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THE PRESSING MESSAGE OF RUSSIAN DISSIDENTS

A LESSON FOR WESTERN LIBERALS

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THE PRESSING MESSAGE OF RUSSIAN DISSIDENTS

A LESSON FOR WESTERN LIBERALS

Nicolas Tenzer

Just consider the following list:

Anastasia Baburova (1983-2009), a journalist at *Novaya Gazeta*,
Artyom Borovik (1960-2000), an investigative journalist,
Natalia Estemirova (1958-2009), a journalist and human rights activist,
Dmitry Kholodov (1967-1994), a journalist, working on corruption in the
military, Paul Klebnikov (1963-2004), a journalist and the head of *Forbes* Russia,
Vladislav Listyev (1956-1995), a popular TV anchor,
Stanislav Markelov (1974-2009), a lawyer, human rights activist, and journalist,
Boris Nemtsov (1959-2015), a liberal politician and main opponent of Vladimir
Putin,
Alexandr Perepilichny (1968-2009), an investment banker and whistleblower,
Anna Politkovskaya (1958-2006), a journalist and human rights activist,
Yuri Shchekochikhin (1950-2003), an investigative journalist and liberal
lawmaker,
Galina Starovoytova (1946-1998), a politician, ethnographer and ethnic
minority campaigner,
Sergei Yushenkov (1950-2003), a liberal politician and human rights defender.

They are only a small selection of the more than two hundred human rights activists, political opponents, and investigative journalists, who have been murdered¹ since the demise of the USSR - most of them after Putin came to power in 2000.

Here, you may read the story of their too short lives. The regime buried those who were the most generous and most committed to saving Russia from decline and

tyranny. They could have found another destiny in their beloved country. Let us not forget bankers, such as Andrei Kozlov (1965-2006), vice-chairman of the Russian Central Bank, combating criminal money laundering, or lawyers, like Sergei Magnitski (1972-2009), who shed light on a massive tax fraud. Both were apparently too well-informed about the business practices of Russia's powerful. Recently a British court unveiled the Kremlin's likely involvement in former spy Alexander Litvinenko's assassination. Nemtsov's friend, Vladimir Kara-Murza, miraculously survived poisoning. In 2015, at Christmas, Vladislav Kolesnikov,² who had been harassed and persecuted because he dared to defend Ukraine, committed suicide. He was 18 years old. In January 2016 the writer and Putin opponent, Vladimir Pribylovsky (1956-2016), was inexplicably found dead.

THE PATRIOTISM OF THE DISSIDENTS: THEIR QUEST FOR TRUTH

All those who advocate freedom in today's Russia suffer acts of intimidation. Any day, they can be shot by a bullet or die of poisoning. Yes, they are afraid, but they continue to speak with admirable bravery and true patriotism because that is what this is all about. All those who confront Putin do so because they know that he dooms the Russian nation to infamy, its economy to bankruptcy, and its people to misfortune. Our dissidents draw their energy from a genuine patriotism. They are ashamed of Russia's villainous image abroad. They suffer because of the bloodshed perpetrated by Moscow and they still dream of a peaceful and cooperative country. They think Russia can be a "great nation," but its greatness can only lie in exemplarity, not in cruelty. They could perhaps be said wanting to "Make Russia great again," because, with Putin, Russia is condemned to decline, spreading its own chaos abroad beyond its borders.

Their quest for truth is key. Nemtsov had been looking into Russia's war against Ukraine and its crimes. His friends, among them Ilya Yashin, unveiled his scathing report soon after his murder. Anna Politkovskaya and Natalya Estemirova had been investigating Russia's criminal deeds in Chechnya, as had Shchekochikhin, Yushenkov and Markelov. One decade later, Chechnya is still under Radzam Kadyrov's yoke. He continuously utters violent threats against Putin's critics and represses any contest at

home. Yashin's report, just published a few weeks ago, again demonstrates that Kadyrov is a true threat to Russia's national security. Who still remembers the over 100,000 casualties of the war in Chechnya, now described as the precursor of Russia's fully-fledged extermination war in Syria?³

Others observed the disappearance of basic rights in Russia by concentrating on the corruption of the ruling elites. Liberal NGOs have been forced to close because of the law on "foreign agents," gay people are assaulted by right-wing groups with impunity and sometimes imprisoned, whereas nationalist groups are flattered and praised by those power. So is the Moscow orthodox Patriarch, whose main aim is to put the religion at the service of the infringement of freedom. A self-declared atheist, Viktor Krasnov has been charged with insulting religious sentiment and may face up to one year in jail, and Russian schoolchildren are forced to watch a video recommending men to marry virgins! Ironically enough, Putin's city, St. Petersburg, still hosts Voltaire's library!

Ten years ago few of us were warning about the irresistible, logical tendency for a repressive power at home to become aggressive abroad. Only few of us were ringing the alarm bell, since Grozny or at least the war in Georgia, urging European companies not to invest in a country that sentences to death both its economy and its freedoms. While teaching there regularly between 2006 and 2008, I witnessed how a general atmosphere of fear and oppression started to prevail. Already, some of my friends in the prosecuted NGO *Memorial* began to flee a country where they could not work and think freely. Since that time, this brain drain has intensified. We should not forget that there exists a deep connection between the repression of human rights in Russia and Russia's geopolitical threat. Those who remain indifferent to the repression and human suffering in Russia should at least pay attention to the dangers for Europe's and the world's security.

Let us consider the facts. The war in Ukraine, which has caused more than 10,000 deaths and displaced 1.5 million persons, started with a peaceful revolution on Maidan Square, advocating freedom and European values. The illegal annexation of Crimea, where ethnic cleansing of the Tatar minority has reached unimaginable proportions, repeated the *de facto* annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008.

Because these land grabs were hardly sanctioned, it could easily be reproduced elsewhere. The Russian regime still illegally detains Ukrainian political prisoners, among them Oleg Sentsov, Alexandr Kolchenko and Yuriy Soloshenko.

Even more atrocious are Russia's actions in Syria, because of the savagery's magnitude. Russia, hand in hand with China (with the significant exception of the last resolution), is covering up the crimes against humanity committed by Assad's regime by using five times its veto in the UN Security Council. Recent Russian atrocities and even war crimes against civilians in Syria add to the long list of crimes, perpetrated by Assad's regime, which is backed by Russia since the beginning of its genocidal endeavor. And now Russia is leading the war in Syria. It is no exaggeration to qualify Putin's Russia as a criminal organization, not to mention a direct threat to Europe.

DO NOT YIELD!

The legacy of murdered dissidents should provide the West with some important lessons when trying to find an answer to this worrying menace. The values, defended by the dissidents, are self-evident for all liberals: human rights, democracy, the fight against corruption, transparency, and cooperative behavior on the international stage - all things which are propitious to an open society. But dissidents are also sending a pressing message to the West. Do not abandon us. Do not leave us alone with Putin. Do not yield. This message is about both our values and our foreign policy, it contains a recommendation on how to deal with Putin's Russia.

First of all, we must hold firm on our values. This concerns not only the defense of democracy and basic rights, but in particular also of the truth. The Kremlin's propaganda jumbles truth and lies by undermining any reference to facts and history through a chaotic nightmare of words and images. Some universities have already begun to burn books that upset the regime and revisionism is spreading fast with a revived cult of Stalin. Because it makes use of the social media the Russian propaganda has a much greater impact than that of the former Soviet regime. When oil and gas prices were high, the regime created a broad international network of regime apologists and Putin devotees, and not only on the fringes of the political spectrum.

“Presentable” think tanks, politicians, or opinion leaders are even more dangerous than radical politicians, since many do not pay enough attention to their attempts to rehabilitate the regime by talking about “appeasement” and advocating “engagement” with Russia. The fall in oil prices has not led to a drop in resources, devoted to propaganda.

This offensive against truth fits within Aleksandr Dugin’s ideological rearmament. Without even hiding his purpose, this ideologist advocates challenging the “decadent” and “gay” liberal values of the Western world for the sake of a so called “Russian soul”. He explicitly endorses a clash of values. His discourse provides an ideological basis, which justifies the invasion of neighboring countries, the commitment of crimes, as well as domestic repression. It also endorses political strategies which could lead to Europe’s dismantlement by funding groups which share his hatred of liberal values. Ideological warfare appears to be the prolegomenon to real war and its permissive factor.

The wake-up call addressed to us by Russian liberals is clear: Russia is a threat to Europe. If Europe loses its values - as it may be already, if we consider the rise of illiberalism in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and elsewhere - Russian democrats will have nowhere to turn for support. Our indifference would be a major sin. Facing Russia’s classical “divide et impera” strategy, US and European leaders’ top priority must not be to compromise on the values on which the free world’s legitimacy and essence are based. Of course, this offensive against liberal values is not limited to Russia, but its threat is the nearest and the most immediate.

NO UNDERSTANDING AND NO FORGIVENESS

This threat should commit US and European leaders to express both a geopolitical vision of Europe and of its principles. The dissidents’ message is eloquent. First, we should not trust Putin. This logically implies that any negotiation with Putin’s Russia is a sham and fools’ game.⁴ We should not satisfy ourselves with any reassuring pledge made by Moscow. Russia can never be part of the solution because it is the number one problem. Moreover, the Russian regime exploits any sign of irresolution and

weakness. This has been demonstrated time and again: in Georgia, in Ukraine, and in Syria. If the West defines red lines, it must stand firm when they are crossed. Blaming, urging, pressing, expressing deep – or even very deep – concerns, as diplomatic chancelleries used to do, has no impact if there is no willingness to take action. Any accommodating approach is understood by the regime as a green light to go far beyond what was agreed, in complete violation of international law. All the human rights activists whom I had the chance to meet were very clear, demanding the West not to lift the sanctions. They all insist that any temptation to “speak with” the regime or, worse, public stances showing an “understanding” of Putin’s Russia would represent a risk for them. Such moves would grant plausibility to the fake theory of Russia being “humiliated” by the West.⁵ If we truly want to help Russian democrats, the West must not be complacent, nor forgive. Unfortunate as it is, they know that the regime doesn’t recognize any other stance than the show of force.

Neither they, nor I are hawks, warmongers, neo-cons, or Russia’s enemies. On the contrary. We merely consider that freedom and liberal values should be protected, since they won’t protect themselves. We are worried by calls to “understand” the regime and to accept its oppression which one can hear throughout Europe, far beyond the far-right and radical left groups.

Many still consider that the Russian people will never be capable of enjoying freedom and democracy. Fallacious culturalism and historical determinism are still enshrined in many people’s minds –especially of politicians. Equivalence between Putin and Russia is highly misleading. Those who do not like Russia argue that any support to human rights there would be futile because of Russia’s putative essence. Those who support Putin are also stuck in an essentialist view of the Russian soul, unable to embrace democracy as we understand it in the West. Russia needs an authoritarian leader, they will argue. The same “culturalism” says that Confucian and Islamic societies will never mature into democracies, which is factually wrong. For anyone who accepts this view, leaders can never really make a difference since they express their people’s spirit. Thus, they cannot admit that Russia’s misfortune has been created by Putin, and they support him as an irreplaceable representative of the Russian people. This argument ignores the claim for liberty of many human rights

activists in Russia, in the Middle-East, and elsewhere, whose strong voices are repressed. They cannot spread their message because of a brainwashing propaganda which has reached the minds of Western leaders.

We must stop invoking “realism.” What is the meaning of a realism that jeopardizes Europe’s and the world’s security? Let us also add that, in the world and in Europe, as they are now, any containment is doomed to fail. As pragmatists, not idealists, we are compelled to say stop. If the liberal world is no longer able to set the agenda and abandons this task to Russia, it will lose both its values and its security. Our values and our security are inextricably linked.

I am grateful to my friend Charles Lichfield for revising my piece. All failures are mine.

NOTES

¹ List of journalists killed in Russia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_journalists_killed_in_Russia

² C. Biggs, “Death of Russian Teenager Who Opposed the War in Ukraine”, *The Guardian*, January 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/14/death-russian-teenager-who-opposed-war-ukraine>

³ N. Tenzer, “Syria’s War of Extermination Signals The End of the International Community,” *The Conversation Global*, October 12, 2016. <https://theconversation.com/syrias-war-of-extermiation-signals-the-end-of-the-international-community-66708>

⁴ N. Tenzer, “Pourquoi il ne faut pas négocier avec la Russie de Poutine,” *The Conversation* (France), February 17, 2016. <https://theconversation.com/pourquoi-il-ne-faut-pas-negocier-avec-la-russie-de-poutine-54748>,

⁵ See L. Shevtsova, *How the West Misjudged Russia*, in particular Part 6: “The Western Pragmatists Explain Russia,” *The American Interest*, February 22, 2016. <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/02/22/the-western-pragmatists-explain-russia/>

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