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Russian communists face repression after Duma elections

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October 8, 2021



Mass meeting with communist deputies on Moscow's Pushkin Square, Sept. 25.
Photo: United Communist Party

Oct. 6 — Since late September, a wave of arrests and detentions has hit communists, socialists and other progressive forces across Russia. The repression has primarily targeted the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), but has swept up members of other parties and movements as well.

The arrests come in the wake of the Sept. 17-19 Russian Duma elections. While President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party won the most seats in parliament, its share of votes fell nearly 5% from the last election, while the KPRF's [grew by more than 5%](#), according to official figures. KPRF candidates had an especially strong

showing in Siberia and other eastern regions.

Overall, the KPRF [gained 15 additional seats](#) in the 450-seat Duma.

There were [widespread charges of vote fraud](#) to the benefit of the ruling United Russia and its allies. This includes the introduction of a new online voting system which opposition groups say does not have the necessary safeguards built-in to prevent fraud and government tampering.

In several cities and regions, KPRF and other opposition candidates had been projected to win races and even announced as winners in the media, until the online vote count was belatedly released by the government, swinging many races in favor of United Russia. In Moscow, KPRF chapters issued statements denouncing the vote theft and demanding a rerun of the election.

Spontaneous protests

On Sept. 20, a spontaneous protest against the perceived vote fraud in Moscow frightened the authorities. Protests have been banned throughout the pandemic, and the left says the government has continued to extend these restrictions indefinitely to stifle its ability to mobilize.

Pickets, car caravans and meetings were organized by left forces across the country, from Rostov-On-Don in the west to Vladivostok in the east.

In Moscow and other cities, KPRF members were detained, including elected Duma members and candidates, who are supposed to have immunity during the post-election period.

Then, on Sept. 25, several KPRF elected officials [held a mass meeting](#) with thousands of voters at Pushkin Square in Moscow. Although this type of event is constitutionally and legally sanctioned, the authorities treated it as an illegal

demonstration. KPRF activists were arrested before the event. Police also attempted to block people from joining the meeting and blasted music to drown out the speakers.

The authorities targeted the KPRF Moscow City Committee headquarters, detaining Moscow City Duma Deputy Elena Yanchuk. The building [remains under police occupation](#). Another local KPRF deputy, Yekaterina Engalycheva, was trapped inside the City Duma building. [She was later arrested](#).

In St. Petersburg, where a similar mass meeting was planned, the KPRF City Committee was also surrounded by police. [A deputy reported](#): “Our activists were arrested at night and in the morning. They came to those who organized this meeting, pasted leaflets. Now many are behind bars. The authorities are terrified of their own people, who were once again deceived in the elections. Today’s meeting is being held legally, in compliance with all legal and sanitary norms.”

In the days since, a wide swath of [the left in Moscow](#) has been hit with arrests and detentions, including [Sergei Udaltsov](#) and other members of the Left Front; [Olga Rusakova](#) of the Labor Russia movement and United Communist Party; well-known socialist intellectual [Boris Kagarlitsky](#); International Marxist Tendency spokesperson Oleg Bulaev; and other leftists unaffiliated with the KPRF.

While Russian left groups have many differences among themselves, they agree that the repression shows the government is increasingly fearful of its declining popularity as austerity measures pushed by Russia’s capitalist oligarchy deepen social misery.

Russia’s contradictions

The modern Russian state is a contradictory phenomenon. It emerged from the ruins of the counterrevolution against the socialist Soviet Union in the early 1990s, which

culminated in the Yeltsin-Clinton coup of Oct. 3-4, 1993, and the shelling of the Supreme Soviet in Moscow.

After a massive sell-off of workers' state property in the 1990s, plummeting living standards and falling life expectancy for the masses, the rapacious new Russian capitalist class was reined in somewhat under Putin's leadership.

Putin's early success was based on the booming oil market of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which allowed the Russian government to keep in place some of the basic social gains of the Soviet period.

At that time, Putin and the Russian bourgeoisie hoped the U.S. and European imperialists would give them a "seat at the table" as an ally and equal. The oil boom fed the illusion among the Russian capitalists that this was possible.

However, that was never the plan of the imperialist ruling classes. It was always the goal of Wall Street, Washington, the Pentagon and Big Oil to parcel up Russia and make it a vassal state, as they did with many former Soviet republics and eastern European countries.

When the oil market crashed in tandem with the "Great Recession" of 2008-2009, the West began to target Putin as its "evil dictator" super-villain du jour, including bogus allegations of tampering with U.S. presidential elections — the very thing that [Washington did to Russia](#) in 1996!

Russia is a large country with a nuclear arsenal and strong military inherited from the USSR. It is a regional power, certainly, but it is not an imperialist country in the Marxist sense. To the U.S., Russia is not a peer to be negotiated with but an errant colony to be conquered and brought to heel.

To survive, the dominant section of the Russian capitalist class — which has its own aspirations and does not wish to be a mere local caretaker for the U.S. and

European Union — was forced to ally with other countries targeted by imperialism, including socialist and bourgeois nationalist governments, from Cuba, China and Venezuela to Iran and Syria.

To defend itself against the far-right takeover of neighboring Ukraine, Russia reincorporated Crimea and has supported and defended the antifascist republics of Donetsk and Lugansk.

In this way, Russia has played and continues to play a largely progressive role on the world stage, even as its domestic policies [retreat into greater austerity](#) and repression.

Nature of the KPRF

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation is itself a contradictory entity. It is the primary inheritor of the apparatus and, in the eyes of many Russians, the legacy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This has given it enormous social weight and resilience.

The top leadership of the KPRF, headed by Gennady Zyuganov, is reformist and oriented only toward parliamentary politics. Left critics charge the KPRF leaders with being a “loyal opposition,” often echoing Putin’s talking points, even some of the most reactionary ones.

However, the party is also the main legal opposition entity in the vast country. [Unlike many smaller left parties](#), it has managed to remain on the ballot despite increasingly restrictive election laws. It has organizational means in every city, town and region; in many ways, it is the only real mass political party in Russia with any life beyond elections.

The political complexion of the KPRF’s local and regional groups also varies widely — with many being far more radical than the national leadership. At the level of

membership, too, the KPRF includes many sincere working-class militants who see the organization as the legitimate heir of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet Union.

This has created great challenges and difficulties for Russian communists — some of whom came from the ranks of the KPRF themselves — who seek to build a new revolutionary party and movement in the Bolshevik tradition.

The fear driving the Russian government's current attacks is that the KPRF might become a hotbed of left resistance with mass support, in spite of the party leadership's best efforts to prevent this.

The Western imperialists share this apprehension. Compared to the wall-to-wall coverage of pro-U.S. oppositionist Alexey Navalny's arrest earlier this year, the U.S. government and corporate media have had virtually nothing to say about the crackdown on the Russian left.

One thing is for certain: the surge in electoral support for the KPRF, which is almost certainly greater than the official figures indicate, the wave of government repression against the left, and the deepening social crisis of world capitalism, are bound to spur a realignment of the left and a radicalization of the masses in the coming period.

Defend Russia against imperialism — Defend the left!

What should communists, socialists and anti-imperialists in the West do?

Our first and most important duty continues to be to demand: Hands off Russia!

U.S. sanctions and economic sabotage increase the suffering of the Russian people.

U.S./NATO war games and military threats not only endanger Russian lives, but

make it easier for those who would repress the left movement to justify their actions in the eyes of the masses.

Russia is not our enemy. Our job is to dethrone the greedy bosses, bankers and landlords here at home, who are trying to drive down wages and working conditions, throw tenants and homeowners onto the streets, and deny safe, accessible education and healthcare for all.

The Russian people made one of the most profound revolutions in human history in 1917 — one that continues to inspire people all over the world with hope for a better future. They are more than capable of sorting out their own affairs if freed from constant threat of war and sanctions.

And we also say: a strong working class and a revolutionary, anti-imperialist left are the best guarantees of Russia's sovereignty.

We stand with the communists, socialists and progressives of Russia. We demand the release of the prisoners and respect for their basic democratic right to organize the working class to fight in its own interests!

