

Helsinki Commission Testimony

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I am very grateful to the Co-Chairs, Senator Cardin and Representative Cohen; and the Ranking Members, Sen. Wicker and Representative Wilson and the rest of the commission members for the opportunity to testify here today. I am grateful to the Commission for its support of core human rights values and for this opportunity to analyze the most painful and consequential events of our time.

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. We have been working in Eurasia to support civil society and encourage democratic development for over thirty years and maintain a large and diverse grants portfolio.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky famously wrote that the tears of a tortured child can be neither atoned for nor avenged. A great Russian writer of the 19th century, he far predates the horrors of Russia's savage war of aggression in Ukraine to assert that human suffering is the only reality and once inflicted it can never be mended. And for this reason, it is not only difficult but feels almost inappropriate to look more broadly at the strategic context and consider its wider scope and medium-term effects. What does the war entail for the longer time horizon and the broader region?

With very few divisions or defections among government or military officials and the fact that virtually any outcome can be presented to the Russian public as a victory, the Putin regime may indeed survive the war. As part of the negotiations to end the war, would the U.S. and Europe agree to rescind the wide-ranging sanctions that they applied over the last three weeks? However, even in this scenario, the enormous costs of the war and the reassessment of Russia strategy in Europe will have profound and unpredictable consequences for Russia. On more than one occasion in Russian and Soviet history, military disappointments triggered reform movements and openings over the medium term in otherwise authoritarian systems.

Throughout Russian history and certainly since the collapse of Communism, the modernizing and democratizing part of the Russian population was the one most integrated with Europe. This is the part of society that is today most directly impacted by the economic crisis and most likely to be either on the run, taking literally any flight or train to any foreign destination, or if still inside Russia steeling themselves for the next turn of Russian history that Putin has already characterized as a time to "purify the nation" by ridding itself of the "fifth column."

The Kremlin's new efforts of information control now focus on blocking social media and isolating Russians from the global internet. Our approach should be to engage and connect with Russian people even as we oppose the Russian government. There are technological means to bypass censorship which

can be employed to break the Kremlin's monopoly over information, to reach out to the Russian public by amplifying the voices of recently exiled Russian media and civil society.

Russia's exclusion from the Council of Europe need not have included its dismissal from the European Court of Human Rights. For two prominent political prisoners and opposition politicians on trial this week—Aleksey Navalny and Andrei Pivovarov—this is a grave loss. Having the prospect of appeal to international mechanisms, especially the European Court, is a way to put pressure on the regime and attract attention to political prisoners. Today there are over 400 political prisoners in Russia and the number of those detained in anti-war protests over the last three weeks is 15,032, according to OVD Info. We should be looking for more ways to leverage international institutions in support of political prisoners not cutting off the few that have been effective.

Putin's effort to gather together the lands of the former empire applies not only to Ukraine. In the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia—particularly in Armenia, Georgia and Kazakhstan—people have reason to fear that they can also become targets in the medium term. If they are to chart an independent and pro-democratic course, they need our attention and support. While public sentiment even in the most authoritarian states such as Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan is sympathetic to Ukraine, the governments throughout the region are reluctant to take a stand publicly. Uzbekistan is the only one to have broken ranks among its Central Asian peers by stating that it recognizes Ukraine's territorial integrity and that it will not recognize the independence of the breakaway republics.

Russia has gained enormous leverage over Belarus, it is the main arbiter of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, and continues to maintain a military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, giving it leverage over the Caucasus, and following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan it is the main guarantor of stability in Central Asia. We need to be more involved with each country, more in tune with their particular needs and predicaments to develop more nuanced long-term strategies. Supporting the EU applications of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia is one such path. Building awareness in Armenian society that mending relations between Turkey and Armenia would create opportunities for a more balanced foreign policy, reinvigorating the Minsk Group as a mediator in Karabakh, and helping Georgians overcome the bitter polarizing divisions within their nation and between citizens and their government about support for Ukraine are other important goals.

Central Asia lies between Russia and China and yet is often neglected in our strategic thinking. They are already suffering economic shocks and are likely to experience more turbulence as currency continues to lose value and fears of wheat shortages and instability mount. Needlessly impoverished, they are governed by kleptocratic regimes that plunder natural resources from society and stash proceeds abroad. As these states try to maintain a neutral stance and resist pressure to provide rhetorical and material support to Russia, we can use this moment to reengage in the region and help them to strengthen their sovereignty and independence from Russia. Central Asia should not become collateral damage to sanctions but rather can be incentivized to pull away from the Russian and Chinese orbit. As a major destination for refugees, they can become a source of vibrant new diaspora communities of Afghans, Ukrainians, and Russians. Given that Central Asia is eager to welcome foreign economic investments, we should make genuine democratic reforms a necessary corollary.

Finally, this moment of extraordinary human suffering but also profound international solidarity can be directed to more strategic ends. In addition to standing with Ukraine and doing all in our power to end the war, we may also consider some medium- and long-term goals.

- Conduct systemic reform to counteract transnational kleptocracy.
- Build regional solidarity among democrats across Europe and Eurasia to counteract authoritarian regimes.
- Develop deeper relations with the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia based on a nuanced understanding of their strategic predicaments while also holding them to democratic standards.
- Distinguish between the Putin regime and its various enablers and accomplices and the Russian people.
- Preserve, support, and amplify the voices of Russian democrats now fleeing the country and those who remain inside.