

'My prisons and the future of Russia'

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EXCLUSIVE - Our interview with Boris Kagarlitsky, a critic of the intervention in Ukraine, Russian sociologist and left-wing activist, who has just been freed after four months of detention 1,300 km from Moscow on the unproven charge of 'approval of terrorism'

Boris Kagarlitsky, an internationally renowned Russian sociologist and political scientist and left-wing activist, has been released from prison after four months. Fortunately, he was only sentenced to a fine on the charge of 'approving terrorism'. However, he can no longer carry out teaching or professional activities in Russia.

The opposition breathed a sigh of relief, because the dissident risked up to six years in prison despite being 65 years old. Although we cannot go into the details of the court case, we spoke with Boris about his experience in prison and his thoughts on the general state of the country.

This is the first interview Boris has given since leaving the prison in Siktyvkar (Komi Republic), which is 1300 kilometres from Moscow, and we are happy to be able to offer it to Naufraghi/e, which had already interviewed him last year. In Italian (ed. Castelvechi) his book 'L'impero della periferia. Storia critica della Russia dalle origini a Putin', and in the spring for the same publisher we will have his new book 'La lunga ritirata', a wide-ranging reflection on the defeat of the European left and its prospects.

Let us summarise for readers who have not been able to follow your story closely, the reasons that led to your detention

Officially, I was accused of 'approving terrorism'. As evidence of my alleged crime they used an excerpt from a video where I commented on the Ukrainian attack on the Crimean bridge in October 2022. The title of the video was 'The Bridge Cat's Explosive Salute'. I was jokingly referring to a cat that actually lives on that bridge and that all the bloggers had been talking about when Putin had arrived in Crimea the day before the explosion. Mine was just a sarcastic joke, nothing more. In the face of this even the judge had to recognise that there was no endorsement of terrorism on my part, although obviously they could not send me away acquitted. In fact, the reasons for my arrest were different from those officially stated. In the middle of last year, in fact, a campaign was underway to shut the mouths of all more or less well-known people who criticised power, no matter if left or right-wing. It was not only me who was arrested, but also a reactionary figure like Igor Strelkov for example.

Anyway, in the end, you did four and a half months in prison

Yes, but it wasn't the first time. I was in prison in Soviet times in Brezhnev's time, when I had formed 'socialist clubs', and then in 1993 and again in 2001. I must say that something has changed for the better since then....

Here, tell us what Russian prisons are like. In the West we have the idea that they may resemble something gloomy halfway between the cells of the tsarist empire and the

barracks of the gulags

It must be said at once that in Russia there are various forms of detention, more or less harsh. I ended up, fortunately, in one of the best-equipped cells. There were four of us and the one who, so to speak, fared best was a detainee who had already been awaiting trial for more than six years. He was already very well organised and had his own TV and refrigerator, which he had obviously bought out of his own pocket. He was very well respected in the prison. So, for example, the warders could not put an inmate in his cell who was not to his liking. But this, it should be remembered, was a prison for prisoners awaiting trial. Then there are the concentration camps, i.e. where you serve your sentence if you are convicted, which are far worse. They are often isolated facilities in the woods and where there is an obligation to work. Although there are always loopholes: a prisoner who was there with me even though he had been sentenced was allowed to stay as a cook. It was an advantageous thing because as his acquaintance he always guaranteed you a larger ration. You could also buy food in the commissary (which was very expensive anyway) and also order pizza outside, but it would arrive the next day, cold of course.

What were your relations with the other inmates? In Russia, we are used to the fact that everyone is afraid to talk about 'forbidden' subjects like war or the corruption of power.

In prison, no one is afraid to talk. After all, what else could they be sentenced to? From this point of view it is paradoxically an oasis of freedom. In general, prisoners have a very critical attitude towards what is happening in the country. I have not met anyone who was enthusiastic about the war in Ukraine. But there is a point to be made: the person who declares himself against the war may, at the same time, be willing to go and fight because this allows him to get out of prison. Especially prisoners who have to serve more than five years in prison try to take advantage of this possibility. If the sentence is less, they prefer to stay in prison and not risk their skins. I also met a prisoner who had been in Ukraine as a volunteer and then, when he came back, they had arrested him again. He too, however, was against the war.

In Russia, are ordinary prisoners separated from political prisoners?

In Soviet times there was this separation, now there is not. Today the division in Russian prisons is different. They separate those who create problems from those who do not; between those of 'low quality' and those of 'high quality'. Rapists, drug dealers, etc. are obviously considered 'low quality' and certainly do not make a good life behind bars. Two of the people who were in the cell with me were accused of murder but came from 'respectable social strata' being former businessmen, so they were still considered 'high quality'.

As for relations with the outside world, for example correspondence?

I used to receive it. It went through censorship of course. Two letters were blocked because they informed me that there was a rumour that Putin was dead. I could also write. I could write four articles, obviously not related to the 'hot topics'. Someone started to incite me to write 'notebooks from prison' but I refused, replying that I had no intention of being in prison for long like Gramsci!

Is it possible to receive books in prison?

For books, the situation is complicated. There is the internal library but it only contains literature, no non-fiction. Even from outside you can only receive literature. Another problem is that there is no prison library catalogue. So you have to ask for a title at random and after a while the librarian tells you whether the title is available or not. I used to ask my cellmates what they had read, so I had an idea of what to ask for. You read a lot in prison to pass the time.

No non-fiction, worse than in Italy during fascism...

The first month and a half the librarian was ill, and I couldn't order anything. So after that I made do.

As a sociologist what did you pick up on the social composition of the prisoners? Is it mainly proletarians or semi-proletarians?

Yes, many proletarians but also many civil servants in prison for corruption. There was also the former deputy mayor of a small town. He was in prison for murder. He had unintentionally killed someone during a drunken brawl that followed a town festival. Then there were various businessmen with links to criminal organisations. Of course many workers, unemployed, young people. A kaleidoscope of the whole of Russian society. Many crimes are related to income. To income that is not there or is insufficient to live on.

Living in Moscow, one almost has the impression that crime in Russia does not exist, that the regime works to give an image of tranquillity and security. Not even in the 'mainstream' newspapers are cases of crime reported.

That's not really the case. Every evening, 'Dejurnaja Cast' ('Service Station'), a programme widely watched by the inmates, is broadcast on TV, where they talk about crime. Then there is a daily crime show on local TV which lasts an hour and in which many prisoners recognise friends and relatives involved in some bad business...

What about migrants?

Of course there are many migrants in prison . Mostly Uzbeks, much less Kazakhs. This is about 15-20% of the prison population. Then there are the elements of the post-Soviet diaspora, mainly of Azeri origin.

Did this, let's say 'extreme', condition lead you to make some reflections on Russian society in general?

In prison, you have the opportunity to meet people you would not normally associate with. In my view, many people who are in jail cannot be called criminals. They do not have that 'inner tendency' to crime. They are mostly people who cross the boundaries of legality with relative ease. People for whom minor breaches of the law are habitual and who sooner or later end up arrested. There was for example a young man who got into a fight with his neighbours because they had loud music. He was not a criminal, simply a person who found it easy to settle disputes that way. For these people, crossing certain boundaries is not so bad.

I know you as an optimistic person, both individually and politically. After this experience are you still one?

Yes, I am an optimist by nature. I was convinced that I would not be in jail for long and that was the case. I have reasons to be optimistic. If you believe that good things will happen to you, the chances of them actually happening increase.

You know that about your imprisonment, someone even joked about it on social media: 'Power does not know what it means to arrest Kagarlitsky. In the days of the USSR, after they arrested him, almost immediately Brezhnev died!

...and just imagine that after my last arrest, the rumour started to spread that Putin was dead and

the one we saw on TV was just a stand-in!

Even Gorbachev before he died entitled his autobiography 'I remain optimistic', why do you remain so?

One must honestly admit that stories like mine do not usually end well. The fact that I am a university lecturer, a political scientist and sociologist who is also known abroad, has helped me a lot. And not only that, the public opinion campaign in my favour helped me. Even some people at the top thought it was better to let me go, that my case was harming them more than benefiting them. But if the same thing had happened to a provincial left-wing or civil rights activist, no one would have helped him. For example, there was an activist in prison who had criticised the government on his blog and was serving five and a half years in prison for the same crime.

It was fine for me and I am happy, but the injustice remains evident. From a political point of view I can say this: certainly in the March presidential elections Putin will be re-elected, but the mere fact that a part of public opinion thinks he is dead and in his place there is a stand-in speaks volumes about the credibility of these elections. People believe much less in the system than they did six years ago. For the first time, people think in their hearts that these are not legitimate elections. The situation is also different for the bureaucratic nomenklatura. The bureaucracy is tired of having to solve problems that the Kremlin constantly creates. For example, many think that these elections are unnecessary when they have to deal with other problems. In the provinces, this malaise is even more evident than in Moscow. This is a new phenomenon.

Russia is on the verge of a crisis in which the greatest danger comes not from the people but from the bureaucracy. The latter tends more and more to sabotage government projects, to slow them down. Later the people will also mobilise, but for now the main destabilising factor is the bureaucracy. Power is unable to solve any problems. It continues on the path of repression and propaganda and accumulates problems. As a Russian saying goes: 'to heal the sick they break the thermometer'. They think that by not dealing with them, the problems will solve themselves. The level of the accumulated problems cannot be known by the opposition, but it is more interesting that neither do the powers-that-be. When and how this will turn into social protest no one knows. But it is certain that for different reasons all classes in Russia today are discontented and uncertain.

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