

Russia's ruling class nervous over spreading global protests

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After nearly two weeks of silence, the Russian government issued its first official statements on the mass protest in the United States and major cities in the rest of the world, sparked by the brutal police murder of George Floyd. On Sunday, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Maria Zakharova declared, “They [the US and the European governments] have reaped what they have sown. Having sown chaos, they have gotten chaos.”

“All around the world they have promoted the possibility of destabilizing conditions, the possibility of playing on internal contradictions that naturally exist with any state and people,” Zakharova told the television station Russia 1.

Speaking to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* on Monday, Zakharova described the accusations—made most prominently on May 31 by former President Barak Obama’s National Security Adviser Susan Rice—that Russia was responsible for the crisis gripping Washington as “mythology.”

“To state, as have several representatives of the Democratic Party in the US that ‘behind the protests in the States stands the hand of the Russians, Russia and Kremlin,’ means to simply not respect your own people and not to understand what is happening. The only thing that links the current situation in the US with Russia is that Moscow has repeatedly pointed out to Washington the necessity of first of all minding one’s own internal politics before preaching to everyone else.”

The same day, the main state television channel, *Perv y i Kanal*, swapped out the credits that were supposed to roll at the conclusion of the film *Brother 2* with scenes of looting and violence from the United States. The song “Goodbye America” by Nautilus Pompilius played simultaneously. The plot of the

popular “cult classic” gangster movie, which was aired on official TV to mark the twentieth anniversary of its release in 2000, touches on racial and social tensions in the US.

The Kremlin’s seeming smugness over the political crisis in America seeks to mask extreme nervousness within the Russian ruling class over the mass protests sweeping the United States and expanding globally. The social moods driving these events also exist in Russia, where the coronavirus pandemic has infected hundreds of thousands, sent the economy into a tailspin, and wrecked the livelihoods of millions. Popular anger at the federal and regional authorities is rising, President Putin’s popularity rating is falling, and a mood of “exasperation, anxiety, and anger” is spreading, as a recent study highlighted in the business daily *Kommersant* noted.

Three percent of the Russian population controls 89 percent of the country’s financial assets. Ninety-eight Russian billionaires have more wealth than the combined savings of the entire population of 144.5 million people. Real incomes have been falling for years and are expected to further decline as an estimated five to six million workers are expected to find themselves jobless by the end of the year.

In an attempt to forestall the spread of protests to Russia and prevent a feeling of solidarity from emerging within the Russian working class, across the political spectrum the country’s media has sought to portray the demonstrations in the United States as little more than—as Alexei Poplavsky of *Gazeta.ru* put it—“disturbances, brigandage, and looting.” They have, according to reporter Rustem Safronov, who works for the Kremlin-funded *Radio Sputnik*, “started to take on a bad form,” becoming “pogroms.”

The news daily *Lenta.ru* featured an interview on

June 4 with a one-time American policeman about “rioters” in the United States. The ex-marine and former member of Florida’s Palm Beach County police force insisted that the murdered George Floyd was indisputably engaged in a crime when detained. Supposedly the sequence of events that led to the man’s asphyxiation are hazy but indicate little more than an “excessive use of force.”

Combining outright lies with half-truths and stupidities, commentators have openly or implicitly endorsed President Donald Trump’s military-police crackdown against what they described as a sort of “black peril” emerging from below. Racist tropes and xenophobia abound.

Writing on *Ekho Moskv y*, Russia’s leading pro-Western liberal news outlet, economist Vladislav Inozemtsev blackguarded George Floyd as a convicted criminal “under the influence of drugs” when arrested. He lamented the deaths of white police officers and falsely claimed that the killing of a white person at the hands of the cops “has in 40 years never resulted in a single speech against police violence in the US.” He described the mass, interracial movement against state oppression exploding in the US as “a demonstration of power” that does “not serve to affirm racial equality, but the superiority of ethnic minorities over the majority.”

Writing in *Gazeta.ru*, owned by the billionaire oligarch Alexander Mamut, Georgi Bovt joined in. In a June 8 article entitled, “Do whites have to kneel before blacks?” Bovt argued that other minority groups in American history “faced conditions not worse than blacks,” but had seen their socio-economic status improve over decades. The social misery experienced by many African-Americans, he claimed, is their own fault. In a particularly nasty moment in the article, Bovt boasts that in Russia it is supposedly acceptable to refer to blacks by the derogatory term “negr,” which, as Bovt clearly knows, is especially ugly to the American ear because it sounds like the n-word.

Bovt’s colleague at *Gazeta.ru*, Poplavsky, insisted the crisis gripping the US was one of “political correctness.” Noting the opinions of a right-wing French commentator, the Russian journalist said that America was in the grips of “an aggressive ideology that has essentially declared oppressed minorities the builders of the future, in the manner of the proletariat

for the Bolsheviks.” While Trump and the Republicans have responded with an admirably strong hand, the Democrats had done nothing and attempted to justify the violence in the streets, Poplavsky wrote.

While having a different political coloration, the racist attacks in the Russian press on the American protests echo the efforts of the Democratic Party and its adjuncts in the media to insist that the demonstrations against police violence are fundamentally a struggle of blacks for “black lives” against “white privilege.” In both instances, the interracial and multi-ethnic character of the social anger erupting across the United States and internationally is denied. In the Russian media it is smothered in bigotry and ugly tropes trading in racial superiority. In the American media, it is drowned in the claim that race, not class, is the dividing line of American society. The aim of both approaches is to block a unified struggle of the working masses against the universal source of their oppression—capitalism.

A notable feature of the present press coverage in Russia has been the relative lack of attention that has been given to the spread of the demonstrations in the United States to other countries, particularly European states. Like the racist denunciation of the protests in the US, this silence is aimed at suppressing the universality of the social grievances underlying the protests by workers and youth throughout the world against racism and police violence.



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