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Bolotnaya Farce

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The number of political prisoners related to the "Bolotnoye affair" underscores the scope of the authorities' crackdown on the remnants of free political expression and the constitutional right to assembly in the country. Even more than a year after the original opposition protests on Bolotnaya Ploshchad, there are new arrests and searches across the country. Even opposition leader Konstantin Lebedev, who fully cooperated with the authorities by snitching on his fellow protesters under investigation, was given 2 1/2 years

behind bars.

Whatever opinions people might hold about the opposition, the harsh crackdown against peaceful protestors, the trumped-up charges, the persecution of innocent individuals and the violence by police cannot be justified. Significantly, the steamroller of repression was first directed not at the opposition leaders in the media spotlight, but at rank and file activists, primarily members of leftist organizations.

If the minor skirmish between protesters and riot police on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on May 6, 2012, had occurred in any European country, it would have been considered a typical, ordinary protest — except, of course, for the clear provocations from the riot police.

Even against the backdrop of Europe's violent street protests, Russia looks tame and quiet by comparison. But even the single episode at Bolotnaya Ploshchad has prompted a months-long investigation based on the assumption that citizens lie and the police are honest and infallible. Not only have the riot police who beat protestors escaped sanctions and administrative warnings, but the authorities have not even looked into charges that officials were themselves at fault for creating the conditions that sparked the clashes.

The arrest of well-known activist Alexei Gaskarov stands out as an exception. A member of the anti-fascist and leftist movement, Gaskarov has been arrested and held in pretrial detention for a second time. His first arrest was connected with the notorious Khimki Forest case, when several hundred anarchists staged an unsanctioned rally at the Khimki city administration building to protest the beating of environmentalists and defenders of the Khimki Forest. The individuals who waged the beatings were never punished, but participants in the rally, which caused only four broken windows in the administration building, were subjected to repressive measures.

In the Bolotnoye affair, Gaskarov's only crime was that he was standing in the square when police pummeled protesters. Gaskarov was not involved in the clash with police, nor did he have a hand in organizing the march. He did not speak from the stage or shout appeals to the crowd and was not involved with the Left Front. In short, he had no more connection to the rally than any of the thousands of other protesters who gathered on and near Bolotnaya Ploshchad that day. If anyone deserves to be called a "prisoner of conscience" in today's Russia, it is Gaskarov.

Of course, it would be unfair and unrealistic to expect that justice will triumph for Gaskarov when dozens of other Bolotnaya protesters also face imprisonment, and millions of other Russians must contend with the broader injustices of poor education, health care and job opportunities. But it is important that the public focus attention on the Gaskarov case as an example of the absurdity, cruelty and ineffectiveness of political repression. The case has already sparked a new wave of activism and protest in Russian and abroad. The pressure must be increased so that the authorities drop all charges and free Gaskarov, regardless of political considerations and hidden agendas connected with the Bolotnaya crackdown.

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