

Dear colleagues,

I am writing to make you aware of a deeply troubling case of political persecution in Russia involving a scholar in our field, targeted for practising that field with integrity.

The purpose of this note is, first and foremost, to make the case known to the community. I will close with some suggestions about possible steps to take, should people wish to do so.

The case concerns the Russian scholar of ancient philosophy **Svetlana Mesyats**, whom some of you may know. Svetlana has been a visiting scholar at Karlsruhe and Freiburg and, most recently, held a postdoctoral position in the TIDA (Text and Idea of Aristotle's Science of Living Things) project at Tübingen. She works on Plotinus and Neoplatonism, and is a member of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies; she also works on Aristotle, especially the *Parva Naturalia*, and on Theophrastus.

The case also concerns her colleagues working on ancient philosophy at the **Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences**.

I will divide this memo into sections, in order to give a manageable overview of the case.

What happened

I have learned that on **19 May 2026**, the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences was raided by officers reportedly from the *Centre for Combating Extremism*, which effectively functions as Russian state's secret police.

Svetlana, along with around ten others, all of them participants in a project dedicated to, among other things, preparing a **new scholarly Russian translation of Aristotle's works**, was taken in for questioning. From what has been reported in the press, they were ambushed at home in the early hours of the morning by armed police and interrogated until late at night.

Svetlana Mesyats was the only one detained. She spent two days in jail and has since been placed under house arrest. Her colleagues - among them Abdusalam Guseinov, a full academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences and, at 87, the Institute's acting director - have been released under what is called a "recognisance not to leave the place of residence," but I and other colleagues are still struggling to contact them, in part because any communication with colleagues abroad could be harmful to them at this stage.

The official charge

The official charge is the alleged misuse of grant money allocated between 2018 and 2024 for the preparation of Russian translations of Aristotle's works. The prosecution has classified this as large-scale embezzlement. This charge carries a sentence of up to **ten years** in a Russian penal colony. Those of us who know Svetlana and her colleagues, some of whom are elderly, fear that they might not survive such a sentence should it come to pass.

Why the charges are false

First, knowing Svetlana and others involved personally, and being familiar with the project and its output, the charges appear outlandish and far-fetched. This is also the position of the Institute of Philosophy itself, expressed through its spokesperson. Translations and related research were steadily produced throughout the period in question, and until now the annual reports on the project had been accepted without any issue by the relevant government agency.

Second, the grant system at the Russian Academy of Sciences is somewhat peculiar. In this context, a “grant” does not mean a separate sum of money paid directly to individual researchers. Rather, *regular* financing for an academic institution may be administratively *framed as a grant*, i.e. funding for a particular research project. In practice, this means that Svetlana and her colleagues **did not receive any money beyond their regular, modest salaries.**

Third, there are signs, obvious to anyone familiar with the political situation in Russia and in Russian academia, that **the case is politically motivated.** For one thing, the Centre for Combating Extremism instead of regular law enforcement is involved. Second, the news of the raid was first reported not through ordinary news channels, but by so-called “patriotic” pro-government social media channels linked to Aleksandr Dugin, who has strong ties to the above-mentioned Extremism Centre. This *strongly suggests* that the charges were instigated, in part, by Dugin himself and by like-minded actors close to him.

Why this is a political case

The Institute of Philosophy has long been accused, already in 2021, of being “unpatriotic” and “pro-Western.” There have also been previous attempts by figures from far-right nationalist, Orthodox-conservative, and pro-Kremlin ideological circles, including Aleksandr Dugin, Konstantin Malofeev, the Orthodox nationalist media mogul, and Olga Zinovieva, to install their own candidate as director of the Institute.

The Institute has been denounced by them as, and I quote, **“the last refuge of scoundrels, traitors, foreign agents, defectors, Russophobes, and extremists who are deceiving our people and the leadership of our country.”** The Institute’s leadership has also been accused of **“LGBTQ+ propaganda”** and **“undermining the family as an institution”** and other nonsense in the same vein.

At first, these attempts failed, largely because Svetlana and her colleagues openly resisted them. They insisted on their right to conduct research independently, *without any imposed ideological agenda.* Their opponents, by contrast, proposed the creation of **“a committee to vet and certify the patriotic and civic loyalty of the Institute of Philosophy’s leadership and every member of its staff.”**

But after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and in the ever-worsening climate of political repression, these groups appear to have felt emboldened. They have now, it seems, managed to persuade the authorities to go after the Institute for being “too liberal” and “politically suspect.”

Why Svetlana, and why Aristotle?

In view of all this, those familiar with the actors involved, do not think it accidental that they decided to target Svetlana and the Aristotle project.

Svetlana is known at the Institute for her intellectual independence and her willingness to say openly what she thinks, including her principled opposition to Russia's war in Ukraine. She also participates actively in the international scholarly community and believes that it is both her right and her duty as a scholar to do so. In today's Russian academia, this alone is regarded as tantamount to treason. Russian universities now officially censor and control academic publications "in the West" as a matter of policy. Svetlana also participated in a research project at the University of Tübingen after the start of the war, which, in Russia, is enough to make her a potential target.

Another reason is Dugin's, and his accomplices', keen interest in ancient studies, especially Plato, Platonism, and Aristotle, and their well-known and openly expressed concern that these subjects should be practised in the "right" way. By this they mean from a nationalist, anti-democratic, Orthodox Christian, and "Russian patriotic" angle. The ideological stakes are clear from the following statement by Anatoly Chernyaev, one of those involved in the earlier failed attempt to take over the Institute and install him as its director:

"It is unclear why the decision was made to translate Aristotle, of all people. Aristotle is the founder of the Western theory of democracy. Plato was an opponent of democratic concepts. Plato's political theory is more in keeping with the historical traditions of our people and our state. It is no coincidence that theorists of democracy, such as Karl Popper, considered Plato an ideologue of the closed society. This entire theory of totalitarianism was deliberately invented in order to discredit our country and identify it with Nazi Germany."

Svetlana and her colleagues resisted this push, and resisted the attempted takeover of their subject. This is what they are being punished for.

Why this matters

This is, first of all, a matter of the personal safety of everyone involved.

But it is also a matter of academic freedom in the most basic sense. No scholar should be persecuted for doing what scholars are supposed to do: studying texts, producing translations and commentaries, publishing research, and maintaining contact with colleagues in their field, including colleagues abroad.

Nor should Aleksandr Dugin, or any ideological faction, or the state itself, be allowed to dictate which authors are legitimate objects of study, which interpretations are permissible, or which intellectual traditions must be treated as politically acceptable or unacceptable. Scholarship cannot survive under conditions in which research is tolerated only when it conforms to state-mandated ideological and political standards.

If Svetlana and her colleagues are being punished for refusing to submit ancient philosophy to such standards, then this is not only an attack on them personally. It is an attack on the possibility of independent scholarship itself.

What can be done?

First, I ask you to familiarise yourselves with the matter. I have included links in English below, where you can read more about the case.

Second, depending on how the case develops, Svetlana and her colleagues will need every form of support and encouragement they can get, but only in ways that are safe for them. This may eventually include anything from personal letters to public statements.

Right now, however, what is needed most is your attention to the matter.

Links:

<https://varetis.academia.edu/SvetlanaMesyats>

<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2026/05/22/russia-s-institute-of-philosophy-raided-over-fraud-case-tied-to-aristotle-translation-project-the-institute-had-previously-been-accused-of-disloyalty-to-the-kremlin>

<https://theins.press/en/news/292891>

<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2026/05/25/antisovetskie-filosofskie-kontratseptsii>

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