

Russia Moves Ever Closer to the Soviet Union

By [Victor Davidoff](#)

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In early June, the Dutch organization Human Rights Initiative for the Former U.S.S.R. published its most recent list of political prisoners in Russia. The publication does not usually get much attention. But this time the list was sensational for the number of people currently persecuted for their political or religious beliefs or participation in civil acts. The current number: 92.

This is almost twice as many than in the previous list published in winter, even after some of last year's political prisoners were freed under amnesty. More than a half of the people listed — 57 people — are still under investigation or awaiting the decision of the appellate court, that is, they were caught up in a completely new wave of political repression.

Many are charged with crimes that reflect very recent political events, including the fall of Yanukovych's regime in Ukraine, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and even the upcoming Moscow City Duma elections.

Alexander Byvshev, a teacher in Orlov, for instance, was charged with "inciting hatred or enmity, as well as abasing human dignity," for publishing online a poem he wrote in support of Kiev's pro-Europe revolution.

Crimea has been part of the Russian Federation for less than three months, but Moscow's Lefortovo Prison has already received four Crimeans, including the prominent Ukrainian documentary film director and international film festival laureate, Oleg Sentsov. According to the Federal Security Service's press release, the defendants planned to set off a series of explosions and fires.

The press release states that two defendants have admitted their guilt, but there are serious doubts about Sentsov's role. His lawyer, Dmitry Dinze, has already sent a petition to the Investigative Committee asserting that Sentsov was tortured while under the Federal Security Service's control in Simferopol.

"A plastic bag was put over his head and he was suffocated until he lost consciousness, and he was threatened with rape and murder," Dinze wrote.

The list of political prisoners is growing rapidly. Human Rights Initiative's list was out of date within days of publication. On June 11, Konstantin Yankauskas, a Moscow city deputy and well-known oppositional activist, was put under house arrest. He and two other opposition activists, Vladimir Ashurkov and Nikolai Lyaskin, were charged with fraud. They are accused of stealing part of the funds donated to Alexei Navalny's election campaign for mayor of Moscow last year.

This is a strange accusation. All the expenses for Navalny's election campaign were published in detailed reports and controlled by the Electoral Commission. No charges were leveled by either Navalny or donors against the financial managers. It is also strange that the law enforcement agencies brought these charges almost a year after the campaign was over.

But one fact makes it all clear. Both Lyaskin and Yankauskas planned to run for seats in the Moscow City Duma in September. Yankauskas was in fact cited as the opposition activist most likely to be elected deputy.

In Russia's post-Stalinist communist era, political stability was achieved by a combination of propaganda, censorship, severe legal repressions against active dissidents and "softer" repressions against those who supported them. Today the Kremlin is following the exact same path it trod in 1980 — a path that led to, in President Vladimir Putin's words "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century."

So why has no one learned anything from history?

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