

THE GLOBAL ECHO OF MOSCOW'S REPRESSIVE HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICES

Dr. Daniel Calingaert, D.Phil.
Executive Vice President

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Democracy and Human Rights Abuses in Russia: No End in Sight
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Introduction

Thank you Chairman Wicker, Co-Chairman Smith, and Members of the Commission. It is an honor to testify before you today. I ask that my full written statement be submitted for the record.

Repression in Russia echoes strongly across Eurasia and beyond. President Vladimir Putin was the primary author of the modern authoritarian's playbook, which has guided strategies of political control since the early 2000s. His methods for suppressing civil society and political opposition have inspired other dictators, and his media manipulation has impacted most of Eurasia directly and extended to Europe and the United States. The spread of Russia's repressive practices is amplified by the global assault on democratic values, which Putin has spearheaded.

Democracy has continued to deteriorate in Eurasia. Among the 12 former Soviet states (excluding the Baltic states), nine suffered declines in the past year, according to the most recent edition of Freedom House's annual report *Nations in Transit*. And Eurasia already is the second most repressive region in the world, only slightly better than the Middle East and North Africa.¹

U.S. leadership is critical to counteract the spread of Russia's repressive practices and media manipulation and thereby defend American values and interests.

Modern authoritarian playbook

Modern authoritarians like Putin create a façade of pluralism that masks state control over political outcomes, as detailed in a forthcoming Freedom House report.² Independent news

¹ *Freedom in the World 2017*: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

² Arch Puddington, *Breaking Down Democracy: The Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians*, Freedom House, forthcoming.

outlets survive with small audiences while pro-government outlets dominate the media, particularly television, where most people get their news. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that mimic the government line or carry out innocuous work like public health can operate freely, while groups focused on political reform or human rights are highly restricted. Opposition parties compete in regular elections but are cut down to size if they start to gain substantial public support.

When election day comes, modern authoritarians rarely face a significant challenge. By then, they have dominated the political narrative through their control of the media, muzzled their critics, and blocked the political opposition from organizing on a large scale. They also provide or deny access to state resources, including allow oligarchs to accumulate vast wealth unencumbered, to ensure loyalty to the regime.

Putin pioneered the modern authoritarian playbook in the early 2000s and refined it over the course of his rule. Other dictators have replicated it. They have followed Russia's example and adopted specific methods of repression introduced by Putin.

Suppression of civil society

A key component of this playbook is suppression of civil society, because civil society mobilizes citizens to check the abuses of power committed by authoritarian elites and to press for democratic reform. As authoritarian rulers seek to stack the deck for their re-election long before election day, to the point where elections are no longer competitive, civil society offers the greatest opportunities to change a country's direction, as occurred with the Euro-Maidan movement in Ukraine and, in 2011, the Arab uprisings.

Russia set the example of constraining space for civil society with government criticism of foreign funding for local civil society groups and the introduction of a restrictive NGO law in 2006. Neighboring countries followed this example, and governments from Ethiopia to Venezuela later pursued a similar assault on civil society.³ In 2012, Russia passed a foreign agents law that required NGOs to register as "foreign agents" if they receive foreign funding to conduct "political activity." This label harks back to the Soviet term used to describe foreign spies and serves to stigmatize pro-democracy NGOs. Similar legislation was enacted in Kazakhstan, debated but ultimately rejected in Kyrgyzstan, and drafted in Hungary.

A foreign agents law can debilitate political reform and human rights groups. In Russia, 158 groups were designated as "foreign agents" and 30 have shut down, according to Human Rights Watch.⁴ Even when not enacted, the debate about foreign agents feeds a

³ Thomas Carothers and Saskia Brechenmacher, *Closing Space: Democracy and Human Rights Support under Fire*, Carnegie Endowment, 2014: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/closing_space.pdf

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/russia-government-against-rights-groups-battle-chronicle>

pernicious narrative aimed at vilifying civil society. This narrative portrays civil society groups as venal paid agents of foreign forces that seek to impose alien agendas and dilute national sovereignty. Authoritarian rulers like Putin use this narrative to distract attention from the real issue—from their efforts to deny citizens fundamental freedoms. The portrayal of civic activists as unpatriotic is particularly pernicious, as these activists in fact show true patriotism in devoting their time and often running serious risks to expose corruption, observe elections, and give citizens a greater voice in how they are governed.

The false narrative of civil society serving foreign interests was reinforced by Russia's introduction in 2013 of the anti-LGBT "propaganda" law, which penalizes "propaganda" of homosexuality. Putin made an issue of so-called LGBT propaganda to depict human rights defenders as purveyors of decadent Western influence intent on imposing their alien values on traditional Russian society. The anti-LGBT law advances this false narrative, undermines respect for human rights, and causes serious harm to Russians. It led to a surge in hate crimes. From 2012 to 2015, annual murders of LGBT persons in Russia rose from 14 to 27.⁵

The introduction of repressive legislation like the foreign agents law and anti-LGBT law serves to mobilize the justice system in constraining rather than defending the rights of citizens and to give a patina of legitimacy to the government's effort to crush dissent.

Media manipulation

While Russia's repressive practices have echoed beyond its borders, its media manipulation affects other countries directly.

Media manipulation is a sophisticated new form of influence that combines facts, exaggerations, distortions, and outright fabrications to shape public opinions. The influence often relies on high-quality productions and entertaining content, for instance by RT (formerly Russia Today), or on social media to amplify rumors or blatant falsehoods to a significant audience. The reach of these rumors and falsehoods in social media at times prompts coverage in mainstream media, as happened with rumors about presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron in France.⁶

Russia manipulates the media space to advance narratives that run counter to verifiable facts but serve its interests. These narratives compete with credible news coverage for attention in Eurasia and Europe. They challenge the very notion of objective truth and thereby aim to breed cynicism and weaken trust in democratic institutions.

⁵ Alexander Kondakov, *Prestuplenia na pochve nenavisti protiv LGBT* [*Hate Crimes against LGBT Persons*], Centre for Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg, Russia, 2017.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/17/world/europe/french-election-russia.html? r=0>

Russian television has extensive reach in neighboring countries. It monopolizes coverage of international news in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, dominates the media space in Belarus, and is viewed by most ethnic Russians in the Baltic states.⁷ Russian media has influenced public perceptions in Eurasia. According to a Gallup poll, residents in most of the 12 countries of Eurasia find the Russian media's coverage of the situation in Ukraine and Crimea more reliable than Western media coverage.⁸

Because Russian TV reaches large audiences in neighboring countries, it can instigate discussions and drive public discourse, as it did on foreign funding for NGOs in Kyrgyzstan. And even where its reach is limited, Russian media can spark public discussions, as it did in Germany with a false report about a 13-year-old Russian-German girl raped by migrants.

During the U.S. election last year, scores of websites routinely peddled Russian propaganda, and coordinated efforts on social media amplified false or misleading stories, for instance about Hillary Clinton's health and about electoral irregularities. Some of these stories originated from Russian state-funded broadcasters RT or Sputnik.⁹

International norms

At the same time as Russia presents a model for political control by authoritarian rulers, it seeks to undercut the ability of international organizations, including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), to protect human rights and democratic standards. For example, Russia blocked the reappointment of the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities, because it objected to her statement in 2014 that she found no evidence of rights violations against ethnic Russians in Crimea, and has impeded the selection of a new OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. Russia seeks to avert scrutiny of its human rights record and that of like-minded governments and to reinforce the narrative that Russia's purported defense of "traditional values" should take precedence over international norms. The Russian government's emphasis on "traditional values" in fact is a cynical ploy to avoid accountability for its human rights violations.

Russia's challenge to international human rights norms is a key part of its broader effort to revise the European order, which the United States was instrumental in creating and which has provided the foundation for peace on the continent for over 70 years. This order is based to a large extent on the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, particularly the grand bargain

⁷ David Satter, *The Last Gasp of Empire: Russia's Attempts to Control the Media in the Former Soviet Republics*, National Endowment for Democracy, January 2014: http://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CIMA-Russia%20report_David%20Satter.pdf

⁸ <http://www.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/189164/russian-western-media-battle-influence.aspx>

⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/russian-propaganda-effort-helped-spread-fake-news-during-election-experts-say/2016/11/24/793903b6-8a40-4ca9-b712-716af66098fe_story.html?tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.9aefc7291d7b

whereby the United States and Western Europe accepted existing borders and the Soviet Union and its communist allies recognized the human dimension as integral to security. This bargain has broken down. Russia respects neither human rights nor existing borders, as evident in its intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea.

U.S. interests

U.S. support for democracy and human rights is integral to the European order that provides peace and security. Unless the United States actively defends this order, Russia will continue to erode it, and Europe will grow less stable. Expansion of Russian influence in Europe is likely to reduce support for the trans-Atlantic alliance and weaken resistance to Russia's encroachments on the territorial integrity of its neighbors.

The spread of democracy serves U.S. economic interests as well. Democratic countries usually are more reliable partners, more economically successful, and more open to foreign trade and investment. Corruption and weak rule of law put U.S. businesses at a distinct disadvantage in relation to local competitors with political connections, and restrictions on media and civil society, such as internet restrictions, limit the access of American companies to overseas markets. For example, LinkedIn was blocked in Russia after a court ruled that the company had failed to comply with a law requiring internet companies to store data on Russia citizens within the country's borders. This law gives Russian intelligence services easy access to personal data.

When the United States defends human rights, it is not imposing its values on other countries. Instead, it is holding other governments to account for failing to live up to their own laws and international commitments to respect the rights of their citizens, including their commitments under the OSCE.

Recommendations

To counteract the spread of Russia's repressive practices and media manipulation, the U.S. government should do the following:

1. **Staunchly defend the human rights norms established by the OSCE and other international conventions.** The United States should respond firmly and vocally to every serious violation of OSCE commitments by Russia or other member governments.
2. **Lead democratic countries in publicly criticizing and diplomatically pushing back on initiatives to replicate Russia's repressive practices** in other countries, such as the Hungarian government's foreign agents bill.

3. **Fully enforce both the *Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act* and the *Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act***, which provide for U.S. visa bans and asset freezes on foreign officials responsible for gross human rights abuses. These targeted sanctions introduce some measure of accountability for such officials and serve to deter future violations of human rights. Congress should press the President to add more senior Russian officials to the Russia sanctions list and to impose sanctions on officials of other governments under the *Global Magnitsky Act*.
4. **Maintain robust funding for U.S. foreign broadcasting**, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America, even in the current context of likely cuts in federal spending. These broadcasting services counteract Russian propaganda by providing balanced, fact-based news in local languages.
5. **Support independent Russian-language media** based outside of Russia so that they can sustain their news coverage and expand their audiences. The forms of this support—training, technical assistance with business operations, material support, etc.—should be determined mainly by these media outlets and reinforce their independence and credibility.
6. **Continue to provide assistance for human rights and civil society in Russia and Eurasia**, including support for pro-democracy civic initiatives and emergency assistance to human rights defenders. The U.S. government should ensure discretion and sensitivity in providing funds for these purposes.

A firm U.S. response to the spread of Russia's repressive practices and media manipulation is critical to defend American values, protect the European order that has safeguarded peace on the continent, and advance U.S. security and economic interests in Europe and beyond.