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The State of Human Rights and Political Freedoms in Russia: Bound to Deteriorate?

Aram TERZKYAN*

This paper explores the state and political freedoms in Putin's Russia, with a focus on the core features of authoritarian and undemocratic governance.

According to widely – held beliefs, today Russia is more repressive than it has ever been in the post-Soviet era.¹ A question remains as to what is the main rationale behind the autocratic practices characterizing Russian president Vladimir Putin's presidency, and if those malpractices are bound to continue?

As a matter of fact, Russia's post-soviet transition has been marred by a series of authoritarian malpractices, ranging from centralization and personalization of power to extensive crackdown on civil liberties and

* Aram TERZKYAN, PhD, is the research co-director of the Center for Central Asian Studies of Eurasia Institutes, USA, e-mail: a.terzyan@eurasiainstitutes.org .

political freedoms.ⁱⁱ What makes Russia stand out from other post-Soviet countries is that the combination of historical conditions that had created a strong anti-communist consensus in most of Eastern Europe had not taken shape in Russia. Clearly, it would be unrealistic for Russians to treat the Soviet system as an imposition on them by a foreign power or see it as an obstruction to independence. As a result, there was a lack of a consensus at the elite and popular levels about the desired character of political and economic transformation.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a broad consensus among the students of Russian politics that the Russian regime – centered around “Putinism” is as a form autocratic rule that is personalistic, conservative and populist.^{iv}

Overall, the state of human rights in Russia has been on severe during Putin’s presidency, with the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly consistently restricted, in law and practice.^v

The long list of human rights abuses in Russia includes arbitrary arrest and detention; extrajudicial killings; pervasive torture by law enforcement authorities; life-threatening conditions in prisons; political prisoners; arbitrary interference with privacy; violence against journalists; severe suppression of the right of peaceful assembly; severe restrictions of religious freedom; severe limits on participation in the political process, including restrictions on opposition candidates’ ability to seek public office; systematic government corruption; trafficking in persons; and crimes involving violence or threats of violence against persons with disabilities, LGBTI persons, and members of ethnic minorities.^{vi}

According to Freedom House reports, the Russian state directly or indirectly owns or controls the mainstays of the media landscape—

television stations, most radio stations, many newspapers, and most regional media.^{vii} Even though some space for independent media does exist, particularly online the Russia's independent media environment remains extremely difficult, with Kremlin controlling the media narrative on politically sensitive issues.^{viii}

Human rights watchdogs have consistently alarmed the Russian authorities' tendency of using repressive legislation to stifle critical and independent voices online and offline.^{ix} The government's efforts at curtailing internet freedom went up to a new level in May, 2019, when Putin signed a law enabling Russian authorities to block access to the internet in Russia, without judicial oversight.^x

Furthermore, in December, 2019 Putin signed a law that endows the Russian government with the right to classify journalists and bloggers as "foreign agents".^{xi} Under the vaguely worded law, Russians and foreigners who work with media or distribute their content and receive foreign funding would be declared foreign agents, potentially exposing journalists, their sources, or even those who share material on social networks to foreign agent status.^{xii}

While a vibrant civil society is largely viewed as a key component of a democratic society and a crucial instrument for political change, the civil society organizations in Russia have been characterized by their organizational weakness, and marginality in terms of their social base, financial assets and influence over policy making .

Evans (2011) notes that this picture in Russia considerably owes to the cultural legacy of the Soviet system with pervasive distrust of social organizations and even of the whole public sphere.^{xiii} Indeed, it has not been uncommon for post-Soviet societies to perceive civic associations as threat to the state's power and stability, along with the belief that the state bears the ultimate responsibility for the wellbeing of the society. Meanwhile, the Putin regime has further reinforced such perceptions to thwart civic activism and prevent it from evolving into an issue-specific, value-driven and a robust civil society. More specifically, the Putin regime has been exerting tremendous pressure on NGOs and other political organizations, whether by withholding state funding, personal pressure, or the use of legal instruments including arbitrary arrests to tighten its grip on the public space and curb pluralism.^{xiv}

The 2012 Foreign Agent Law has been a huge blow to the NGOs free and independent activities in Russia. According to its provisions, organizations engaging in political activity and receiving foreign funding must register as foreign agents, even if the foreign funding they receive does not actually pay for political activities.^{xv}

As a result, the NGOs focusing more on Western ideas, such as LGBT rights get labelled as “foreign” agents. These NGOs encounter a very hostile environment, and face fines and potential shutdowns.^{xvi}

This picture has much to do with the Kremlin's emphasis on the necessity of defending traditional values as opposed to those of liberal democracy.

To justify massive violations of human rights, the Kremlin has consistently strived to delegitimize the idea of liberal democracy itself, labelling it subversive and alien to the Russian national character.^{xvii}

The Russian president tends to contend that the ideology underpinning Western democracies for decades has "outlived its purpose". Thus, "the liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population".^{xviii}

Liberal democracy has been invariably associated with the acceptance of homosexual rights- hailed by the Russian president as a "genderless and fruitless tolerance" that allows "good and evil" to be valued as equal.^{xix} Moreover, the West has been regarded as a purely LGBT-promoting community that endangers national identities and traditional values in post-Soviet countries and beyond.^{xx}

To prevent all these from happening, Putin has positioned Russia as a counter-hegemonic force opposed to the West's "crackdown" on conservative values and even world's last bastion of traditional values, characterized by its rejection of revolutions, homosexuality and feminism.^{xxi}

Apart from encouraging homophobia, this rhetoric has led to the further misrepresentation of liberal democracy -often contrasted with Russian "sovereign democracy." Remarkably, the narratives that underpin Putin's discourse have proven popular with the Russian population. According to a survey conducted by the state-run Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, nearly two-thirds of Russians believe that homosexuals

are conspiring to subvert the country's traditional values.^{xxii} Moreover, they believe in the existence of an organization that strives to destroy Russian spiritual values through imposing radical minority norms on the country's majority.

Such perceptions allowed Putin to strengthen his "strongman" image, with the president not allowing the Western liberals to weaken Russia. The necessity of standing up to the West has served as a convenient pretext to suppress dissent and pluralism across the country by labelling civic and opposition activists as "anti-Russian spies," or "foreign agents," "traitors," who are involved in the "Western conspiracies."^{xxiii} Moreover, the Russian government passed a number of laws aimed at shrinking the public space by stigmatizing the core of the liberal-reform movement as "foreign agents" fighting against traditional Russian values.^{xxiv}

Moreover, to suppress dissent and pluralism, Putin has tended to undermine the very idea of political opposition, by implicitly representing it as an anti-state force that causes instability, rife with devastation.

Namely, in response to a question about opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Putin stated that Russians "do not want second edition of today's Ukraine for Russia."^{xxv} Meanwhile, the Russian president would frame the Maidan Revolution as a sign of "fascism revival," asserting that those who stood behind the latest events in Ukraine are nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites.^{xxvi}

Such examples would help point to the hypothetical future of a strong opposition, that would soon or late strive to stage a devastating revolution. It turns out that considerable part of Russian population tend to share Putin's stances opposition. Remarkably, a Levada-Centre survey on the

necessity of political opposition found that 54 percent of respondents thought Russia needed one, while a quarter disagreed with such ideas.^{xxvii} Reasons given by the second group against the concept of political opposition ranged from concerns regarding internal divisions to its perceived detrimental effects on the country's general stability.^{xxviii}

Overall, respondents possessed largely negative and pessimistic understandings of the official opposition in Russia, describing it as weak, marginalized, fragmented and even a 'dying species'.

Even a quick glance of the Duma presents an unfavorable picture of a fragmented opposition, divided by communist, nationalist and liberal ideologies. Ironically, only a shared distrust by the public appears to unite these groups, with respondents often associating the parliamentary opposition with terms such as "fake opposition", "rubber stamp opposition" and even "pro-regime."^{xxix}

As a result, at this point there seems to be no considerable hindrance to Putin's plan to stay in office. That said, his authoritarian practices seem bound to continue.

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