



Written by [James Heiser](#) on January 13, 2010

82-year-old Russian Dissident Arrested in Moscow

Veteran dissident Lyudmila Alexeyeva's recent arrest by Russian authorities is demonstrating several facts: First, that "post-Soviet" Russia is still far from being a free nation, and, second, that a single person can speak out against authoritarianism.

Ms. Alexeyeva has been, by her own estimation, an active dissident for over four decades. In fact, [a 2004 *St. Petersburg Times* article](#) noted that she had begun resisting Soviet oppression during the Stalin years when she was a university student. Now, at the age of 82, Alexeyeva is one of the last remaining significant figures from the dissident movement that emerged during the Khrushchev era, and she is still resisting the ruling powers in Moscow.



For Alexeyeva, such resistance came at a significant cost over the years, including numerous arrests and 16 years in exile. According to the *St. Petersburg Times*:

In 1977 Alexeyeva and her family were allowed to emigrate to the United States, after the KGB hinted that she would likely be arrested otherwise.

While her husband, Nikolai Williams, taught mathematics in U.S. universities, Alexeyeva continued her human rights activity and wrote histories of the Soviet dissident movement.

"Even in my sweetest dreams, I could not dare to hope to return home one day," she recounted. Then the Soviet Union collapsed, and Alexeyeva returned.

Since 1996 Alexeyeva has headed the Moscow Helsinki Group, Russia's oldest human rights organization. She also has been president of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights since 1998.

Four years later, Alexeyeva joined a commission intended to advise President Vladimir Putin on human rights issues, a move that brought her criticism from rights activists who see themselves as permanently opposed to power.

"My job is to see to it that authorities observe human rights," she said. "Unless you come out and talk to them, you cannot make that happen."

Alexeyeva's latest arrest occurred at a New Year's Eve rally in Moscow. Somewhat ironically, the purpose of the rally was to uphold the constitutional right Russians to protest. [According to a Reuters report](#):

A coalition of opposition groups organized the rally to defend their right to protest, as enshrined under Article 31 of the Russian constitution. Rallies are one of the few outlets for Russia's weak and fragmented opposition.

Police began to clear the protesters as soon as they arrived. A man dressed as Father Frost,



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Russia's equivalent of Santa Claus, was dragged through the snow to a waiting bus.

Alexeyeva, who was dressed as Snegurochka, Father Frost's female assistant, was escorted to a bus by riot police. "I don't know why I was detained... How could I possibly offer any resistance to anyone?" she said, quoted by Echo Moskvyy radio.

Activists cried "shame" as police detained several elderly people. At least 50 people were detained, police said.

"Down with Putinism, Freedom to Russia," one protester shouted from the window of a bus being driven to a police station. The opposition says Vladimir Putin, now prime minister, led a major clampdown on civil liberties during his presidency from 2000-2008.

The extent to which true civil liberties ever fully emerged in the "post-Soviet" era is still debated, but undeniably the Putin period was marked by a steady decline in such liberties as had briefly been enjoyed by the Russian people. The mass arrests in response to the New Year's rally demonstrate the increasingly heavy-handed actions of a government little concerned for the effect its internal policy is having on its standing in the minds of Russians and the citizens of other nations.

[As the New York Times reports](#), confronting the modern face of authoritarianism in Russia is, in a sense, more difficult now than it was during the Soviet era.

New fears have replaced the old ones, though. Ms. Alexeyeva has received death threats, and last year she buried two friends who were killed. Legal risks are unpredictable, too. While Soviet dissidents could strategize to protect themselves — knowing, for example, that prosecutors needed at least two witnesses — their tricks are of no use in a post-Soviet justice system, where cases can be wholly fabricated, she said.

"Now they do what they want," she said. "There were rules then. They were idiotic rules, but there were rules, and if you knew them you could defend yourself."

But for veteran dissidents such as Alexeyeva, the fight goes on. And in an age obsessed with the power of images, she has learned how to turn those images against the regime. In the words of the *New York Times*:

It did not take long for the police to realize their error: within 40 minutes, one of them opened the doors of the bus and told Ms. Alexeyeva she was free to go. She refused, and by that time photographs were beamed around the world showing a wraithlike woman looking up apparently in terror at an officer in camouflage.

In fact, Ms. Alexeyeva had rather expected to be arrested, so she had ordered a shipment of hot meat pies delivered to her apartment and told the guard to admit her New Year guests. A party was in full swing at 11 p.m., when she arrived home from the police headquarters. Russian leaders would wake up to angry statements from the United States National Security Council, and then from the president of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek, who said he was "profoundly and personally touched when I think that this very respectful 82-year-old woman spent the night of New Year's Eve under Russian arrest."

A few days later, as she watched snow sift past her window, she retold the story for the hundredth time with evident satisfaction. "If it serves as a lesson to them, I wouldn't call it a victory, but it would be useful," she said. "Whether it will serve as a lesson I can't say, because they study very badly."

Photo of Lyudmila Alexeyeva: AP Images



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