The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why the Foreign Ministry Should Keep Quiet

By Michael Bohm

October 31, 2012



Those nostalgic about the Soviet Union got a nice treat on Oct. 22 when the Foreign Ministry released its report on U.S. human rights violations. Reading just a few pages of the report was enough to bring back memories of the "Ikh Nravy" (Their Morals) series that appeared for nearly a decade in Soviet newspapers and on television. The series harped on poverty, crime, homelessness, unemployment, the exploitation of the working class, racism and other "human rights violations" in the United States.

The 60-page Foreign Ministry report, which focuses only on the U.S., is a response to the U.S. State Department's annual human rights report, which covers dozens of countries. Russia's main message in its report: The U.S. has no moral grounds for criticizing Russia on its rights record.

Using a crude strategy that dates back to the Soviet period, Russia's report tries to shift focus away from its own rights abuses by saying the U.S. government is guilty of the same, or even worse, violations.

This is a favorite tactic of the Kremlin. For example, when the West criticized the state's takeover of Yukos, President Vladimir Putin said the case differed little from the Enron corruption scandal. When the West criticized Russia for the torture and death of Sergei Magnitsky in pretrial detention, Putin said during an RT interview in September that the U.S. is just as guilty because its government executes convicted criminals. When the West criticizes Russia for kidnapping opposition leader Leonid Razvozzhayev in Ukraine, supporters of the Russian government say the U.S. kidnapped Viktor Bout in Thailand.

The Foreign Ministry broke down U.S. human rights violations into 15 categories. Here are some of the more interesting ones:

- U.S. presidential elections limit the rights of voters because the president is not elected by popular vote, but by the Electoral College.

Technically, the Electoral College does elect the president after the people vote, but there has never been an occasion when its members prevented a popular elected president from assuming office. What's more, 24 states have laws that punish electors if they deviate from the popular vote.

As a whole, Russia's concerns about U.S. voters' rights appear strange coming from a country where "carousel voting" has become an established political term to describe busing voters from one polling station to another to cast multiple votes for United Russia. For all of its concern about U.S. voters, the Kremlin has shown a conspicuous lack of concern for Russian ones. It has told political parties to contest results in the courts, where the cases are routinely rejected. State-controlled television accused Golos, the independent election watchdog, of running a U.S.-funded campaign to discredit Russia after it found that about 15 percent of the votes in December's State Duma elections were falsified to boost United Russia's results, while the March presidential election was padded by about 6 percentage points.

- The U.S. limits freedom of speech.

The report offers examples such as journalists detained at Occupy rallies and the arrest of Bradley Manning, a U.S. army soldier who released classified files to WikiLeaks. What's more, Alexei Pushkov, head of the Duma's International Affairs Committee, said during a special Oct. 22 Duma hearing on U.S. human rights violations that the U.S. media "act as the ideological hand of the United States ... and serve the political interests of the government."

These claims are particularly vacuous in a country whose main three television stations are state-owned, and one of them, NTV, is infamous for its "Anatomy of a Protest" pseudo-exposes and other made-to-order hatchet jobs against the opposition. What's more, Russia is No. 142 on the 2012 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, next to Gambia and Swaziland.

- "Legalized corruption," which the report defines as lobbying

Indeed, lobbying abuses remain a large problem in the U.S., but at least there are laws and regulations that help control the industry. In Russia, however, there are no lobbying laws at all, which explains why the "influence peddling" trade in the Duma and other governmental bodies has spun out of control and goes unpunished. It is a bit strange for Russia, whose ranking on the 2011 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index was No. 143, next to Togo and Nigeria, to speak about corruption in the U.S., whose ranking is No. 24. If there is one area where Russia should probably shy away from criticizing other countries, it is corruption.

- Child abuse

Children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov claimed during the Oct. 22 Duma hearing that abusive U.S. parents have received lighter sentences when they abuse Russian-born children, suggesting that U.S. juries and judges are driven by Russophobia in these cases. This is a patently false allegation. When the parents are tried in U.S. courts on child-abuse charges, it is irrelevant where the child was born. In most cases, the victims are already U.S. citizens with a name like Jimmy Smith, not Vanya Petrov.

Other purported U.S. rights violations include:

- the gap between the wealthy and poor
- eavesdropping on dissenters
- racial and religious discrimination
- biased U.S. courts and government influence on the judicial process
- keeping suspects in pretrial detention without bringing charges against them
- Internet censorship
- violations of workers' rights, including the right to organize and collective bargaining
- human trafficking and kidnapping.

The Foreign Ministry even recommended measures that the U.S. should take to improve its human rights record.

In one embarrassing mistake, however, the Foreign Ministry faults the U.S. for carrying out capital punishment on minors. But the last minor to have been executed was in 1959, when Leonard Shockley, 17, was executed by the state of Maryland after being convicted of murder. In 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court in Roper v. Simmons went further, outlawing capital punishment against any adult who committed a crime as a minor. Moreover, capital punishment is banned in 17 states.

One of the biggest ironies of the ministry's report is that most of the information was taken directly from nongovernmental organizations reports — the same NGOs that the Kremlin has claimed are a part of a U.S.-orchestrated plan to destabilize the country and stage an Orange-style revolution. The Kremlin is apparently trying to have its cake and eat it, too. When Amnesty International, for example, criticizes Russia, it is "Russophobic" or "a U.S.-funded agent"; when it criticizes the U.S., it is an authoritative, objective source.

To be sure, the U.S. has its share of human rights violations. But what is more important is

how U.S. courts, NGOs, the media, Congress and other elements of civil society force the government to respond to abuses and crimes. In an open, democratic society, there is an ongoing, daily battle to hold the government in check. But in a closed society like Russia, this daily battle is turned on its head as the state stifles elements of civil society to allow the government to continue its abuses and cover up past ones.

In fact, the Foreign Ministry all but admitted as much when it included — perhaps foolishly — in the report's section on police brutality that the city of Oakland, California, paid $1.7 million to the family of a victim in a police brutality case. The Foreign Ministry should have asked itself, "Has the Russian government ever paid even a fraction of this amount to Russian victims of similar police abuse?" The family of an Azeri national who was killed by being stabbed at least 77 times by Moscow police officers in September certainly deserves similar compensation.

But the only compensation seems to come when the European Court of Human Rights forces Russia to pay — rulings that many in the government dismiss as, again, Russophobic or interference in Russia's internal affairs and sovereign rights.

Perhaps the most telling aspect surrounding the rights report is the stark difference between the U.S. response to its release and the Russian response to the annual U.S. State Department report. Joseph Kruzich, spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Moscow who attended the Duma hearing on U.S. human rights, told a Moscow Times reporter: "As our own history clearly demonstrates, open, factual honest discussions of these issues make democracies stronger."

Compare that to the statement that Duma deputies made at the same hearing: Russia is "against the U.S. political course that uses human rights as an instrument of political pressure and a foundation for interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states."

These two opposite responses vividly illustrate what separates strong, democratic nations from weak, autocratic ones.

Michael Bohm is opinion page editor of The Moscow Times.

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