The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we’ve been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

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https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org
This week we’re featuring 2 guests speaking about Russia. First up, John spoke with author and journalist Dmitry Okrest about the state of anarchist and antifascist movements in Russia, the politics of Putin’s United Russia party, nazis and the far right in Russia and successes of the Communist Party in electoral politics. Then, Moscow Anarchist Black Cross member-in-exile, Antti Rautiainen, adds some more detail on repression in Russia, including the hunger strike of Network Case prisoner, Victor Filinkov, calls for solidarity from mathematician Azat Miftakhov and others.

Search for this interview title at https://thefinalstraw-radio.noblogs.org/ to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

AR: Yeah, I could mention it. I have my own podcast, but it’s mostly in Finnish and dealing with some local discussions, but I will also put in Russian episodes, and occasionally, there will be also English texts. I hope to have an episode this week or next week about a project called FemDatcha, a feminist shelter for burnout activists that was organized by feminist activists in the Moscow region. So this was an example of a creative and positive project in Russia because it’s not only suffering and repressions, people also have some new and interesting concepts and ideas and I would also like people to pay attention to these things. You can find my podcast with my own name Antti Rautianen, which is a bit tricky for an English speaker I didn’t figure out any fancy name and also wanted to keep my content eclectic, I don’t have any special topic. It’s just basically for my own rants about various stuff. But we can link it to the episode description so people can find it. I have a couple of English episodes and in the future, there will be more. This one about a feminist cottage FemDatcha will also be in English.

TFSR: That’s awesome. Thank you so much for having this conversation, Antti. I really appreciate it.

Antti: Thanks. This is my favorite podcast because others in the States don’t seem to have so much international perspective. I think it’s very important that you are pushing this direction because America is so big that people often tend to watch mostly inside.

TFSR: Yeah, absolutely. It’s really easy for us to just think about ourselves as the world. Thanks so much for the kind words and take care of yourself.

AR: Okay. See you I guess in five years, we will have a third podcast.

TFSR: Anarchy will reign by then, so it will be a less depressing conversation.

A: Yeah.
**DMITRY OKREST**

TFSR: Hello and welcome to the Final Straw. My name is John and I’m going to be conducting an interview today with Russian independent journalist Dmitry Okrest about the recent repression of leftists and anti-fascists in Russia. Welcome to the show, Dmitry.

Dmitry Okrest: Nice to meet you.

TFSR: Nice to meet you. To start with, could you give our listeners some context on yourself and the work you’ve done as an independent journalist in Russia?

DO: Just a few words, I have been a member of a punk hardcore scene in Moscow for the last 15 years. I had been more involved like 10 years ago, and I made my fanzine, organized freemarkets, music label, a book publishing house, and discussion forums. There was one generational change, I tried to work at first in a historical publishing house, and then I moved to work in the media. And as a journalist, I worked for a long time in a society department.

I write more about street politics, human rights, police, prisons. And I have also written about a lot of political radicals, including Nazis, jihadists. I’m now a co-author of two books about how the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc moved from their version of socialism to capitalism. The books are in the spirit of A People’s History of the United States by Howard Zinn, and I’m also the author of a book about Rojava, where different researchers, activists, fighters talk about this project and their own experience. I’m currently preparing a book about the anti-fascist movement in Russia. We’re looking for an opportunity to translate some of it into English.

TFSR: That’s great. Those books all sound really fascinating. You said they’re only in Russian currently.

TFSR: Dmitry also mentioned in the prior interview dropping banners and posting solidarity images is something that embarrasses Putin’s administration and has a deep impact. Are there other methods that come to mind, like you’ve mentioned the mathematician society and supporting them and applying pressure? But are there other methods that come to mind that folks can engage with from abroad to show solidarity with anti-fascists and anarchists, as well as oppressed identities in Russia, particularly well, not whitewashing the repression and cruelty of our own governments that are repressive institutions?

AR: A very important thing is just to spread information. Also, many of the campaigns, especially before the sentences, need to pay the lawyer bills, which can be quite expensive, because there are not really many activist lawyers in Russia. Occasionally, especially if there are no terrorist charges, you can have some human rights organizations sponsor lawyers but this is not always the case, if there is some radical politics involved, that doesn’t necessarily happen. I will say also that basically maintaining horizontal contacts, I think it’s very important to be involved in the local struggles but I think the anarchist movement is not only about the local struggles, it’s also about international solidarity. And in Russia, and even more so in Belarus, the movement is now in a pretty difficult situation so it’s good to just maintain contact and discussion not only on the repression work but general strategies and perspectives. So especially when this COVID era is beginning to end, it’s more important than ever also to have international meetings and discussions and not only meet in some discussion forums, social media or Twitter or whatever, but also to have face-to-face meetings and to create more solidarity.

TFSR: Awesome. Is there anything else that you’d like to mention that I didn’t ask about?

AR: This was pretty much what I wanted to say on this. Avtomon.Org website is hosting the ABC Moscow news, but we can put all the relevant links and so on to this episode information.
DO: Unfortunately, only in Russian. But we wanted to translate it into English, too.

TFSR: That’s really interesting. All three of those sound fascinating. And just for context, as most of the listeners live in the United States, and we’re ignorant about the world in general, or at least many of us are. How old are you? Where does that place you as far as your experience with the Soviet Union, and the years in between? Do you recall that experience of the Yeltsin years and all this?

DO: I was a child when the Soviet Union collapsed. So I really don’t remember anything. But I remember a lot of details after the Soviet Union crashed. So it was the time of economical crisis, most of the people didn’t have any money at all, no jobs. There were a lot of local wars. But on the other hand, there was much more freedom, freedom of speech, freedom in politics, and there was no big punishment for any activity. Now it’s a nostalgia war about what was it? Was it a good time, or not a very good time? And now, there are much more political wars over this period. Most people have a very selective memory for it. So now, it’s a very political question.

TFSR: Interesting. When you’re saying more like freedom of expression, you’re saying as in contrast to today, right?

DO: Yeah, because Putin has been the president for 22 years. He became prime minister in 1999. So we had like nine years of so-called freedom, and then a 21-year period of the so-called stability, but in fact, there is no stability, it’s just a mask, imagination.

TFSR: A question I wanted to sort of start off with: Could you, to the best of your ability, give us a brief overview of recent anarchists and anti-fascist movements in Russia, and the repression that has been facing them? Because I’m aware of a bunch of trials in the last 10 years or so of supposedly anarchists terrorists or whatever.

DO: Maybe the most well-known case is the so-called Network terrorist group. It started four years ago before the World Cup Championship. Activists were kidnapped, beaten, tasered, forced to sign a piece of investigation evidence. These are 11 men from different cities, and secret services doesn’t necessarily reach Viktor. Actually, as far as I know, around one month ago, he hadn’t received any mail. Everything was just stored somewhere or trashed but at least the prison administration knows that is not being abandoned, that people are following the situation. And also the support campaign has to pay the lawyer bills and so on because if they put this heavy pressure on Viktor, he will be in constant need of lawyer support for all time he serves in prison, which will be the following four years. There are also instructions on our website on how to donate to the Network case prisoners.

TFSR: I know that that website has a lot of information about other people in the Network case and also other prisoners that are being supported. Are there any individuals or cases that you’d like to mention that should be particularly or generally supported by listeners?

AR: I think all the cases are important, especially the network has prisoners because they have very long sentences. A number of them have more than 10-year prison sentences, but also the Network case was at least lucky that it managed to get good international support and attention of many anarchists and anti-fascist, but there are obviously many other cases.

For example, there was an anarchist couple from Chelyabinsk who just got crazy two-year sentences for a simple banner drop, which was done in solidarity with the Network case. Also, there is artist Pavel Krivevich who is an artist and not an anarchist, but he was doing many actions to support the Network case and for one of his performances, he is now in this famous Butyrka prison in Moscow, where many anarchists were jailed even before the Revolution. Also, a very important case is the case of Azat Miftakhov, the mathematician. He was sentenced for another support action for the Network case prisoners to six years in prison, for just breaking a window of the ruling party office. And he’s been put on pretty heavy labor condition, but at least he can receive mail. So it’s important to support him by letters at this point. And also, there is an international campaign to have the International Society of Mathematicians involved. So if any of the listeners are working or enrolled in mathematics departments in any of the universities, you can check on our website how to join the efforts to have the International Association of Mathematicians support Miftakhov, because, in Russia the support campaign is actually mostly organized not by anarchists, but by the community of mathematicians. Because that’s Miftakhov’s profession.
AR: Filinkov’s case doesn’t seem to be super high profile. But it’s not only anarchists but also some human rights defenders or liberals supporting him to some extent, especially the Novaya Gazeta, which got the Nobel Prize in literature, they are covering his struggle. So I wouldn’t say that he’s completely isolated but also these demands are super moderate. He’s not demanding Putin to give up power or something. So I think there are certain chances for him. Quite a prolific hunger strike was around 2018-19, Oleg Sentsov, one of the Crimean prisoners, together with Alexander Kolchenko were accused of organizing underground activities against the Russian occupation of Crimea. Sentsov himself was not an anarchist, but his co-defendant Kolchenko was, and Sentsov was in some very long hunger strikes, and eventually, he was released as part of the prisoner exchange. Of course, not only because of the hunger strikes, but I think the hunger strikes may have played some role that he was included in the prisoner exchange, which was originally meant to be just prisoners of war. So, I think hunger strikes are pretty popular in Russia, even with some liberal and environmental struggles, maybe even too popular, if you asked me, but I wouldn’t say that they are completely useless. They also can achieve some results. Sometimes it might be that risks are heavy, but also sometimes you don’t have so many other options. I hope Filinkov’s strike will succeed.

TFSR: Yeah, me too. Are there ways for people outside of Russia to support his case?

AR: I asked about this for people who are more closely involved in supporting Filinkov. Our group, the ABC Moscow, we have been diminishing during the years, and half of our group has been forced to migrate for different reasons, as I was deported and others have become refugees. There are still people in Russia involved but we are not, in this particular case, super active. But there are people in, for example, in the Repression campaign for the Network prisoners, and they are currently organizing letter-writing, but they have only resources to organize this in Russian. And of course, you have to send the letters in Russian but I think in the show notes, we can share the links to online forms in Russian and a petition text. With Google Translate people who might want to contribute can try the join this campaign, but also, as usual, just in general information coverage would be needed and letter-writing. On ABC-Moscow’s site, you can find Viktor’s prison address. Of course, if you send mail to prison, it incriminated them with the participation in this mythical terrorist organization. There were a lot of accusations of them being terrorists, but no real evidence. In this case, the political police made a lot of work. A lot of people moved from Russia because there was a dangerous situation.

There are also other terrorist cases. Three years ago, a 17-year old anarchist went into a local political police office with a bomb, but he killed only himself. And he said that he tried to support the Network case defendants. And after that, more than 200 people were arrested, cases started against them. They commented that he was a hero to do it. Some of these persons are anarchists or anti-fascists. That played badly against the anarchist movement. Also the people in Kaliningrad, in Crimea, that used to be part of Ukraine, there were also terrorist cases. So now a terrorist case is the best way to put anybody in prison because no one really wants to support terrorists. Because, you know, it sounds like they wanted to kill everyone. But now people understand that it wasn’t really a terrorist, but something that political police called like that.

TFSR: I see. I know that there is or was a big-ish movement of anti-fascism in Russia. And in my mind, that was a response, I assume, to a rise of hard-right violence on the streets. Is there... it’s hard to say a brief history of that because that’s many years. But in my mind, the reason I could assume that the far-right gained power or popularity in Russia in the last...

DO: Fortunately not now, but 10 years ago, hundreds of migrants and ten street anti-fascists were killed. But when the Nazis tried to seize the monopoly of power and become the power themselves, all violence was stopped pretty quickly. There was quite a lot of information about provocateurs in the Nazi movement. Now, there are a lot of Nazis in Russian prisons and they wanted to do something like Aryan Brotherhood, but most of them just cooperate with the prisons administration in exchange for any help, indulgence. On the other hand, a lot of right-wing football fans became demonstratively apolitical last year in exchange for opportunities to control their territories. Some of them attacked political opposition actions and now, they try to be very silent, especially before and during the World Championship in Russia four years ago.

Now it’s not a really big problem but last summer, political police arrested three groups of neo-Nazis. It looks like they became more popular, the memory of those events pops up amongst the younger generation,
but the intensity of passion is not the same at all. So, police forced these Nazis to admit on camera that they renounce naziism, but I think they were not ideological, it was rather street violence, nothing more. But they will be in prison for the next 10 years or so. So in my mind, now we can expect a consistent evolution of the right into the people hate – open misanthropy. Some Nazis hope for disparate revenge, and therefore they can commit terrorist attacks. But I think they will inevitably be crushed by the state and police.

TFSR: I know that this conversation is sprawling, but that brought up an interesting point for me. I personally don’t really understand what Putin’s and United Russia’s politics are. I think a lot of American liberals see them as being right-wing, but in my mind, it seems like they just work with whomever against whomever. I don’t really understand what United Russia’s politics are, other than just like power.

DO: I think that nobody knows, in fact. It’s something quite conservative. But inside Russia, the state just uses different political science and young politicians. When they need, they use Nazis. But in this case, they’re not a Nazi state, they just use it for several years. For example, they tried to communicate with the left-wing movement 10 years ago, but nobody wanted to do it. And they said, okay, but they tried to do it. Now they say a lot of things against tolerance, about transgenders, etc. They seem to be much more right-wing, but in fact, in the next five years, it could change again.

TFSR: It’s just cold power or something like that? Interesting. I guess, speaking of politics, more macro politics in Russia, we saw really large protests last year, in theory, in support of the opposition political figure Navalny. And the United States media and liberals championed him as a liberal democratic icon, but some of what I’ve read is that he’s somehow a Russian nationalist, or has sketchy racial beliefs of other groups in the Russian Federation. I guess I’m curious about how leftists and specifically anarchists engaged in those protests, and also what your take of Navalny as a political figure is.

DO: As I said before, the Russian government doesn’t use any political terms. And usually, people in Russia also don’t use any political terms. Most people really don’t know the difference between a liberal, democratic, authoritarian, etc. When you talk about liberal, Western, etc., usually

AR: Viktor Filinkov was in prison as a part of the so-called Network case, which was started around 2017-18. It was a number of anarchists and anti-fascists, and just their random friends from the city of Penza and the city of St. Petersburg, who were framed up to be some underground terrorist organization. I was a part of a support campaign for them which united many different people all around Russia and also internationally, but it didn’t succeed to have this case collapse, and everyone was sentenced. And Viktor Filinkov was one of the people sentenced, they started doing their terms this year and the previous year they have been appealed without any changes. And now they have been sent to prison colonies. Viktor Filinkov arrived in his colony in August. It’s in Orenburg, close to Kazakhstan. And they have been putting huge pressure on him in this colony. He’s been basically sent to the hole more than 10 times, he hasn’t been a single day in the general prison population, maybe he was in some common cells for a couple of days, but in general, he has been kept in complete isolation.

And currently, he started a hunger strike on the 30th of October. This is a traditional day of political prisoners, of first Soviet dissidents, and then political prisoners in the Russian Federation since the 70’s. There were hunger strikes of political prisoners already in the 70’s. So Viktor joined this tradition, but also, he is stating his own demands, which are that he wants to be released to the general prison population to escape the isolation. And he also demands to get written materials, like books, papers, and materials of his own case, because currently, he is not even allowed to read his own case. This is an ongoing thing, the hunger strike has been on for around one month and Victor is struggling for some basic things. Probably, it’s the prison administration who wants to frame him up, every time he is sent to a hole for a minor violation, like laying down in his bed, which basically is not allowed in the Russian prison colonies in certain hours or not dressing completely, according to prison form rules. Just general bullshit things. And probably the goal is to railroad him to higher security prison called EPKT, which is basically the highest security prison.

TFSR: A hunger Strike is a really intense method of struggle that can cause extreme deterioration of some of the body’s systems, long-lasting effects after the actual hunger strike. It’s a choice of the last tactic for people. Is there much history recently of the prison administration’s responding to this? Or is there much discussion in Russia right now about Viktor’s case?
other.

TFSR: I like you mentioning that you need to do mental health stuff but also learn how to shoot guns. I didn’t expect it to go there but it makes a lot of sense. I really appreciate you talking with us. Where can people find work that you’ve written and stuff that are translated into English?

DO: I have some publications on OpenDemocracy.net. It’s a site with a lot of materials on the situation in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine in English. We made a podcast in English about Russian prisons, and we called Russian Limbo. We usually don’t have any possibility to make articles in foreign languages, unfortunately.

TFSR: No, that’s great. We will put these different websites you’ve mentioned, and podcasts in the show notes so people can click on those. And that podcast about the Russian prison sounds fascinating. I appreciate it. Thank you for negotiating the time difference with me.

DO: Thanks a lot. And thanks for your questions and interest. It was really nice to talk with you.

ANTTI RAUTIAINEN

TFSR: Can you identify yourself for the audience with any names, pronouns, or affiliations that make sense for this conversation?

Antti Rautiainen: Yeah, my name is Antti, I’m working with ABC-Moscow. Even so, I’m in exile currently, haven’t been able to visit Russia for almost nine years.

TFSR: So I was hoping that a chat with you could accompany the interview that we just heard with Dmitry Okrest, about the situation for anarchists and anti-fascists in Russia by making space for more specific updates from Moscow ABC. So thank you so much for making yourself available for this. Off-mic, you had mentioned that there was a hunger strike of Viktor Filinkov. Could you tell us more about his situation, remind us of his case, and how he’s doing?

people don’t understand what it means. Navalny originally was known as a blogger who writes about corruption. He is was originally from the Democratic Liberal Party, but he tried to cooperate with nationalists. He tried to communicate with them when they were popular 10 years ago, but Nazis and other nationalists didn’t accept him. So as a result, now Navalny tries not to answer this question, he tried to ignore it. And for a long time, he was out of danger, although he had several criminal cases, then he was poisoned last year, he was taken to Berlin, then he returned despite a prison term. Now he’s in prison.

His arrival was a strong sign that inspired many people, not only his supporters. Navalny’s actions look rather like a civil protest in which anarchists also took part and two of them ended up in prison. One guy is still in prison, there was a case with policemen. The current protests are connected with the name of Navalny. Now he’s been recognized as an extremist organization. And nobody can say that he supported Navalny without a punishment. There were mass actions against putting Navalny in the prison but then the most massive repression began this January, and now most of the employees of Navalny’s campaign team have immigrated. Many media outlets are in crisis and under sanctions, and a lot of people are in prison because it’s very easy to be in prison for being detained several times at a legal demonstration. And now we don’t have any legal demonstration because of the pandemic, it’s illegal to make any demonstration at all.

Another thing, economic conditions have been deteriorating in Russia. Lately, Navalny has made it visible how officials are living richer and richer. So people were really angry in this case, because they don’t have a lot of money, but they see a video with officials and their palaces. So for me, it’s a good position when we can see the result of such corruption. But as I said before, most people don’t use any political terms. They don’t have any political education. And in this case, the main problem is that they don’t know what is going to happen afterward. And there is no opportunity to understand what will happen after this government.

TFSR: So there are recent elections in Russia. And I know that something that came out of them was also this law against foreign agents or something like this. That that has led to the repression of journalists and other people, but specifically leftists. Could you speak about the most recent wave of repression? As well as stories that I’ve read about people leaving Russia for Georgia or other areas, having to flee basic-
ly, based on the repression.

**DO:** It's true. Since the beginning of 2021, the Ministry of Justice has added 11 media outlets, 42 journalists, and 9 NGOs to their register of so-called foreign agents. Every Friday someone else gets on this list. Now there are 223 foreign agents. If we think in terms of liberal democracy, it is an act of state pressure on the media or public organizations, because there is the destruction of any infrastructure and control by authorities. We're talking about projects controlled by the Russian authorities. These organizations get grants from different funds – from the US, from United Nations, and the European Union. But the problem is that these organizations, these NGOs, and these media are the only ones that try to do anything with corruption, protests, or tortures in the police departments. The danger of criminal liability constantly hangs over foreign agents – from fines to imprisonment up to five years. It led to really big fines and bankruptcy of organizations. You can go to prison for five years if you don't do good paperwork for the ministry, but no one knows how to prepare it. And society understands it. People sign a lot of petitions against this foreign agent law. So now it's 150,000 signatures. But as usual, there are no street actions because people are afraid. As I said before, detentions at a rally can lead you to prison. So people try not to be in this area.

**TFSR:** I'd seen an article about specifically Russians fleeing to Georgia. And I imagine it's because Georgia is aligned with the United States.

**DO:** Russia and Georgia, there was a war between them 12 years ago, so we don't have any diplomatic contacts. There are a lot of American NGOs that are based in Georgia. 20% of Georgia's territory is under the control of the Russian army. This country is relatively safe, sorry for such a comparison, but it looks like an American activist would go to Cuba, for example. But basically, everyone connected with politics in Russia is going to Georgia now: journalists, human rights activists, supporters of Navalny, liberal activists, leftists, anarchists. During the pandemic, there are not a lot of states where we can go. The border with Georgia is closed, we can go to Armenia, and then from Armenia, which is a friend of Russia, we can go to Georgia, but most states now are closed for Russians. So Georgia became a state where it can be maybe safe, maybe not, I don't know exactly.

**TFSR:** I see. Along the lines of talking about Georgia, and then also

**TFSR:** I assumed you probably didn't listen to it, but in an interview, my colleague did with the folks from Belarus about the uprising there, was interesting, because while so many of their comrades are in prison and facing really horrible odds, they also seem somewhat more positive about potential future stuff in Belarus. It takes me by surprise, the attitudes of those folks being hopeful about the future. Whereas it seems like in Russia, it's not so hopeful at the moment, which is just the reality, obviously. But it was interesting to hear the differences, obviously, it's very different countries in different contexts.

**DO:** I can't say that I am an optimist because I think I'm more realist. I really don't think that it will be better after Putin, because I really fear that different police departments, Nazis, etc. can use their power. But on the other hand, I see people around me, I see a lot of good vibes between people. I hope that it will be better because people can say something without being repressed. But it's just a hypothesis, I really don't know.

**TFSR:** I wanted to first thank you, and really appreciate you being in touch with me and doing this. But I also wanted to ask, is there a way that you can think of that anarchists or anti-fascists in the United States could show solidarity with their comrades in Russia that are facing repression right now, or any kind of meaningful solidarity?

**DO:** There is the Anarchist Black Cross Moscow, which supports the repressed activists, and Russian and Belarusian anarchists often call for solidarity. So the best way is to make any demonstration or help. So you can check like Avtonom.org or Rurement.com for any information in English because these organizations provide legal and material support, medical care, food parcels, etc. I know that the Russian state really doesn't like to see any solidarity in different states they get very angry. And for us, it was really interesting to see how American anti-fascist and anarchists took part in different demonstrations last year or two years ago, it was really exciting for us. But my recommendation is that everyone needs to know how to support each other, like to know how to take medical care, how to sustain good mental health, and how to be in a good healthy condition because when we had that street violence 10 years ago, only training with guns and knives helped people from the anarchist movement to survive. So in my mind, it's really good knowledge how to protect yourself, and I hope that people from the US also know how to help themselves and to protect each
DO: I think that it shows the request for left-wing ideas because people see the crisis, economic crisis, political crisis, ecological crisis, electoral crises, but people don’t see any solution. There is no way to protest. A lot of people went to this election because they just wanted to show they don’t agree with the state, they wanted something to change. But they’re really afraid to do anything, to take part in any street action, in any organization, because a lot of organizations now are under punishment, under repressions. So, I think that it could be a good chance to show that there are such ideas that they can be popular, but no one knows how to use that effect.

TFSR: Have there been any sort of attempts from more autonomous or anti-authoritarian left groups to, not piggyback, but exploit the fact that these ideas are becoming more mainstream, or work on spreading those?

DO: In fact, we don’t have any polls to understand what people really think. And we don’t have time to grow politically or to raise any activist, because it’s a really big risk for such people. Only in their kitchens [in private] do people say what they really think. And in this case, we have a lot of informal networks between people. But there is no real formal actions and formal organizations for any movement, and most people prefer to put their ideas, their activity in a secret.

TFSR: Does it feel like when there are large-scale demonstrations, that’s the only moment when people can be open politically? Like when there are enough people in the streets, that it’s hard for the police to pick off individuals?

DO: I think that really nobody knows the answer to this question. Because there is no data, no information. And it’s really hard to make any researches and now the state tried to do something with independent researchers, with independent education, with people who know how to make a study. We don’t have any tools to understand what we can do in the next year, in the next five years. There is a very good term to describe this. It’s “forced helplessness,” people don’t know about their power, and there is no opportunity to check it. The same situation is for the left-wing movement and anarchist movement because they don’t know what power they have and how to use it. There is no space for practicing it.

right-wing violence that we were talking about earlier. Has there been a lot of repression of queer and trans activism and life in Russia, or how that has been because you mentioned that anti-trans stuff had been popping up?

DO: It looks like no people – no problem. Now a lot of such people are invisible, because of the law against the so-called “gay propaganda.” So most people prefer not to say about themselves, for example, most gay people I know, I really don’t know if they’re gay or not, because there is no one coming out and sometimes I hear about someone, but usually people prefer not to say anything about it. So most people prefer to be “normal” because if you say that you are gay, it will be not a very good situation in prison if you get arrested and there is a lot of homophobia. Most people, including gays and trans persons, prefer not to show themselves in many cases, especially in a demonstration, etc. So there are no open street manifestations or something like that. Most people show their sexual orientation only in talks at home. And in Georgia, it is the same situation. In Georgia and Belarus, in Ukraine, the situation is a bit better. But in fact, there are a lot of Nazis also, so most people prefer not to show themselves during ordinary life.

TFSR: That’s pretty grim. Speaking of Belarus, maybe a week or two ago on The Final Straw, we aired an interview with several Belarusian anarchists about the uprising and repression by the Lukashenko regime there. And I was wondering, because, in our talks, we discussed Belarus and Belarusian anarchists quite a bit. And I was wondering, without making this a conspiracy, how much interaction and solidarity is there amongst anarchists in former Soviet and Eastern European countries? Because I know that there’s been a really strong anarchist movement in Belarus for as long as I’ve been reading the Abolishing Borders From Below magazine about Eastern Europeans. So I was wondering what influences go between these countries?

DO: Belarus is the closest country to Russian, in linguistic and cultural terms. I’ve never been to Canada and US, but it looks the same. So the before the beginning of the war in Donbas, Ukraine was the same country. But now, xenophobia is unfortunately on both sides. So there were many common organizations in post-Soviet space, and activists always went to each other during demonstrations or gatherings. A lot of people from Russia helped local activists, for example, many of my friends are banned
from entering the territory of Belarus for the next 10 years. The reason was that they participated in street actions, and now activists left for Russia when the repression started in Belarus because neighboring Poland didn’t open any humanitarian escapes.

At the same time, the territory of Russia is not very safe for the Belarusian people. For example, one Belarusian journalist was detained in Moscow and brought to Belarus, and now he’s in prison. An anarchist from Belarus is in jail in Moscow, he took part in so-called mass riots in Belarus and the Belarusian state wants to extradite him. But he’s still in Moscow. Right now, over 1000 people are in the prison for political reasons in Belarus and about 30 anarchists and anti-fascists are among them. Some of them were tortured by suffocation, electricity. We don’t have any quality communication with them, because it’s a big problem with lawyers now. They can’t share information about the case. I think that same situation will be in Russia in the next maybe two-three years because usually, Belarus looks like a [testing ground] where the state tries to do something and to understand if it works or not? A lot of people think that now we will have a similar situation in Moscow or St. Petersburg.

TFSR: Has that happened in the past where forms of repression... Have authoritarian government policies happened in Belarus and then later happened in Russia in the past, or is that just a fear?

DO: The most updated information, you can read on abc-belarus.org. It’s the website of the Anarchist Black Cross Belarus. But what I see now, most people don’t do any street action, but they are still angry, they stayed, and they try to help people in prison, they try to support each other, there was a lot of solidarity between people, they help each other in medical cases, in cases of mental health. So in my opinion, it is the best option for people now to help each other and try to support each other in this dangerous time. So the best time is to save their resources.

TFSR: Thank you for that. I mean, it’s just a horrible situation. Well, this isn’t really related to the anarchist movement or anarchy at all. You sent me an interesting article in Jacobin, about the recent elections and electoral gains by the [Russian] Communist Party, and also that article was posing that there is a shift within that party towards a more social-democratic opposition, and I was curious about if that in itself could lead to a resurgence in leftist politics in general. And also, if the recent gains in the election are significant, or if it’s just a weird apparition?

DO: Well, there was a very interesting case of Mikhail Lobanov, he is a professor. He’s a mathematician. He took part in a trade union, he’s a real good activist. And he is not a typical communist from this party but in fact, this Communist Party is not a real communist party. It’s not a Marxist party. It’s more conservative, they think about how the Soviet Union was a really great state. And for them, it’s more important to know that the Soviet Union was Imperial than an actual communist state. So the campaign of professor Lobanov, I think was the best thing that left activists have been doing for a long time in the entire post-Soviet space because the degree of penetration of leftist ideas, slogans, problems to the masses was unprecedented. People really were surprised that there is someone who could say anything smart about society without any problem.

He didn’t say he is a communist or a socialist, in fact, he looks like a left-wing democrat. But for a lot of people, it was really surprising, because they usually see people who are more Stalinist than communist. So in Lobanov, they just saw a very smart person who can tell smart things about society, about taxes, about different repressions with a left-wing optic, and in this case, it was really interesting to see the reaction of people. He won the election, but in fact, now he’s not a deputy in the Parliament, because the state preferred to change the results. In this case, it was interesting how he made a political machine. There are a lot of left-wing activists who decided to help him. He preferred to be a mouthpiece of a lot of people. He preferred to be not like a typical parliamentarian, but a man who takes a recommendation from people to the state, and for the political system in Russia, it’s looks really exotic. So maybe for people in the US, it looks like nothing special, but for the Russian political movement, it was special, like “Wow, how did that happen?!?” People were really surprised, and that’s why a lot of people helped him.

TFSR: Do you think in some ways that his popularity or the popularity of the things he was saying shows that there is some left-wing or more liberatory desire in Russian society? Also, do you think he’s actually speaking to material needs? Do you think there is a left potential in Russia?