

Protests erupt in Russia over sentencing of Bashkir nationalist Fail Alsynov

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In mid-January, the Republic of Bashkortostan, also known as Bashkiria, (including the regional capital Ufa) was shaken by protests in support of Fail Alsynov, a leading Bashkir nationalist activist. Bashkiria is home to about 4 million people and named after its native Bashkir people, a Turkic ethnic group. The Republic is one of the most important oil-producing regions in Russia. It is also rich in other raw material resources.

The protests were reportedly the largest in Russia since the NATO-provoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which marked the eruption of open conflict between the NATO imperialist powers and Russia.

The protests developed initially in the small town of Baymak during the court hearing and after the verdict in the case of Alsynov. The court scheduled the verdict announcement for January 17. On January 16, he was classified as a terrorist and extremist, and the next day he was sentenced to four years of imprisonment in a general regime penal colony.

The number of protesters on January 15 was in the hundreds or thousands. Already by January 17, it had grown to potentially tens of thousands, according to some media reports. During the first protest on January 15, people gathered near the court where Alsynov was tried to support him. They chanted the words “Freedom!” in Russian and Bashkir, “Freedom to Fail Alsynov!” and “Fail, we are with you!” The police did not intervene.

The January 17 protest in Baymak started in the same place near the court building where the activist was sentenced. People refused to disperse and shouted “Shame!” This time there were clashes with law enforcers after the announcement of the prison sentence. The footage showed officers of the National Guard of Russia, armed with shields and batons, pushing back the protesters, who threw snowballs in response.

The protesters managed to block the truck carrying Alsynov from passing for quite a long time. Messenger apps and social networks, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, were disrupted by authorities, and the entrance to the city was blocked. By the end of the day, the situation in the city had stabilized.

Later, police in the region opened a criminal case against the protesters for being involved in “mass riots,” while Dmitry Peskov, the press secretary of Russian President Vladimir Putin, rejected the categorization of them as riots.

Already on the morning of Friday, January 19, a rally in support of Alsynov took place in Ufa, the capital of Bashkiria, in one of the city’s main squares. Reports indicate that between several

hundred and more than a thousand people took part in the protest. When people began to dance and sing national songs, the police warned the crowd that the rally was unauthorized, arrested several people and eventually forced the people out of the square.

The immediate basis for Alsynov’s arrest in August 2023 was a phrase he used in April 2023 at a rally against a gold mining company: “Kara khalyk.” It literally means “black people,” a derogatory and racist term in Russian to denote people from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Alsynov claims that his words have been mistranslated. Regardless of the interpretation of that word, the statement for which he was sentenced oozes of nationalism. He said, “Armenians will go to their homeland [after the war in Ukraine], the ‘kara khalyk’ to their own, Russians to their Ryazan, Tatars to their Tatarstan.” “We won’t be able to resettle, we have no other home, our home is here!”

Prior to his August arrest, in March 2023, his home was raided by officers of the FSB, the Russian secret service, and he was charged with “discrediting” the Russian army. Alsynov has described the war in Ukraine as a “genocide” of the Bashkir people, pointing to the large number of Bashkirs drafted into the Russian army.

Of course, the Kremlin’s persecution of Alsynov has nothing to do with concern with the right of immigrants and non-Bashkir national minorities. The Kremlin itself has pursued a viciously racist policy of discrimination toward immigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia who are brutally exploited by Russian companies.

In order to understand what is at stake in the case of Alsynov, it is necessary to review his political history and the character of Bashkir bourgeois nationalism.

Fail Alsynov became known as a leader of the Bashkir nationalist and separatist movement for serving first as the deputy chairman of the Bashkir national organization “Kuk-Bure” and then as the leader of the nationalist organization “Bashkort,” which was banned and categorized as extremist in Russia.

Bashkir bourgeois nationalism originated at the end of 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. It erupted into the open after the overthrow of the Tsar in the February Revolution in 1917. Already then Bashkir nationalists began to issue ecological demands, such as the demand to stop cutting down Bashkir forests. Such demands remain central to the Bashkir nationalist movement to this day, and they have also prominently been raised by Alsynov. Like other bourgeois nationalist movements in the former Russian Empire,

the Bashkir nationalists were bitterly anticommunist and fought against the Soviet power.

With the establishment of the Soviet Union in December 1922, which acknowledged the equal rights of national minorities in its constitution, and the creation of autonomous republics, the early Bolshevik regime under Lenin and Trotsky fought for the internationalist unification of the oppressed masses of the former Russian Empire. This involved, in the case of the Bashkir people, the granting of significant rights of autonomy to what was then the Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

However, the nationalist reaction under the Stalinist bureaucracy encouraged the resurgence of the most vile forms of bourgeois nationalism, including Great Russian chauvinism but also extreme nationalism of national minorities.

After the destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism in 1991, nationalist organizations mushroomed in Bashkiriya. In 2006-2007 “Kuk-Bure” was founded, and Alsynov, then only in his early 20s, became its deputy head. The ideology of the organization was inspired by both the Turkish and Russian far right. “Kuk Bure” means “Grey Wolf,” an allusion to the Grey Wolves movement, a far-right Turkish paramilitary organization that has been involved in terrorist attacks and assassinations. “Kuk-Bure” reportedly also used the Grey Wolves’ salute.

A close friend and associate of Alsynov, Ruslan Gabbasov, recalled in his memoirs, “Notes of a Bashkir nationalist,” that the organization was also principally influenced by the neo-fascist ideology of the Russian National Unity (RNE) party, the largest fascist organization in Russia in the 1990s, which demanded the expulsion of all non-Russians from the country and idealized Adolf Hitler. He wrote, “Azat Salmanov [one of the founders and leaders of the organization] ... borrowed the entire ideology of Kuk Bure from his classmate, a Russian skinhead named Maxim. Maxim was a member of the Bashkir branch of the RNE [Russian National Unity—an ultranationalist, neo-fascist organization in Russia]. At that time, Azat was not very interested in Bashkir nationalism, but gradually, communicating with Maxim, he began to adopt the ideas of the RNE.” According to Gabbasov, Salmanov would then later “apply” the ideology of the RNE “in the formation of Bashkir nationalist ideology. ... Subsequently, he used it all in ‘Kuk Bure.’”

Members of Kuk-Bure were reportedly involved in violent clashes with both Russian nationalists and immigrants from the Caucasus.

After the dissolution of Kuk-Bure, Alsynov became a leading figure in the organization Bashkort, which largely recruited from disaffected rural youth. Like Kuk-Bure, the organization embraced a pan-Turkic ideology and reportedly maintained ties to nationalist circles in Kazakhstan. Its demands included greater autonomy for the Republic of Bashkortostan within the Russian Federation, national quotas for Bashkir people and the nationalization of enterprises that were involved in the processing of raw materials.

In 2019-2020, Alsynov led protests against the development of Mount Kushtau by the Bashkir Soda Company (the region’s largest industrial company). After that, his organization was banned as “extremist,” and the governor of the region, Radiy Khabirov, wrote a statement denouncing Alsynov.

With his protest against companies and demands for environmental protection, Alsynov no doubt seeks to appeal to widespread and legitimate social discontent over extreme levels of poverty, as well as the destruction of the environment. However, there is nothing progressive about Alsynov’s political program. It expresses the interests not of the people of Bashkiriya but rather those of a small stratum of the Bashkir elite and upper class that benefited from the restoration of capitalism and see the Putin regime as an obstacle to their further self-enrichment. They hope to benefit from more direct links with American and European imperialism and immediate access to the world market.

Bashkiriya is one of the richest regions in Russia. It provides for a large share of Russia’s oil reserves and also holds significant natural gas, coal, ferrous metal ores, timber and other raw material resources.

Consequently, the social interests of a section of the regional elite and upper middle class coincide with the aims of the US and the European imperialist powers, which seek to bring about the disintegration of Russia and its transformation into a raw material appendage of imperialism. As was the case in the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the fueling and exploitation of national, ethnic and religious tensions is a central component of that strategy.

There are many indications that significant ties already exist between the Bashkir nationalist movement and the imperialist powers. The above-quoted Ruslan Gabbasov, whom the Russian outlet *Novaya Gazeta*, which is itself sympathetic to the pro-US “liberal” opposition in Russia, described as Alsynov’s “closest associate,” is a former journalist at Idel.Realii, the Tatar-Bashkir service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). Radio Free Europe is widely known to be associated with the CIA since the Cold War. Today, Gabbasov lives in Lithuania, a NATO country and one of the key bulwarks in the war against Russia.

The Putin regime, for its part, has nothing to counterpose to the growing nationalist and separatist tendencies within the oligarchy and upper middle class other than the promotion of Great Russian chauvinism and state repression, combined with ongoing attempts to find a negotiated settlement with the imperialist powers. It sees its greatest enemy not in the imperialist powers or rival factions of the oligarchy, but the working class.

Ultimately, the imminent danger of the carve-up of the Russian Federation and a new world war are the historical end product of the Stalinist counter-revolution and the restoration of capitalism out of which all factions of the oligarchy in the former Soviet Union emerged.

Workers and youth in Russia, regardless of their nationality and religion, can only find a progressive way out of this impasse through a revival of the internationalist and socialist traditions of the October Revolution and by constructing a new, Trotskyist leadership in the working class.



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