and Donbas residents. The suffering of civilians resulted from concrete aggression by Putin’s forces, and it’s crucial to recognize and respect these people’s interests.

During an interview with [Democracy Now](#) on December 8, 2022, Boris was asked by Amy Goodman if he had concerns about his personal safety while speaking in Moscow. Boris responded, “Not more than anybody else in Russia these days.” He said the government declared him a ‘foreign agent,’ though they failed to specify which country he was an agent for. Boris said he didn’t believe there’s a need to be overly fearful. He had experienced imprisonment in Russia on at least two occasions, and he has been here for many years, witnessing various changes in regimes.

Alex Callinicos, an internationally reputed left political theorist, wrote in [Socialist Worker](#): Boris stands as a living embodiment of this unique group – possessing erudition, fluency in multiple languages, and an abundance of humour and charm. Yet, beneath these qualities lies a profound commitment to anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist ideals. Callinicos said that throughout their shared history, their political strategies have seldom aligned. Boris’s unwavering adherence to the principles of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century French socialist, Jean Jaurès, has been a defining feature of his approach. Jaurès contended that “reform and revolution, far from being mutually exclusive, augment and are conditioned by one another,” a philosophy Boris has faithfully embraced.

He noted that in practical terms, this translates into a form of radical reformism, wherein Boris seeks “revolutionary” or “irreversible” reforms capable of reshaping the very foundations of capitalism. Regrettably, the neoliberal era has demonstrated that no reform is truly irreversible. Nevertheless, Boris remains steadfast in his determination to resist what he terms the “new barbarism” inherent in contemporary capitalism, a commitment that has consistently placed him at the forefront of global protest movements.

Callinicos also critically viewed his position: “Boris hasn’t always made the right political calls. The brutality and corruption of the Russian version of neoliberalism has tempted him sometimes to ally with ideologically reactionary forces opposed to Western imperialism and its allies in central and eastern Europe. Thus in 2014, he made the mistake of welcoming the pro-Russian separatist revolts in eastern Ukraine as ‘a revolutionary movement’. However, [Callinicos said](#), “Boris has been a staunch opponent of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. He argues that ‘most of the motives for the war in 2022 were purely domestic. It was an attempt to restore the shattered support for the regime in the face of mounting social and economic crisis.’”

Kagarlitsky’s approachability and openness enriched left-wing gatherings by fostering dynamic discussions. His impact extends well beyond his writings. Since 2008, he’s played a vital role as a founder and editor of Rabkor, a prominent online journal and YouTube channel for left-wing discourse. His essays and columns on Rabkor have attracted tens of thousands of readers, establishing him as a respected figure in the Russian left. His insightful analyses have shaped left-wing discourse, solidifying his influence on political and social discussions in Russia.

Critics argue that Boris Kagarlitsky’s charges emerged solely from one of his Telegram posts, in which he analysed the Ukrainian attack on the Crimean Bridge on October 8, 2022. It’s evident that there is no endorsement of terrorism in this post. This incident highlights how law enforcement often employs weak pretexts for charges. In response to Kagarlitsky’s arrest, a coalition, primarily comprising left-wing groups, has launched a vigorous public campaign for his release and justice. This multifaceted campaign includes publishing numerous articles, distributing informative leaflets, and organizing public meetings. These efforts aim not only to raise awareness but also have the potential to unite diverse groups with a shared cause.

In a plea for help from people worldwide, [the Rabkor editorial board said](#): “Boris is not just a famous left-wing thinker and scholar; he’s also a Marxist who has studied class conflicts, was a Soviet left-wing dissident, and now might end up as a political prisoner in Putin’s Russia. He’s part of the global socialist movement, has taught many Marxists, and has stayed true to his beliefs for a long time. Kagarlitsky shouldn’t be in jail because, in 2023, politics shouldn’t be seen as a crime. We strongly disagree with his arrest.”

On August 16, [Kagarlitsky wrote](#) from prison: “I think that the current arrest can be considered a recognition of the political significance of my statements. Of course, I would have preferred to be recognised in a somewhat different form, but all in good time. In the 40-odd years since my first arrest, I have learned to be patient and to realize how fickle political fortune in Russia is. The experience of the past years, it would seem, does not dispose much to optimism. But historical experience as a whole is much richer and gives much more grounds for positive expectations. Remember what Shakespeare wrote in Macbeth? “The night is long that never finds the day.”

A global movement is actively working towards securing Kagarlitsky’s freedom. The ongoing efforts include the organisation of gatherings and protests calling for his release and justice. These events are planned to take place in different cities around the world on September 16.

---

**K.M. Seethi** is a Senior Fellow at the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). He is also the Director of the Inter-University Centre for Social Science Research and Extension (IUCSSRE), Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala.

[\*Click here\*](#) to subscribe to *ESSF* newsletters in English and/or French.

---

**P.S.**

The Wire

<https://thewire.in/rights/freedom-for-boris-kagarlitsky-activists-globally-extend-support-to-jailed-russian-intellectual>