

Why Some Russians Need the West's Help

By [Michael Bohm](#)

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"The West will help us."

Ostap Bender's famous phrase from Ilf and Petrov's "The 12 Chairs" may have been on Konstantin Fetisov's mind when he met with Michael Posner — U.S. assistant secretary of state for the bureau of democracy, human rights and labor — in the Moscow region a week ago.

Fetisov is a leader of the movement opposing the construction of the Kremlin-supported \$8 billion Moscow-St. Petersburg highway that will travel through the Khimki forest. He was beaten badly by unidentified assailants last November, leaving him with impaired speech and memory loss.

During his meeting with Fetisov, Posner said the United States needs to "redouble" its efforts to press Russia on protecting human rights.

Posner's six-day human rights tour across Russia once again raises the question of whether the United States and its European allies have an obligation — or even the right — to criticize Russia on its democracy record and support Russian victims of human rights abuses.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's position on the matter is clear: Russia's human rights record is an internal matter. "Don't poke your noses in our internal affairs," is how Putin put it, referring to the United States, during an interview with CNN's Larry King in December.

But Putin's stance is a direct contradiction of Russia's commitments under several international conventions that the country has signed, including the European Convention on Human Rights. It also contradicts Russia's membership in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The foundation for all these international agreements and organizations covering human rights is grounded in three basic principles: Human rights are governed by international law, they serve as the basis for world order, and all signatories are obliged to adhere to their principles.

If this were not enough, Putin should take a closer look at Article 15.4 of Russia's own Constitution, which states that international agreements that Russia has signed, such as the European Convention on Human Rights, are an inalienable part of the country's laws. It also states that if an international agreement contradicts Russian law, the international agreement takes precedence.

Thus, the Kremlin cannot hide behind the bankrupt argument that human rights abuses are "internal matters." There is no such thing as a government's "sovereign right" to commit human rights abuses.

Despite Putin's opposition to Western "interference," there are many cases in which the West has, indeed, helped Russian victims of human rights abuse. This was true for Soviet dissidents and remains true for Russians today.

Take, for example, former Yukos vice president Vasily Aleksanyan, who was not given adequate treatment for cancer and other AIDS-related illnesses while he was held in pretrial detention from 2006 to 2009. Although the Russian courts ignored three injunctions by the European Court of Human Rights to free Aleksanyan until trial, he was finally released in January 2009 after the European court found Russia had violated four articles of the European Convention on Human Rights. In this case, unfortunately, the West's help was too little and too late. Aleksanyan died due to complications from AIDS on Oct. 2.

As the Aleksanyan case shows, it often takes several years and many attempts to convince Russian officials to respond to allegations of human rights abuses — particularly when law enforcement officials are the ones abusing human rights and when they are protected by senior government officials.

Similarly, a U.S. bill may ultimately help the family members of Sergei Magnitsky achieve justice. Magnitsky, a lawyer who represented Hermitage Capital, died in pretrial detention after being denied medical care. Versions of the bill, sponsored by U.S. Senator Ben Cardin and aimed at sanctioning 60 government officials implicated in Magnitsky's death, are also being

considered in several European countries. These sanctions, which include visa restrictions and asset freezes, are particularly effective because they hit corrupt Russian officials where it hurts most.

There are also many less-known cases, as Washington Post journalist Kathy Lally reported on Saturday. Stanislav Dmitriyevsky, for example, who heads the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society that investigates mass murders and abuses by Russian soldiers in Chechnya, was convicted on dubious “extremism” charges in 2006. He told The Washington Post that he was able to avoid a prison term largely because European and U.S. agencies, including the National Endowment for Democracy, supported his case.

Putin’s other false argument, which borders on conspiracy theory, is that Western forces meddle in Russian affairs in an effort to undermine the current regime — or even topple it in an Orange-like revolution. Many Russians who fall for this myth believe that the United States actively funds opposition parties, such as Parnas, despite the fact that this is strictly prohibited by both Russian and U.S. laws.

But what Washington does partially fund, through agencies like USAID, is several hundred Russian nongovernmental organizations, with an average grant amounting to about \$50,000. Some of the recipients include:

- The Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers, which helps stop hazing and other abuses in the army;
- Memorial, a human rights organization;
- Perm-36, which is devoted to helping Russians learn more about the gulag;
- The Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, which defends Russian journalists’ constitutional rights, including helping them pay for a lawyer when they are wrongly accused or otherwise persecuted for their investigative work;
- The Murmansk Association of Female Journalists.

This is hardly the stuff to make an Orange Revolution.

If the Kremlin wants victims of human rights abuses to rely less on the West for help, there is one way to achieve this — by the Russian government helping them instead. But this will require an independent court system and an open, democratic state that is committed to protecting human rights and prosecuting those who violate those rights.

Unfortunately, Russia’s “sovereign democracy” model is committed to the direct opposite: increasing the government’s power, limiting the ability of civil society to fulfill its democratic role and covering up human rights abuses under the cynical pretext that these cases are “internal Russian matters.”

As long as Russia’s democracy remains “sovereign,” Russians like Konstantin Fetisov will have no other choice than to rely on the West for help.

Michael Bohm is opinion page editor at The Moscow Times.

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