

# Why (and how) to campaign for the liberation of Boris Kagarlitsky

July 31, 2023



Boris Kagarlitsky has been imprisoned for opposing Russia's war on Ukraine.

On Wednesday 26 July, we heard that Boris Kagarlitsky had been arrested by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), who promptly transferred him from Moscow to Syktyvkar, in the far north, on charges of "apology for terrorism." A trial is scheduled for September where he faces up to 7 years in prison.

The Russian regime, whether Putin's loyalists or other networks, has no legitimacy and no historical right to try anyone – not even the criminal torturer Girkin. Boris Kagarlitsky has nothing to do with "terrorism" and is a celebrity on the international "radical left", which makes his arrest internationally politically relevant. *Aplutsoc* therefore associates itself with the statement circulating in ENSU, irrespective of the issues addressed in the rest of this article:

On 25 July, Boris Kagarlitsky, a well-known intellectual and socialist activist, was arrested by the FSB on charges of "justification of terrorism", and immediately transferred to Syktyvkar, 1300 km from Moscow. There, at a hearing held behind closed doors and without the presence of his lawyer, the court decided to keep him in detention until his trial, which is due to take place in September, at the end of which he could be sentenced to 7 years in prison.

Kagarlitsky's prosecution and detention are part of a repressive campaign to silence all voices opposing both the invasion of Ukraine and the Russian government's domestic policies. Over the last

year, the Putin government has prosecuted, imprisoned or forced into exile a number of well-known political figures, intellectuals and activists who have spoken out publicly against the war as ordinary citizens via social networks. Kagarlitsky himself was classified as a “foreign agent” in May.

We express our solidarity with Boris Kagarlitsky and demand his immediate release, as well as that of all those detained on political grounds.

Having said this, a campaign for the release of Boris Kagarlitsky must, for us and, we believe, for European Network in Solidarity with Ukraine (ENSU/RESU) if it were to take position as such, be well understood politically if it is to be effective. This undoubtedly requires all activists to be fully informed. That is the purpose of this article.

To make it clear that we could face a problem, let’s mention two communiqués from Russia.

The first is from Angry Patriots, the fan club of Igor Girkin alias Strelkov: <https://t.me/KRPRus/147>.

Girkin-Strelkov, well known in Russia and notorious in Ukraine, Bosnia and Moldova, is a high-level FSB and GRU officer who was present in Transnistria in 1991, in Bosnia in 1994, and led the establishment of the “People’s Republics” of Donbass and Luhansk in 2014. He then organised the shooting down of the MH17 plane (298 dead), for which he has been condemned in an international court. For several years now, he has been denouncing the inadequacy of Putin’s efforts to Russify half of Ukraine, and has become an “opponent”, undoubtedly right-wing for the ultra-nationalists, but seen as “left-wing” by others who have passed him off as a “red soldier” wanting to “fight imperialism”, namely, first and foremost, Boris Kagarlitsky. Representing the critical ultra-nationalist wing hostile to Wagner mercenary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin, Girkin-Strelkov was arrested a week before Prigozhin.

His Angry Patriots movement is calling for Kagarlitsky’s cause to be united with Girkin’s, and there is no doubt that while there will be a lot of talk on the international left about Kagarlitsky’s defence as that of a “Marxist sociologist”, in Russia itself, perhaps more people will hear about it from Girkin and other red-browns, monarchists and “patriots”.

A completely different communiqué comes from the anarchist Telegram thread Netchaievtchina: <https://t.me/nechaeverywhere/3951?fbclid=IwAR3OwFd6n3LHQo97bVr4uaqlBwxZCkwL1nKVFJNevHeRHNNr2Bn-ioAdyKU> .

These comrades, for they are our comrades, do not question the principle of demanding Kagarlitsky’s release, but see him as the key figure in the “dangerous myth of the revolutionary Donbass” and deplore the fact that the many activists threatened with death in prison, “ordinary activists” like Yevgeny Karakashev, threatened with death from brain disease, have no influential support and solidarity networks: In fact, these comrades fear that even less will be said about ordinary activists now that an broad campaign by the “amnesiac left” in favour of Kagarlitsky is being prepared.

Let us repeat: we must campaign for Kagarlitsky’s release. But is the terrible question of these

Russian anarchist comrades legitimate? Yes, it is!

Boris Kagarlitsky, born in 1958, joined the Samizdat ('self-publishing', or dissident movement), around 1980, and was arrested in the last months of the Brezhnev era, then "pardoned and released in 1983" according to the Wikipedia article on him.

During perestroika, he was the best-known leader of the Moscow 'New Socialists' group. Together with an anarcho-syndicalist group and the "Marxist Platform" current of the CPSU, they were behind the Moscow Popular Front, an "informal" movement which, more or less beyond the control of its initiators, supported Boris Yeltsin's election to the Congress of People's Deputies and to the Moscow mayor's office.

It was during this period that Boris Kagarlitsky became very popular with the radical left and far-left press in the West, such as the New Left Review and the journal Fourth International. The book he had been working on for years, *Les intellectuels et l'État soviétique de 1917 à nos jours* (Intellectuals and the Soviet State from 1917 to the Present Day), by far his richest, most original and most remarkable work, was published in English in 1988 (in French by PUF in 1997).

These years came to an end with the collapse of the USSR. During the putsch of August 1991, he and his group, like their anarcho-syndicalist and "CPSU Marxist" allies, adopted an abstentionist stance, not supporting the mass movement opposing the putschists, which Yeltsin later took over.

At the end of 1993, during the armed confrontation between the President of the "Russian Federation", Boris Yeltsin, and his "parliament", they sided with Yeltsin and took part in the fighting, losing with him – Kagarlitsky then spent a brief period in prison where he was beaten. This second choice placed its authors on the side of the so-called "conservative" or "National-Stalinist", or even "Red-Brown" forces.

As a result of these events and these choices, the project to build a "Workers' Party" in Russia, which they had been promoting, was aborted. Some withdrew, others embarked on a great career, like the former "anarcho-syndicalist" leader Andrei Isayev, who went on to become leader of the former official trade unions (still there today) and a supporter of Putin.

Boris Kagarlitsky began his career at the Russian Academy of Sciences. His international contacts contributed to his status as a "Marxist sociologist", which we will take the liberty of contesting. In fact, his most original work is his first, on the Russian-Soviet intelligentsia. From the beginning of the Putin years, B. Kagarlitsky ran an "Institute for the Study of Globalisation and Social Movements", then, with the rise of the Internet, he initiated the Rabkor website.

Their work consists of denouncing US "imperial" hegemony and highlighting the integration of Russia under Putin into global neoliberalism and the hegemony of finance. Kagarlitsky adopts formulas from authors of a completely different calibre such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin. He provided some confirmations for Naomi Klein's chapter in her book on the neoliberal 'shock strategy' in Russia after the 1991 putsch. There are no really original analyses here, none of the materials which the Russian workers' movement and young people could have done with in those

formative years of Putinism. Indeed, this lost left perceived Putins 'state-minded' and nationalist aspects as a lesser evil, or even as a remnant of "socialism".

As one contributor to the lively debates among Russian activists over the last few days put it: while convinced of his 'collaboration' with the 'authorities' – which, in Russia, everyone understands as meaning the repressive organs – he nonetheless considers Kagarlitsky, like many others, to be ideologically completely sincere and explains that "...that's the fundamental problem: ideologically, Kagarlitsky represents the vestiges (just vestiges? ) of the alterglobalism of the 1990s – first half of the 2000s, when planet Earth was enveloped in the tentacles of Euro-American capital, compared to which everything is secondary (...). Regimes like Russia or Iran, of course, don't represent anything really good either, but in principle they are a lesser evil compared to the global financial neo-fascism (...). I think this is the most toxic idea circulating in today's left-wing circles, and not only there."

The "Kagarlitsky left" finds that an ugly Putin is better than a supposedly neo-liberal Yeltsin, and that national-statism does not only have its faults. anarchists and militant trade unionists rail against this, and young people trained in this way often find it excessive or too compromised. But this is the thinking which permeates the cultural habitus of many groups and currents on the Russian left. And it shows when it comes to making choices.

In 2008, as comrade Vladislav Starodubtsev, a Ukrainian activist with Sotsialnyi Rukh, recalls, Kagarlitsky welcomed Putin's Georgian war, declaring that "the blow dealt to the United States opens up new prospects for struggle".

During the massive demonstrations against Putin's re-election in 2011-2012, he took a "sceptical" posture, according to the Russian comrade quoted above, speaking of a "petty-bourgeois, well-fed middle class" too far removed from the real "social movements".

And so we come to the decisive moment: 2014.

Here, Kagarlitsky is the emblematic figure of what Ukrainian Vitalii Kulik calls "pink Putinism" <https://politcom.org.ua/kagarlitsky-as-a-mirror-of-pink-putinism>. He denounced Ukraine's Maidan as "fascist", of course, and told anyone who would listen that hundreds of thousands of workers had risen up in Donbass – a total fabrication. He called for a "Donetsk takeover of Kiev".

At the time, his institute and website received substantial funding – 3.2 million roubles according to Ukrainian sources

<https://www.nihilist.li/2015/03/31/kagarlitskij-vojna-i-politicheskaya-korrupciya/?fbclid=IwAR2sKslj18hRiMO2eRyBrf-fxhcSUFzyYxjVzppnxz4k7b-BC9rPQKn4zHc> – from the Russian authorities.

Kagarlitsky's group provided Western political intermediaries, in particular the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation of the German party Die Linke, and Britain's Stop the War coalition (formed years earlier to oppose G.W. Bush's wars), with conferences and biased information, in particular on the alleged "pogrom of the trade union house in Odessa" on 2 May 2014. A conference was organised in [occupied] Crimea in November 2014, with the participation of Kagarlitsky and Western activists including the British Richard Brenner. The general line of this event was that Russia must help the "Donbass uprising" to wrest from Ukraine all of its south and east – the "Novorossia" which Putin outlined in his speech on 14 April 2014. The Kagarlitsky centre also organised the promotion of the

Borotba group <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article33625> , a real fake party, a Potemkin party to use a Russian metaphor, to make Western leftists believe that revolutionary communists with Che T-shirts were fighting “Ukrainian Nazis” in “Donbass”.

His relationship with Girkin-Strellkov was public, and the Kagarlitsky website interviewed him regularly. Contacts and meetings with Dugin’s Eurasian far right also increased during the Novorossia campaign. According to V. Kulik, during the summer and winter of 2014-2015, Kagarlitsky boasted that, using the resources of his now solvent Institute, he ran a “school for social activists” in Belgorod which sent its “pupils” to “work in the government apparatus of the people’s republics”. Yes, there where strikes, trade unions and the Ukrainian language were banned and torture chambers filled.

It is clear that there is a change between the warmongering line cloaked in vague “revolutionary” verbiage, which played a key role in 2014 in covering up Putin’s counter-revolution, and Kagarlitsky’s orientation from February 2022 onwards when Kagarlitsky condemned the “special military operation”. So did the No. 2 leader of the Russian “Left Front”, Alexei Shakhin, who emigrated to France (Left Front No. 1 leader Sergey Udaltsov did not change his line).

One Russian comrade points out that Kagarlitsky manages to say he was right in 2014 and also in 2022: ultra-bellicist imperialist in 2014, but opposed to the “special military operation” in 2022, for him there is a political continuity ...

Clearly opposed to the war from 24 February onwards, Kagarlitsky is not for all that defeatist from the Russian point of view (even taking into account the obligation to speak in hushed tones). His condemnation of the war since 24 February has been based mainly on his denunciation of a dictatorial drift in Russia, which he sees as the means to this end.

The most hostile Ukrainian analysts link his position to the disgrace of Vladislav Surkov, Putin’s ideologist for many years and the mastermind of the propaganda operations surrounding the “Donbass” and the “Ukrainian Nazis” in 2014, who would therefore have been his mentor. This is not inconsistent with the postulate of a sincere position, for which Putin after turning his back on a phantasmatic “people’s war” in 2014 would have fallen into a trap allowing him to walk to dictatorship.

Not only are Girkin’s “Angry Patriots” supporters defending Kagarlitsky, but since his arrest he has received two public endorsements from the highest echelons, which indicates that there is a crisis at the top, a debate within the state apparatus, and that what is happening to him is part of this “Russian crisis” that has been open, particularly since the Prigozhin putsch.

So there was the support of Margarita Simonyan, the formidable TV presenter who, for example, called for Ukrainians to starve, whose Telegram channel, linked to a TV channel, described her arrest as “shameful, unnatural and disgusting”. <https://t.me/russica2/52942>

Then there are the statements by Sergei Markov, a Putinist figure who has been or is responsible for various parastatal foreign policy bodies and state control of “history”, denouncing his arrest as a

“very serious political error” and, in passing, presenting him as an immense figure in the “international left-wing socialist movement” (sic), calling on the “presidential administration” to collaborate once again, and closely, with him and what he represents.  
<https://t.me/logikamarkova/7471>

Comrade Fred Fuentes, a Green Left activist from Australia, author of numerous articles and playing an active role in internationalist support for Ukraine, has circulated an article <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/solidarity-needed-russian-anti-war-socialist-boris-kagarlitsky> calling for the defence of Kagarlitsky against repression, in which all the elements just presented are either ignored, passed over in silence or euphemised as past differences which must not alter the necessary solidarity. Fred Fuentes mentions Sergei Markov’s support for Kagarlitsky, describing Markov as an “eminent pro-Kremlin intellectual”. That’s a bit short-sighted: it was Markov who, on Russian television in autumn 2022, called for the nuclear bombing of European capitals, London in particular.

Girkin, Simonyan, Markov: it has to be said that the opposition to Kagarlitsky’s arrest has been voiced by representatives of sectors of the Russian state who are themselves in favour of the war, but no doubt find it ill-conducted and lacking in scope...

The question is therefore legitimate: are we defending a militant of the left, of the workers’ movement, or of the “forces of progress” as it is sometimes called, in the broad sense, whatever the differences, or are we faced with a factional struggle? If Girkin is not a “political prisoner” for us, is Kagarlitsky?

This question is inescapable, as is the answer given at the beginning of this article. But the worst thing would be to deny ourselves this questioning, to dismiss it as something we don’t want to hear – moreover, that would lead to not hearing, once again, what our Ukrainian comrades are telling us!

Only the truth is always revolutionary. And the golden legend of an eternal dissident who, after all, only made one big mistake in 2014, is a golden legend, an insipid mush that bears no relation to the truth, however hard it may be.

To question this golden legend is to revisit the whole history of the relationship between the ‘radical left’ and the USSR, which has now become Russia for more than three decades. The Kagarlitsky question is not a problem of individuals, but opens up a far-reaching historical, political and even moral question.

This is perhaps why it is so painful, and why it would be so easy to rush without conscience or reflection into a finally easy ecumenism, into a good ‘Eastern’ cause rediscovered with the campists. Nothing could be worse, because that would muddy the waters, whereas the global reality since 24 February requires us to clarify them.

No, we won’t be singing the praises of the “anti-war, anti-Putin Russian socialist” with the likes of Mélenchon or Corbyn, who have never taken a stand to save the men and women still to be saved – Igor Kuznetsov, Daria Polyudova, Yevgeny Karakashev, not to mention Maksym Butkevich.

And yes, we must demand in all conscience that Boris Kagarlitsky be released, because it is not up to Putin or any faction of the mafia oligopoly in power in Russia to judge him, and because he is part of our history in its most painful aspects, and we also have a duty to clear the air about it, so that we can have a future by coming to terms with the past, the whole past – the real past.

Vincent Pr  sumey, 28 July 2023.

Translated from French by AN

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<https://aplutsoc.org/2023/07/28/faire-campagne-pour-liberer-kagarlitsky-pourquoi-et-comment/>