

I'm a Ukrainian leftist. This is why I support Boris Kagarlitsky

August 5, 2023



Leading left-wing Russian thinker Boris Kagarlitsky is facing up to seven years in prison on charges of “justifying terrorism” even though it is clear to everyone – including supporters of Vladimir Putin and his aggression in Ukraine – that he was arrested for his anti-war views.

Kagarlitsky is perhaps the most prominent Marxist thinker in the post-Soviet space, known in academic and political circles inside Russia and beyond. He was arrested on 25 July after stating in a social media post that the attack on Russia’s Crimean Bridge in October 2022, believed to be the work of Ukraine, was understandable “from a military point of view”. His case is just one of hundreds of police investigations into anti-war Russians.

His arrest has provoked a heated debate about solidarity – and whether Kagarlitsky deserves it, given his previous statements.

Starting out in the late Soviet Union as a left-wing dissident and underground Marxist, Kagarlitsky, now 64, was perhaps the only person from this community to achieve widespread recognition in Russia and the wider region following the fall of the USSR while retaining his socialist convictions. Several generations grew up on Kagarlitsky’s books and lectures, and his assessments of political events in post-Soviet countries became a guide for observers in the West. He became a symbolic figure for the Russian left.

Kagarlitsky’s public rejection of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was therefore bound to irritate the Russian authorities. His arrest shows that even internationally famous public intellectuals, who have connections in high political circles, are no longer safe from repression.

Support for Russia’s annexation of Crimea

But Kagarlitsky’s views on the war in Ukraine have not always been the same. Following Ukraine’s Euromaidan revolution, he was an enthusiastic supporter of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the pro-Russian separatist movements in the Donbas, seeing some progressive ‘anti-imperialist’ features in those events.

As he put it in 2015: “Novorossiia [New Russia] is not a project, but a movement, a dream, a public goal.” The website he ran, Rabkor, followed suit, arguing that “the way to end the civil war in Ukraine lies through... [Kyiv’s recognition of] defeat in its war against the rebellious south-east”, meaning the so-called ‘people’s republics’ in the Donbas.

Many who grew up on his work found it difficult to read such articles – it felt as if the author had been replaced by someone completely different.

Kagarlitsky became a frequent guest on state television, commenting on Russia’s military operations in the Donbas. His new milieu came to be dominated by people associated with Russia’s so-called ‘patriotic left’, which often involved conservative and imperialist positions.

The conclusions that Kagarlitsky drew from world-systems theory (an analytical framework that emphasises long-term political and economic trends outside of nation states) matched the expansionist aims of the Russian state.

If you present world politics exclusively as a confrontation between the global periphery and the global centre, it isn’t difficult to imagine the 2014/15 war in the Donbas as one of the hotbeds of this confrontation. In this analysis, Russia became (even unwittingly) a kind of vanguard of anti-imperialist struggle, supposedly helping the Global South to free itself from the hegemony of the West.

Kagarlitsky also expressed hope that, under the burden of new historical challenges, the Russian regime would put an end to neoliberalism and transform into a more progressive system. But, as it became clear that this was unrealistic, and that such a position was merely a left-wing prop for the Putin regime and its imperial adventures, he began to revise his views.

Changing views

Kagarlitsky’s political assessments began to change in 2017, as Russian political life became ‘interesting’ again. He seems to have realised that he had got involved with a rather unpleasant crowd and it was time to move away – towards the Russian opposition, a much more natural place for him as a representative of the progressive Russian intelligentsia.

He clashed with political conservatives who applauded the Russian police’s vicious crackdown on youth protests. Unambiguous comments about the need to overthrow Russia’s top officials and the supreme ruler himself began to appear. Kagarlitsky also sought to expose Putin’s statements about Russia as a “besieged fortress” as ridiculous self-justifications of a corrupt regime.

In 2020, he supported the huge anti-Lukashenka protests in Belarus, calling on Russians to learn from their neighbours. In 2021, he supported protests defending opposition leader Alexey Navalny, who had been detained on his return from abroad, and called for his release.

Kagarlitsky’s dislike for the current system and Putin personally had grown so much by this point that he was ready to devote entire streams on his Rabkor YouTube channel to discussing rumours of the president’s poor health. He did not conceal his hope that the ‘wait’ would not be long.

On 24 February 2022, the Russian army began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Kagarlitsky immediately took a very specific position against Russian aggression, calling it a sinister adventure of the regime that was doomed to failure.

When asked about his changed attitude towards Ukraine, Kagarlitsky replied: “The victim may be a

bad person, but they are still a victim. 1930s Poland was a very reactionary state, but when Germany attacked, it was a victim of aggression and it had every right to support and sympathy in repelling the attack.” He did not hesitate to compare Russia with the darkest aggressors of the past.

Since the invasion, Kagarlitsky’s Rabkor YouTube channel and website has published anti-war content from Marxist positions, aimed at the Russian left rather than the liberal audience that is traditional for the opposition media. Other anti-war leftists and even liberals began to appear on Kagarlitsky’s live streams – people who were on the opposite side of the argument from him eight years ago.

As another anti-war blogger Alexander Shtefanov noted, Kagarlitsky’s activities became dangerous for the Russian authorities because they created rallying points for a wide range of anti-war opposition – and specifically for those who remained in Russia.

In 2022, the authorities declared he was a ‘foreign agent’, hinting that it was time for him to get out of the country. He decided to stay – despite the real risk of going to prison, which has now happened. Undoubtedly, this was a very brave and honourable act.

Anti-war, anti-Putin

Has Kagarlitsky rejected his past positions? Probably not. He adheres to the theory of the ‘absolute event’, which is to say neither the failures nor the merits of the past matter when you’re facing a crisis such as Russia’s war against Ukraine. Instead, it’s your attitudes and actions that count.

Kagarlitsky’s approach is very practical. Instead of excluding potential allies, it assumes that the coalition against the ‘absolute event’ will be open and inclusive.

Kagarlitsky’s media activity since February 2022 has shaped the anti-war views of thousands of Russians. In fact, his stance in 2014 and 2015 may have helped, allowing him to reach those with moderate patriotic views, who would never have been won over by agitators with an ‘ideal’ past and a clear-cut position.

Kagarlitsky may have once supported sections of the Russian patriotic left who yearn for territorial expansion. But no other well-known leftist has done more to instil into thousands of Russians a simple thought: the Putin regime is criminal, the invasion of Ukraine is criminal, there is no justification for it, and it must be resisted.

Some still cannot forgive him for his past conduct, but now he has been detained for his sincere anti-war convictions, for his actions against the war. For this reason alone, he deserves international solidarity.

The campaign to free him is important for other reasons. Without an anti-war movement inside Russia itself, it will be very difficult, perhaps impossible, to end the war in Ukraine. Russian society is far from ideal, of course, but only from this imperfect society, with its imperfect people with their imperfect biographies, can an anti-war and anti-government movement emerge.

Anyone who delays this movement is doing harm. For the last 18 months, Kagarlitsky brought it closer.

This article originally appeared on OpenDemocracy on Aug. 1, 2023.

Image: Rabkor/You Tube