

Russian state frame-up results in draconian prison sentences for left-wing youth

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On February 10, a district military court in Penza handed down sentences of 6 to 18 years in prison or penal colonies to seven young men from the Russian cities of Penza and St. Petersburg. The draconian sentences were issued following a blatant state frame-up, in which police and officers of the FSB (the Russian equivalent of the FBI) with ties to the far right systematically tortured the accused.

The court found the seven men, aged 23 to 34, who were active in left-wing, anarchist and anti-fascist circles, guilty of having founded a terror organization, the “Network” (“Set”), as well as illegal weapon trafficking. The prosecution alleged that the “Network” had planned to unite Russian anarchists into “militant groups which aimed to violently overthrow the constitutional order” and to conquer power by force through attacks on state institutions.

The defendants were arrested in late 2017 and early 2018. Almost all initially signed confessions but later retracted them, claiming that they had been signed under torture and pressure by the FSB. They also reported that explosives and weapons were planted as evidence in their apartments. Their testimony about the torture and planted evidence was ignored by the court, and the confessions extracted through beatings and electro shocks were the main basis for their conviction. The court also relied on several anonymous witnesses.

The online platform Media Zona published parts of the testimony of Dmitry Pchelintsev, in May 2019, who was accused of having co-founded the “Network.” He described having been interrogated for days under torture, including electro shocks and severe beatings, without being able to speak to a lawyer. The officers also threatened to murder his wife. The Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation has repeatedly refused to investigate the officers involved in the torture.

Pchelintsev recalled a conversation with one of the FSB

investigators, Valery Tokarev, who said, “Look Dmitry, you started messing with the state, you opposed the state. We don’t like that and you will simply be ground into powder.” When Pchelintsev asked, “But what information is there, anyway, that I’m some kind of threat to society?” Tokarev responded that the reason was that they were convinced that he would join a revolution if it broke out.

According to a report by the liberal *Novaya Gazeta*, another defendant, Ilya Shakursky, had been approached by a local neo-Nazi with ties to the prosecution on the popular social media network Vkontakte a year before his arrest. Shakursky recalled that a certain “Vlad Dobrovolsky” had reached out to him on Vkontakte in the fall of 2016 and gave him “important information about a planned attack by neo-Nazis on an anti-fascist event. He said he gave me this information because he was personally offended by the Nazis in Penza. He also told me that some neo-Nazis have close ties to the department for the fight against extremism [of the Interior Ministry] which, in turn, do not hinder the organization of events by the neo-Nazis.”

Shakursky said, “He later told me that an extremist neo-Nazi organization is active in Siberia which aims to fight for the autonomy of Siberia. As a convinced anti-fascist, I considered it my duty to learn more about this organization in order to expose them through articles for the media. ... I met Vlad only a few times despite his constant requests for meetings. ...At our last meeting in the summer of 2017 he started to talk to me about his plans for radical action and that he wanted to make explosives. I considered him a crazy fanatic and stopped talking to him and ignored his calls.”

Dobrovolsky was later identified as Vlad Gres’ko, a student active in the local neo-Nazi scene. According to the *Novaya Gazeta*, Gres’ko and Tokarev, the same prosecutor who also tortured and threatened Pchelintsev,

are members of the same sports club in Penza. Recordings of the conversations with “Vlad” made by Shakursky were confiscated by the FSB during their raid on his house and the prosecution and the court rejected making them available to the defense at trial.

Shakursky also told the *Novaya Gazeta* that he recognized a man in the detention center (SIZO), who had tried to provoke a fistfight with him on the streets after one of the meetings with “Vlad.” At the detention center, the man spoke to an investigation officer from the FSB, telling him that he wanted to “shoot the curs [*shavka*, a term used by Nazis for anti-fascists].” The same investigation officer tortured Pchelintsev and Shakursky and threatened the latter with rape.

So blatant was the state frame-up of these youth that even the business newspaper *Vedomosti* felt compelled to contrast it to the lack of any kind of prosecution of the far-right National Liberation Movement (NOD), which has ties to Evgeny Manyurov, who attacked the FSB’s headquarters last December, gunning down several people.

The “Network” case illustrates the extensive ties of the Russian state and political establishment to the violent far-right. Russian police are known to collaborate with far-right vigilante groups in hunting down immigrants and leading political parties such as the Stalinist Communist Party and to maintain ties to formally banned far-right organizations like the Movement against Illegal Migration. The Kremlin also cultivates ties to the far-right on an international level, including the Front National in France.

The verdict has prompted an outpouring of protest. On February 12, an open letter was published on the website scientific.ru, denouncing the case as “fabricated” and an “act of terror” against Russian citizens. As of this writing, the letter, which calls for the immediate revocation of the sentence, has been signed by over 2,700 academics and science journalists. On Monday, February 17, 13 independent book stores in nine cities stopped operation for a day in protest against the verdict.

Right-wing liberal opposition politician Alexei Navalny also denounced the sentence.

Navalny himself, however, has close ties to fascist forces in Russia. The Pabloite Russian Socialist Movement (RSM) has maintained complete silence on the case.

The “Network” case is a blatant state frame-up which is meant to send a message that any anti-capitalist and revolutionary movement will be met with the full force of

the state. The sentencing of these youth takes place as the Russian government has robbed 800,000 people of their pensions on the basis of a pension reform that has been opposed by 90 percent of the population. Social inequality is at a record high, and real incomes have declined for five years in a row, with one in eight Russians now officially living on less than \$150 a month.

The only official opposition to the Putin government currently comes from the right: the liberal opposition, led by Navalny, which is closely aligned with US imperialism, and its pseudo-left hangers-on. While Navalny has recently tried to tap in into the massive social discontent—and is massively promoted by the Western bourgeois press and liberal media in Russia—public opinion polls show that just a little over 2 percent of the population have confidence in him.

What the oligarchy as a whole fear above all is that the international reemergence of the class struggle will sooner rather than later spread to Russia through mass social protests and strikes outside the control of all the established political parties.

It is revealing that the Western bourgeois press, which is always eager to denounce the “authoritarian regime” in Russia when it targets its right-wing opponents in the oligarchy and upper middle class, has barely commented on the state frame-up of these left-wing youth. The *New York Times* only published a brief report by the Associated Press. There were almost no reports in the German media.

Underlying this silence is the fact that the same class and political dynamics that are behind the frame-up of these left-wing youth in Russia are also on stark display in the imperialist countries. The German state, in particular, has built and covered up for an extensive network of right-wing extremist terrorists that have targeted immigrants, left-wing political organizations and politicians, while the government and the secret service (Verfassungsschutz) systematically seek to suppress and criminalize any opposition to the far-right from the left.



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