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Soviet Tyranny Was a Crime Against Humanity

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin paid his respects last year to the victims of the Soviet massacre of Poles at Katyn, but the Russian state is in no hurry to honor the memory of the millions of its own citizens who were killed and tortured and whose family members were permanently crippled by Soviet repression.

There has been a storm of controversy and criticism over a report published recently by a working group of President Dmitry Medvedev's human rights council, headed by Mikhail Fedotov. The main objectives are to create a nationwide program to preserve and honor the memory of the victims of the Soviet totalitarian regime and to start the process of national reconciliation and full understanding of the country's tortured criminal past.

As expected, critics have tried to detract attention away by focusing on elements of the program that have only secondary importance — mainly, the proposal to bury Lenin's mummified remains and to ban state officials from publicly defending Stalinist crimes.

Nonetheless, this initiative is of strategic importance for the country. Its success or failure will determine Russia's future in the coming decades. These goals are much broader than simply opening up Soviet-era archives to the public and erecting monuments to the victims of 20th-century state-sponsored terror throughout the country. The program seeks to achieve something much more fundamental: a gradual but permanent shift in public awareness and national consciousness toward the rejection of totalitarianism and authoritarianism and toward a basic understanding that a strong civil society and democratic institutions are crucial to the survival of the country.

It was no surprise that the democratic and humanitarian focus of the "de-Stalinization program," as it has been labeled, elicited such a sharply negative reaction by modern-day Stalinists, who, amazingly, still exist in significant numbers in Russia.

But the essence of the Stalinist system — and the broader Soviet system of totalitarian government control that continued nearly 40 years after Stalin's death — is the total domination of the state over the individual. By creating an all-encompassing and omnipotent "power vertical," that system denied citizens their inalienable human rights and rejected the rule of law. It viewed people as meaningless and faceless "cogs" to help build an all-powerful state machine. Recall, for example, when millions of peasants were killed to develop an urban industrial base for the Soviet Union.

Such an anti-humane social contract was forced upon the Russian people starting in 1920, following the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War, and only ended with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika. Millions fell victim to state-sponsored terror and large-scale "social engineering." Victims included peasants, priests, skilled technicians, common laborers, Poles, Jews, the Kalmyk, Chechens, Germans, intellectuals and many others.

Unfortunately, the heinous crimes of Soviet tyranny — one of the world's greatest tragedies of the 20th century — have gone practically unacknowledged and remain largely on the distant periphery of public awareness. Moreover, the national task of identifying and understanding the causes of the tragedy remains unaccomplished. The connection has not yet been clearly drawn between the totalitarian, violent nature of the state and the resultant low standard of living and the backwardness of the country's economy and technology that continues to this day. As a result, Russian society does not fully appreciate the danger that the current authoritarian and corrupt government poses, nor does it fully appreciate the fundamental need for individual rights, civil society, democratic institutions and transparency and accountability in government.

After 1945, Western Europe entered a period of deep reflection and public discussions about the evils of tyranny that led to World War II and more than 55 million deaths. As a result, Western Europe firmly rejected authoritarianism and radical nationalism, the ideologies that had predominated after World War I and that had resulted in the outbreak of World War II. It marked the birth of a fundamentally new European political culture based on tolerance, open borders and trade, the willingness to delegate some state sovereignty to European and global institutions. By drawing valuable lessons from its tragic past, Europe laid the foundation for its current prosperity.

The Soviet Union and modern Russia have not found the strength or the willpower to go

through the same process. And although former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev deserves credit for condemning Stalin's personality cult and eliminating the gulag, he, of course, fell far short of condemning and rejecting the very foundations of totalitarianism — state-sponsored violence and a repressive, dominant and all-intrusive single party and ideology. Perestroika led to the opening of many state archives and the rehabilitation of many victims of Soviet tyranny, but it could not complete the task of officially condemning and renouncing the totalitarian form of rule as such.

Former President Boris Yeltsin took many laudable steps to bring Russia closer to goals set out in the de-Stalinization program, but Putin in a very short time rolled back most of Yeltsin's achievements. He brought back and instituted the Soviet concept that a "strong hand," huge bureaucracy and power vertical are needed to develop the country, establish order and "bring Russia up off of its knees from the Yeltsin era of chaos and lawlessness."

This dangerous process of going back to the Soviet style of government and repeating the same tragic mistakes is occurring precisely because Russian society doesn't fully understand the dangers of authoritarianism. And this is why the current de-Stalinization and anti-totalitarian program is so important for Russia's future — so Russians can fully understand the country's past crimes and draw the necessary lessons from it.

Arseny Roginsky, a member of Memorial, a group that studies repression, perhaps put it best when he told Medvedev, "This program aims to increase not just knowledge, but understanding." To achieve this kind of understanding, it requires opening state archives and erecting monuments to the victims of state-sponsored terror. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. The program also needs to build museums all across Russia and list the names of the millions of victims of Soviet terror. It needs to educate the young generation of the genocide and terror committed by previous generations. That requires publicly classifying the most egregious state policies as crimes against humanity and changing school textbooks and curriculums to reflect this.

The current anti-Stalinist and anti-totalitarian program states that "only recognition of the evils of totalitarianism can serve as the foundation for the uplifting of society and the country." Without that recognition and understanding, Russia will have no future.

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