



# HELSINKI COMMISSION REPORT

October 18, 2018

## IN BRIEF

### What's Next in Putin's Crosshairs?

*Abkhazia. South Ossetia. Crimea. The Kerch Strait. The World Cup. A 25-year reign. Putin has a record of getting what he wants. What's next?*

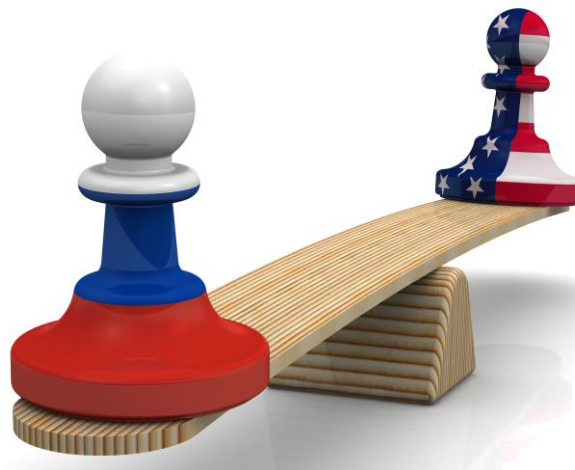
Since 1999, Vladimir Putin has led a Russian government that tramples on human rights and international norms. His government increasingly restricts freedom of the press and censorship is pervasive, especially for opinions critical of the government.<sup>1</sup> Putin and his cronies are linked to murders of numerous political dissenters and journalists.<sup>2</sup> Russian authorities persecute religious minorities that they deem “nontraditional,” such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Tatar Muslims.<sup>3</sup> The Kremlin tacitly approves the Chechen authorities’ continued gross violations of human rights including disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial killings based on suspected sexual orientation.<sup>4</sup>

Russian forces actively fight in eastern Ukraine, and earlier this year, the Kremlin further tightened its control of Crimea as it finished the illegal construction of a bridge crossing the Kerch Strait.<sup>5/6</sup> Russian troops occupy the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia and continue to occupy the Transnistria region in Moldova against the government’s wishes. Moscow continues to prop up Bashar Al Assad’s regime—who

uses chemical weapons against civilians—by providing weapons and thousands of troops.<sup>7</sup> Russian cyberattacks disrupt democratic institutions around the globe.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Russia still denies its involvement in the downing of Malaysian Flight 17, resulting in the deaths of 298 people.<sup>9</sup>

The United States and the European Union have responded to Putin’s provocations with sanctions designed to curb the Kremlin’s aggression.<sup>10/11</sup> Despite these sanctions, which have damaged Russia’s economy and major corporations owned by Putin’s cronies, Putin has brazenly persisted in shattering international law and civilized norms.<sup>12</sup>

Today, it appears that the Kremlin is less interested in sanctions relief and is after something less tangible: moral equivalence. The more nations that accept that Russia’s actions are morally equivalent to those of Western countries, the more the world will overlook Putin’s disregard of international norms and human rights. Moral equivalence secures his public approval—and therefore power—within his own country and gives him impunity abroad.



### **How Does Putin Achieve Moral Equivalence?**

The Kremlin presents Russian policies as morally equivalent to those of Western countries. For example, when confronted about his invasion of Ukraine's Crimea or South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, Putin points his finger at the United States' involvement in Iraq or Libya. When atrocities occur at the hands of the Assad regime in Syria, the Kremlin denies them outright or blames another party. Putin claims that the United States attacks free speech, while his government is responsible for persecuting journalists.<sup>13</sup>

This tactic represents the Soviet textbook "whataboutism" method of pointing out wrongdoing of another country, rather than addressing the accusation at hand. When asked about the Western reaction to the illegal occupation of Crimea on March 4, 2014, Putin answered:

*We are often told our actions are illegitimate, but when I ask, "Do you think everything you do is legitimate?" they say "yes". Then, I have to recall the actions of the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, where they either acted without any UN sanctions or completely distorted the content of such resolutions, as was the case with Libya...*

*... if I do decide to use the Armed Forces, this will be a legitimate decision in full compliance with both general norms of international law....<sup>14</sup>*

Putin does not discuss the legality of his own actions but pivots to what he claims is United States overreach. He also promises to comply with international law that he already breached days earlier by illegally occupying Crimea.<sup>15</sup>

In his notable New York Times op-ed, Putin advocates for the compliance of international law, though he unilaterally sent troops to Ukraine and Georgia without consent from the UN:

*We need to use the United Nations Security Council and believe that preserving law and order in today's complex and turbulent world is one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding*

*into chaos. The law is still the law, and we must follow it whether we like it or not.<sup>16</sup>*

The Kremlin also misleads the public through disinformation campaigns. For example, following a deadly chemical gas attack by the Russia-backed Syrian regime in Douma, and the attempted assassination of former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the UK last spring, British intelligence agencies reported a "4,000 percent increase in activity by social media 'bots,' trolls and automated accounts."

Bot accounts created several false narratives about Douma specifically: that the attack was staged and the "victims" were actors; that the attack was a false-flag operation, providing a pretext for the United States to get further involved in Syria; and that inspectors found no evidence of an attack. These bots have an expansive audience. It is reported that one bot account reached 62 million people.<sup>17</sup>

### **Moral Equivalence and the Western Response**

World leaders who endorse Putin's actions, including political leaders in NATO and OSCE participating States, help muddle the moral distinction between Western actions and those of Putin.

The President of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman, denies that Russian forces are present in eastern Ukraine and defends the illegal occupation of Crimea.<sup>18</sup> Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini defended Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea and aims to have the sanctions against Russia lifted.<sup>19</sup> Defeated French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen claimed the referendum in Crimea was legitimate and denies that Russia invaded.<sup>20</sup> These statements repudiate reality and have serious implications as they further confuse the moral distinction between actions of the West and those of Russia.

The Kremlin propaganda machine has also scored significant victories with U.S. leaders. For example, at the Helsinki Summit press conference, when asked about the decline in US-Russia relations and if he thinks Russia is to be held accountable for

anything, President Trump responded, “Yes I do. I hold both countries responsible. I think the United States has been foolish. I think we have all been foolish.”<sup>21</sup>

Diplomacy is indeed a two-way street, but the United States relationship with Russia has been on the decline because of Kremlin belligerence—not U.S. foolishness.

### **What Can Be Done?**

Granting moral equivalence between the West and Russia has significant implications. If Putin’s actions are overlooked on the basis of moral equivalence, security in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, and the entire international system will be further at risk. It will only further encourage Russian aggression and enable Putin and his cronies to act with impunity.

The United States must take the lead in acknowledging the abuses taking place in Russia to properly defend the international order and U.S. national security. Following the Helsinki Summit, Helsinki Commissioners Senator Ben Cardin (MD), Senator Cory Gardner (CO), Senator Jeanne Shaheen (NH), and Senator Thom Tillis (NC), among other legislators, issued statements repudiating the Kremlin’s claims of the suggestion that Russian actions are morally equivalent to those of the United States.<sup>22</sup>

The Kremlin’s behavior is unyielding. Therefore, the United States and its allies must use any tools

available to put additional pressure on Russia to rein in their belligerent foreign policy and uphold international norms and human rights.

For example, the United States can encourage the international community to introduce new sanctions against Russia. Simultaneously, the U.S. delegation in the UN can spearhead resolutions that condemn Russian actions in Georgia and Ukraine. Congress can also take part by passing resolutions affirming the territorial integrity of those countries and condemning Russian aggression. The United States must also urge its allies not to engage in deals with Russian oligarchs (e.g. the Nord Stream 2 Pipeline).<sup>23</sup> In both bilateral meetings and multilateral forums, the United States should actively demonstrate its commitment to human rights and hold violators accountable by citing specific instances of abuse and confronting false notions of moral equivalence when they arise.

The United States must vigilantly refute the idea that Russian actions—and actions of any government that routinely abuses human rights—are morally equivalent to those of the United States. The Russian government routinely demands to be treated as an equal partner. However, Putin’s actions have proven that he is a part of the problem, not the solution.

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## **About the Helsinki Commission**

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, is an independent agency of the Federal Government charged with monitoring compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advancing comprehensive security through promotion of human rights, democracy, and economic, environmental and military cooperation in 57 countries. The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. Senate, nine from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce.

Learn more at [www.csce.gov](http://www.csce.gov).

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<sup>1</sup> Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Russia 2017 Human Rights Report," U.S. Department of State, 2018, Accessed August 2, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/277455.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Oren Dorell, "Mysterious Rash of Russian Deaths Casts Suspicion on Vladimir Putin," USA Today, May 04, 2017, Accessed August 06, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/05/02/dozens-russian-deaths-cast-suspicion-vladimir-putin/100480734/>.

<sup>3</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Russia," United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 2018, Accessed August 2, 2018, [http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1\\_RUSSIA.pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_RUSSIA.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Russia 2017 Human Rights Report," U.S. Department of State, 2018, Accessed August 2, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/277455.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Cory Welt, "Russia: Background and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, August 21, 2017, Accessed August 7, 2018, <http://www.crs.gov/Reports/R44775?source=search&guid=c237803808624e0ba493b9bd2ac3e03e&index=7>.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Roth, "Putin Opens 12-mile Bridge between Crimea and Russian Mainland," The Guardian, May 15, 2018, Accessed August 02, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/15/putin-opens-bridge-between-crimea-and-russian-mainland>.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Almukhtar, "Most Chemical Attacks in Syria Get Little Attention. Here Are 34 Confirmed Cases," The New York Times, April 13, 2018, Accessed August 08, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attacks-maps-history.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Cory Welt, "Russia: Background and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, August 21, 2017, Accessed August 7, 2018, <http://www.crs.gov/Reports/R44775?source=search&guid=c237803808624e0ba493b9bd2ac3e03e&index=7>.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Osborne, "Flight MH17 Was Brought down by Russian Military-sourced Missile, Investigators Confirm," The Independent, May 24, 2018, Accessed August 06, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/mh17-missile-ukraine-2014-russia-military-netherlands-deaths-investigation-a8366721.html>.

<sup>10</sup> For Ukraine-related sanctions see: EOs 13660, 13661, 13662, 13685; The Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014; The Support for the Support and Sovereignty, Integrity, Democracy and Economic Stability of Ukraine Act of 2014. For Malicious Cyber Activity-related sanctions see: EOs 13694 and 13757. For Human Rights Abuse and Corruption-related sanctions see: The Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012 and Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. For other sanctions on Russia see: EOs 13582, 13722, and 13382.

<sup>11</sup> Dianne E. Rennack and Cory Welt, "U.S. Sanctions on Russia: An Overview," Congressional Research Service, July 26, 2018m, Accessed August 02, 2018, <http://www.crs.gov/Reports/IF10779?source=search&guid=66fd8e9d2543419bb363c46baf53271b&index=2>.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Keatinge, "This Time, Sanctions on Russia Are Having the Desired Effect," Financial Times, April 13, 2018, Accessed August 06, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/cad69cf4-3e40-11e8-bcc8-cebcb81f1f90>.

<sup>13</sup> RFE/RL, "Putin Says U.S. Pressure On RT An 'Attack,' Will Get 'Proper Response'," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, November 11, 2017, Accessed August 25, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-today-rt-justice-department-deadline-register-foreign-agent/28844886.html>.

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<sup>14</sup> "Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists' Questions On the situation In Ukraine," Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, March 04, 2014, Accessed August 06, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366>.

<sup>15</sup> Article 2, Section 4 of the UN Charter states: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Putin, "A Plea For Caution From Russia," The New York Times, September 11, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Middle East Eye Staff, "Russia Driving Huge Online 'disinformation' Campaign on Syria Gas Attack, Says UK," Middle East Eye, April 20, 2018, Accessed August 03, 2018, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/salisbury-syria-russia-social-media-theresa-may-528921594>.

<sup>18</sup> Editorial Board, "From the Czech Republic, a Warning for Our Midterms: The Russians Are Still Meddling," The Washington Post, January 29, 2018. Accessed August 22, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/from-the-czech-republic-a-warning-for-our-midterms-the-russians-are-still-meddling/2018/01/29/4498a748-0517-11e8-b48c-b07fea957bd5\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3e8afe15d67f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/from-the-czech-republic-a-warning-for-our-midterms-the-russians-are-still-meddling/2018/01/29/4498a748-0517-11e8-b48c-b07fea957bd5_story.html?utm_term=.3e8afe15d67f).

<sup>19</sup> Lally Weymouth, "'Italy Has Done a Lot - Maybe Too Much'," The Washington Post, July 19, 2018, Accessed August 22, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/italy-has-done-a-lot-maybe-too-much/2018/07/19/dc81a292-8acf-11e8-8aea-86e88ae760d8\\_story.html?%20utm\\_term%20=%20fe1294276783&noredirect%20=%20on%20&utm\\_term=.d52479e93e4f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/italy-has-done-a-lot-maybe-too-much/2018/07/19/dc81a292-8acf-11e8-8aea-86e88ae760d8_story.html?%20utm_term%20=%20fe1294276783&noredirect%20=%20on%20&utm_term=.d52479e93e4f).

<sup>20</sup> Lucy Pasha-Robinson, "Marine Le Pen Backs Putin and Denies Russian Invasion of Crimea," The Independent, February 07, 2017, Accessed August 23, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/marine-le-pen-front-national-russian-kremlin-putin-invasion-annexation-crimea-ukraine-2014-a7566196.html>.

<sup>21</sup> FP Staff, "Here's What Trump and Putin Actually Said in Helsinki," Foreign Policy, July 18, 2018, Accessed August 07, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/18/heres-what-trump-and-putin-actually-said-in-helsinki/>.

<sup>22</sup> For Senator Cardin's statement see: <https://www.cardin.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/cardin-calls-trump-putin-summit-foreign-trip-detrimental-to-us-national-security-interests-values>. For Senator Gardner's statement see: <https://www.gardner.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/gardner-statement-on-president-trumps-meeting-with-vladimir-putin>. For Senator Shaheen's statement see: <https://www.shaheen.senate.gov/news/press/shaheen-statement-on-trump-putin-summit-its-absolutely-shameful-that-president-trump-cannot-bring-himself-to-confront-vladimir-putins-attacks-against-the-united-states>. For Senator Tillis' statement see: <https://www.tillis.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2018/7/tillis-statement-on-u-s-russia-relations>. Also see S.Res.584: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-resolution/584>.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/08/07/why-nord-stream-2-is-the-worlds-most-controversial-energy-project>.