



Azat Miftakhov in court, 2019 / Photo: Victoria Odissonova, Novaya Gazeta

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ARTICLES

# Vladimir Putin's Russia Claims to Be Fighting Nazism, but It's Persecuting Anti-Fascists

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## ОБ ЭТОМ НИКТО НЕ УЗНАЕТ

Если об этом никто не напишет. Подпишитесь на регулярные пожертвования ОВД-Инфо, чтобы плохие дела не оставались в тишине.

ПОДПИСАТЬСЯ

*On September 4, Russian anti-fascist Azat Miftakhov was released from jail, only to be instantly rearrested. Vladimir Putin claims to be fighting Ukrainian Nazis — but he persecutes anti-fascists in Russia itself.*

On a **chilly** morning, September 4, Elena Gorban stood outside a Russian prison. She was waiting for her husband to be released from jail after four years behind bars. Yet the mood was sour. She **knew** that the jailed anti-fascist **Azat Miftakhov** was likely to be immediately rearrested.

Azat came out wearing a prison uniform. Burly men in plain clothes, one of them masked, then made it clear to Elena, along with Azat's mother and stepfather, that the anarchist mathematician wouldn't be going free. They proceeded to inform the family that they would only have five minutes together. Elena, who **said** she already wrote everything she wanted through her letters, simply embraced her husband. She held him until he was taken back into custody — and driven away for a transfer.

As authorities continue their inhumane treatment of the soft-spoken mathematician and anti-fascist activist, Vladimir Putin's decades-long war on human rights and the Left is ever more evident.

## **POLICE VENDETTA**

Born in the small town of Nizhnekamsk, Tatarstan, Azat excelled in math since kindergarten, participating in countrywide competitions. He did his undergraduate study at the prestigious Moscow State University and then started his PhD in mechanical mathematics in 2015.

A committed anarcho-communist, Azat supports international struggles against capitalism and opposes the police state. In his 2019 court **statement**, as he faced trial, Azat said he «participated in opposition rallies and marches, distributed anarchist leaflets. . . . I was also involved in the fight against dishonest bosses and criminal realtors.» Azat concluded that his activism prompted «revenge» by the police.

Azat had been arrested on trumped-up charges on February 1, 2019, right before his birthday. Cops claimed he planned to blow up a gas pipeline. They beat Azat to the point where he slit his own wrists to avoid further punishment. They also rounded up six more people, one of whom **told** journalists that cops tortured him through beating and tasering, aiming to get a false confession.

On February 7, 2019 — the date Azat’s imprisonment was legally over — he was immediately rearrested, this time for supposedly breaking a window in the office of Russia’s omnipresent United Russia party.

The charges were visibly fabricated. A witness, who **died** a year later, appeared out of nowhere, claiming that seeing Azat on the news had jogged his memory. In 2021, Azat was sentenced to six years in prison for a broken window. His supposed coconspirators, who received far lighter punishment, deny Azat’s presence at the scene.

Left-wing figures from all over the world, including Slavoj Žižek and Noam Chomsky, **advocated** for Azat; some 3,500 mathematicians signed a letter calling for his release. But to no avail — the authorities were adamant that Azat serve his sentence. While he was imprisoned, his jailers lost no time to harass him further. For instance, they **leaked** Azat’s intimate photos to ensure that he was cast down to the very bottom of the brutal prison hierarchy.

Azat was meant to be released this September 4. But as the sentence drew to an end, it became apparent that the Kremlin was determined to keep Azat in prison. In August, it added him to a list of «extremists and terrorists» and opened another case against him.

Sure enough, once Azat was released, authorities only gave him five minutes to talk to his wife and family, and then they **took** him right back into custody. He is accused of «justifying terrorism» for allegedly cheering on a suicide bombing

of an FSB office while watching TV with other inmates — a charge he denies. He might get five more years in prison under the new case.

## ANTIWAR DISSIDENTS

Azat's case is illustrative of two currents in modern Russia: the brutal and humiliating treatment of political prisoners and the decades-long assault on leftist activists. While the Kremlin [claims](#) it is anti-fascist in its war on Ukraine, nothing could be further from the truth.

OVD-Info, one of Russia's largest human rights watchdogs, recently released an [infographic](#) on political prisoners, showing 226 people imprisoned for their antiwar activism alone. Political prisoners in Russia are subject to torture and humiliation. Political prisoners of all stripes can get brutalized at the Kremlin's behest — they can be electrocuted, raped, beaten, or even tortured to death. OVD-Info knows of thirty-seven antiwar dissidents who have been tortured since the full-scale invasion in February 2022, and this is only the tip of the iceberg, as so much torture is covered up.

The brutality of Putin's state is often aimed at left-wing activists, who are persecuted for their antiauthoritarian, pro-labor, and anti-war stances. Take the recent [case](#) of Siberian anti-fascists. Cops detained six anarchists in three Siberian cities on bogus charges of trying to overthrow the government. One of the anti-fascists worked as a veterinarian, so the authorities claimed that he was going to provide a nonexistent militant group with medication. All six men went on the record about the horrifying treatment they received at the hands of the authorities: beatings, sleep deprivation, asphyxiation, threats of rape, and more.

«They handcuffed my hands behind my back, and then taped a piece of paper onto my face so I couldn't breathe or see, » anti-fascist Kirill Brik [told](#) his lawyer. Brik was then beaten for

roughly three hours, with police forcing him to sign a false confession.

This persecution is nothing new. Putin has spent decades suppressing anti-fascists in Russia and subverting the legacies of the Soviet fight against Nazism. While instrumentalizing the Soviet legacy in its propaganda, the Kremlin harshly crushes leftists at home.

Going into the 2000s, Russia had a robust anti-fascist movement that fought against the voracious far right and the rising authoritarianism of the Kremlin. **Hundreds** of anti-fascists showed up to protests, and various groups **popped up** everywhere. But Putin's administration, obsessed with what it calls a «**power vertical**» — strict political control and hierarchy — has tirelessly stamped out and subverted leftist opposition. Some were thrown into prison — like Ilya Romanov, who **spent** close to a decade in Russian prison for various forms of activism. Others were forced into exile — like **Antti Rautiainen**, a Finnish anarchist and publicist who lived in Moscow for over a decade.

## THE NETWORK CASE

Russian far-right groups have also contributed to the strangling of Russia's left. Russia's neo-Nazis are heavily **linked** with the Kremlin, and their most prolific and brazen collaboration went on in the first decade of the 2000s. Several anti-fascists were murdered then. Most famously, in 2009, neo-Nazis shot anti-fascist journalist Anastasia Baburova together with human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov.

In 2017, the FSB, Russia's feared security agency, **used** a neo-Nazi agent provocateur in one of the most recent and well-known crackdowns on Russian anti-fascists, arresting eleven activists for belonging to an anti-government organization, «Network, » that most likely has never even

existed. In 2020, the men were condemned to sentences of three to eighteen years. The jailed activists repeatedly said that the FSB agents tortured them and forced confessions. Dmitri Pchelintsev, sentenced to eighteen years, [recounts](#): „They tried to put a gag in my mouth, but I didn't open it, so they gagged me with duct tape. Last time [they tortured me], the gag chipped a lot of my teeth. They hardly spoke. When they stopped hitting me in the face and stomach, they gave me an electric shock.“

Putin's Kremlin has kept up its vendetta against anti-fascists for years. The Russian state is jailing, torturing and forcing activists into exile. If anything, the repression is ramping up, as the Kremlin is fearful of unrest brought about by the invasion. [Mikhail Lobanov](#), an academic and a union activist, has been pressured into exile. [Boris Kagarlitsky](#), a Marxist intellectual, has been arrested. Azat Miftakhov was rearrested minutes after release. All these cases are a part of the Kremlin's war on Russia's civil society, especially its progressive part.

## FAILED LEFT

While the Kremlin has been brutalizing anti-fascists for years, there is little solidarity shown by the «official left» within Russia.

Russia's largest communist party, the KPRF, has mostly [joined forces](#) with the Kremlin and does not behave as if it followed communist tenets. Its leadership supported the invasion of Ukraine, made [friends](#) with the state-controlled Russian Orthodox Church, and [embraced](#) nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric. Especially ironic was the KPRF leader Gennady Zyuganov [praising](#) the tsarist ancien régime — so much for the party's nominal Bolshevik legacy — while arguing that ethnic Russians should be ascribed a «special role» within the Russian constitution. Barring few dissenters (like former member Dmitry Chuvalin, who was

arrested for being a part of a Marxist reading group), KPRF is an active participant in the Kremlin's attempt to reframe the Soviet legacies of communist and internationalist aspirations in imperial, «Great Russian» terms.

In a state that decisively transgresses any kind of anti-fascism, and whose largest communist party has been captured by imperialists and nationalists, leftist activists have to rely on their grassroots mutual-aid networks and international solidarity. On the ground, activists can have an impact in a variety of ways, such as raising money for victims of the regime, as they did for the parents of the Network case defendants. And even though many are paying a high price for their activism — like union leader Denis Ukrantsev who spent almost a year in jail, partially for defending Azat on social media — they keep going. Despite brutal repression, Russian anti-fascists continue combating the Kremlin, especially its war against Ukraine.

International solidarity through donations, letters, and raising awareness is also incredibly important for Russia's hounded anti-fascists. While it might seem like slacktivism to some, solidarity campaigns are key to giving political prisoners hope. Azat's wife, Yelena Gorban, says that «receiving letters is important and pleasant for him» — she said Azat was getting stacks of letters from all over the world.

Years in isolation and the torturous conditions of Russia's jails make letters especially valuable to prisoners. Readers can support Azat, or other jailed anti-fascists, through OVD-Info's letter-writing tool, Letters Across Borders. It will translate all letters into Russian (as is required by law) and make sure the letters reach political prisoners across Russia. Supporting Azat and other Russian dissidents is the duty not just of leftists who want to see a truly anti-fascist Russia but of anyone with a conscience.

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*editor at OVD-Info.*

## **ЧТО Я МОГУ С ЭТИМ СДЕЛАТЬ?**

Прочитать, рассказать, поддержать. Подпишитесь на регулярные пожертвования ОВД-Инфо, чтобы как можно больше людей узнали о политических репрессиях в России сегодня.

**ПОДДЕРЖАТЬ**