

The Latest Victim of Putin's Purges

By [Victor Davidoff](#)

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Since Vladimir Putin's third presidential term began, the independent Russian media has compared the current political repression with the repression of the great Stalinist purges. But until recently, this comparison has been something of a metaphor, since the today's repressions are far smaller in scope and exclusively target the political opposition, while in the 1930s Stalin packed off to Siberia thousands of state officials who had at some point deviated from Stalin's party line.

But recently, some facts have surfaced that have called into question the metaphorical nature of the comparison. The [site](#) Russkaya Planeta reported that in the past five years, more than 100 mayors have been dismissed from their posts or convicted of crimes. All of them ran against United Russia candidates and won. As Russkaya Planeta commented, "The position of mayor is just about the most dangerous job in Russia."

Not long ago,
comparisons
between Putin's

regime
and Stalinism
were
an exaggeration.
Not anymore.

The only significant deviation from the Soviet era is that these mayors didn't face political charges, like "spying for Antarctica." They were repressed by the vaguely worded accusation of "exceeding the authority of their job" or charged with taking bribes.

How weak these corruption charges are can be seen in the recent high profile case against the mayor of Yaroslavl, [Yevgeny Urlashov](#). A lawyer and human rights activist, Urlashov is a popular figure in the city. As an independent candidate, he beat the United Russia candidate last year with such revolutionary slogans as "Give the City Back to the People!" and "Down with Thieves and Crooks!"

On the night of July 3, Urlashov was arrested on a charge of extorting bribes. A plethora of facts indicate the political nature of the case against him. Just about every week Urlashov received anonymous phone calls with the message, "We'll put you in jail no matter what." On July 2, the day before his arrest, Urlashov had organized a demonstration of several thousand people against United Russia, and he was arrested on the way home from a meeting with representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The next morning after a search of the mayor's apartment, the police announced that they had found almost \$500,000 and 20 million rubles (\$600,000). This, however, was quickly proved false by Urlashov's lawyer, who showed journalists the official report of the search. The report showed that only one thing was confiscated: a smartphone. In fact, it wasn't a Vertu or even an iPhone, but a cheap, Chinese-made HTC. This didn't exactly jibe with the image of a corrupt politician living in the lap of luxury.

Later it became clear that money was, in fact, found — but not in Urlashov's apartment. It was found in his neighbor's. On his Facebook page, opposition leader Boris Nemtsov asked, "How do you like that? They come search your apartment, and when they don't find anything, they go to your neighbor's place, find something, and use it against you."

Urlashov was [put behind bars](#) and will remain there at least until Sept. 2. The entire accusation against him rests on the testimony of a local businessman and United Russia member, whose company had a contract with the city to repair roads. He maintains that Urlashov extorted a bribe from him in return for a new contract. Urlashov countered during an interview with Dozhd TV that he refused to sign off on work done by the company because the quality was poor, and he demanded that the contractor "make good on his old debts." This was confirmed by a tape of a phone conversation, during which there was no mention of money. Because of the ambiguity of the word "debts" — work undone or money owed — the tape might be used as evidence in court by either side.

The only testimony about Urlashov's "guilt" is from middlemen: three people who have also been arrested and are behind bars and who cut a deal with investigators. This is a scenario right out of the Stalinist show-trial playbook: voluminous, fallacious testimony by pseudo-

witnesses and not a scrap of hard evidence of guilt. Apparently aware of the paucity of evidence, on July 6 the Investigative Committee brought more charges against Urlashov based on a video of a meeting between Urlashov and another city contractor in a restaurant. In the tape, the contractor handed the mayor something wrapped in a newspaper. The Investigative Committee maintains that there was 500,000 rubles (\$15,000) in the newspaper, but, again, the only evidence is the word of the contractor.

Journalist Arkady Babchenko wrote on his Facebook page: "Right now before our very eyes, the party of thieves and crooks is destroying the Yaroslavl mayor's office. They are destroying the office of an independent mayor, elected by the public. This is in the best traditions of the NKVD. It's the routing of a 'Trotskyite organization of enemies of the people.'"

And so today the political regime in Russia appears to have much more in common with the Stalinist regime than it seemed to have just yesterday.

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