

The West's Flawed 'Civilization Burden'

By [Robert Shlegel](#)

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The winter session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, or PACE, ended last week. After attending the session, I am convinced more than ever that the West's general attitude toward Russia hasn't changed.

In the same way that a visit to the theater begins at the coatroom, a visit to a PACE session always begins with a walk through the large entrance hall. This time, the parliamentary delegates from 47 countries were greeted by a photo exhibit of Russian opposition leaders at the protest rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad. Staring menacingly at visitors were the black-and-white faces of Alexei Navalny, Garry Kasparov, Yevgenia Chirikova and other lesser-known opposition figures. A banner announced that the exhibit had been staged by the New Jersey-based Institute of Modern Russia. To make sure the point wasn't lost, a large portrait of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky was placed in the very center of the exhibition.

While Mikheil Saakashvili is still formally the president of Georgia, he is no longer the leader of the country in the broader sense, particularly after his party suffered a crushing defeat last year in the country's parliamentary elections. It was clear from Saakashvili's expression and manner that he badly wanted to be treated with the respect normally accorded to a

president, but all he got was dead silence when he approached the podium and when he finished his speech. The Estonian delegation may have been clapping, but it was hard to tell for sure.

The main point of Saakashvili's speech was that democracy in Georgia had become more democratic during his presidency. He fielded questions after the speech, and I was lucky enough to get one in. I remarked that in his speech he criticized Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili for trying to establish at least some type of relationship with Russia, whereas Saakashvili had driven that relationship into a dead end during his tenure. Saakashvili answered, "We never took any actions against Russia." In short, he lied.

The next day, there were two presentations on Azerbaijan based on the international monitoring of political prisoners in the country. The first report was very objective. It was approved by the Azerbaijani delegation and was not nearly as interesting as the second report. That report on political prisoners was a complete disgrace. Besides the facts that the authors of the report had never set foot in Azerbaijan and that the term "political prisoner" was never clearly defined, the data were flawed because many of the political prisoners mentioned had already been set free.

This blatantly biased and incorrect report on Azerbaijan evoked indignation and resentment among the delegations of countries that were themselves under monitoring — or that could be monitored — owing to their recent accession to the Council of Europe. In a rather rare display of solidarity, countries that usually are placed in the category of "developed" and "democratic" also spoke out against this report. As a result, this report was rejected by the assembly.

The strong bias and double standard among many PACE members against countries like Azerbaijan, Russia and other former Soviet republics — excluding Georgia, of course, which is a friend of the West and considered a democracy — is an old problem. Indeed, it has become customary for Western members of the assembly to proclaim that everyone is equal, while their behavior gives away that some are "more equal" than others.

Russia and most former Soviet republics are regularly criticized and subjected to monitoring on human rights violations and are a favorite target for PACE reports. Meanwhile, Western countries, along with the Baltic states, love to play the role of judges and protectors of human rights. They love to play the missionary role of torchbearers of true democracy who bring "civilization" to most former Soviet republics. And we are fed up with it.

That attitude was perfectly illustrated in the PACE report titled "On Freedom of the Media in Europe," which was presented during the latest session. As the title indicates, the report should have been devoted to all of Europe, yet for some unknown reason, the author focused for the most part on problems in Turkey. Of course, the report would not have been complete without mention of Russia and other former Soviet republics, but it somehow finished up without a reference to a single country in "old" Europe. The attitude of the speaker toward "developing countries" was made clear in a regular meeting held to make corrections and amendments to the report.

After hearing the report, the representatives of the "enlightened powers" thanked the speaker for his thorough and objective work. I am sure their bias is not based in malice. It is simply

that these reports fit comfortably into their self-serving worldview, which holds that they live in civilized, advanced countries and that somewhere, far away in the East, live primitive people who must be educated in the modern concepts of democracy, rule of law and freedom.

The problem is that the world has changed dramatically in recent years, and a model of behavior that might have been tolerated in the 1990s now elicits nothing but laughter and irritation. I am certain that if the politicians of Western democracies do not find a new, respectful attitude toward Russia and do not change their patronizing tone and language, there will be a complete breakdown in communications and rising tension and irritation between the former Soviet republics and the West. Moreover, there will be a loss of global leadership that will be difficult to restore.

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