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“A Dangerous Slide Backwards: Russia’s Deteriorating Human Rights Situation”

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In the summer of 2011 I crossed Russia’s 11 time zones, from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad, to interview about two dozen leaders and activists of six non-governmental organizations and movements. The analytical conclusions from more than 40 hours of interviews and over 300 pages of transcripts, are in this report, titled *The Quest for Democratic Citizenship*” which I ask to be entered in the record, subject to format rules and regulations.

But this was far more than a field study for me. These were among the finest men and women I’ve met anywhere. They were fearless, extremely hard working, smart and absolutely unyielding in their quest for dignity in democratic citizenship. None of the organizations and movements whose leaders and activists I interviewed was overtly political much less oppositional. Two of them were environmental; one was battling the destruction of historic buildings in St.Petersburg; one was concerned with road safety and the corruption of the traffic police; and two advocated honest elections and freedom of speech and demonstrations.

What united them all was the moral imperative of dignity in democratic citizenship, including, first and foremost, equality before the law and the end of effective disenfranchisement through restrictions on party registration and falsification of the election results. In these key regards, their core demands were no different from the civil rights movement in the United States or the demands of the Arab Spring or the cause of Chinese dissidents today.

I describe them here for you because I want to put causes and faces on the tragedy that is unfolding in Russia today. All of the organizations I visited are now under pressure and harassment. One of them, Baikal Ecological Wave which for many years has been trying to save the world’s largest body of fresh water from pollution is facing the same choice as hundreds of other organizations: to register as a

foreign agent, because the only support it gets is from foreign environmental organizations – or close down and abandon its cause.

Looking ahead, I see three main implications of this crackdown on civil society in Russia. Let me list them in the order of importance and from short term to longer time periods.

First, the prospects for U.S.-Russian relations seem bleak. Any substantive reset with the U.S. would contradict the regime's dominant domestic narrative of propaganda and repression, with the U.S. as the key alleged threat to Russian security and domestic stability. It is possible, of course, that the regime would try and combine repression with détente but it is unlikely: the Kremlin today seems in no mood for sophisticated bifurcation of its domestic and foreign policies. Dictated by the considerations of regime survival, the worsening of relations with the United States may be seen as a boost to the domestic legitimacy of the regime which presents itself as the defender of Russian sovereignty against the plotters from abroad, aided by paid traitors at home. Thus, expect no accommodation on Syria or Iran – or anything else that might be seen domestically as “concession to the US.” Indeed, even strategic nuclear arms reduction may fall victim to the same domestic political calculus despite the Administration's concerted efforts to assuage Russia's concerns over the missile defense in Europe.

Second, what we are witnessing after a year of authoritarian consolidation, following Putin's reelection in March of last year, looks more and more like a significant change of the regime from a relatively softer authoritarianism to a much harder and malignant version. The harassment and self-exile of a leading Russian economist and establishment reformer Professor Sergei Guriev has signaled a unilateral re-negotiation of the long-standing social compact with the liberal public opinion leaders. If previously pro-reform members of the establishment could write what they wanted and be safe from repression so long as they were not actively supporting political opposition, the Kremlin's message today is: You must stop public criticism of the government -- or risk harassment and even jail. If you don't like the deal, leave while the going is still good. Those who chose to stay, in the words of a leading opposition blogger Yulia Latynina, “must in all honesty believe that the greatness of Russia lies in Vladimir Putin,” and that “the source of protests against the great Putin can only be a world conspiracy [by the West] and the ‘fifth column’ inside the government.”ⁱ

Finally, and most damagingly in the long run, the assault on civil society is a tragedy for Russia because non-government organizations are, first and foremost, a school of democracy that teach personal responsibility, self-organization, peaceful dissent and compromise. Although on the personal level they detested the regime and never hid this attitude, the leaders and activists I interviewed were utterly pragmatic, ready to compromise and cooperate in the service of their cause. “Our attitude toward the government is that when we can cooperate with it, we do,” a young woman in Vladivostok told me. “When we think that the regime's policies are wrong, we don't hesitate to say it openly.”

This is what is being destroyed! Left in the rubble of civil society are only stagnation, hatred, and radicalism. Left behind is scorched earth, incapable of upholding democratic institutions, when this regime falls or implodes – just as happened after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I ask that in addition to my study of civil society organizations, two recent articles of mine, published in the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal, be entered into the record, subject to format rules and regulations.

¹ Yulia Latynina, "Pikseli odnoy kartinki," gazeta.ru, May 31, 2013 and "Doktor, a otkuda u vas takie kartinki?" novyagazeta.ru, June 1, 2013.