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# Russia's Neglected Human Rights Activists

By Susanne Berger

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Last month French newspaper Le Monde featured an impassioned appeal by two human rights veterans — Aage Borchgrevink, a senior adviser to the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, and Gregory Shvedov, a member of the Russian human rights organization Memorial and editor-in-chief of the Internet publication Kavkazsky Uzel (Caucasus Knot).

The two activists strongly urged official European institutions and governments to take a much more determined stance in the defense of human rights workers who find themselves increasingly under siege. According to Borchgrevink and Shvedov, right in Europe's back yard — in Azerbaijan and across the Caucasus region — activists and journalists who fight on the front lines against the suppression of civil liberties are regularly brutalized and even killed with impunity.

Borchgrevink and Shvedov have witnessed first-hand the erosion of the rule of law in Russia and its neighboring republics. In recent years, the Kremlin has moved aggressively to stifle independent media, severely limiting the ability of journalists to report human rights abuses.

The situation is expected to decline even further with the passage of a new law that will prevent commercial advertising on paid cable and satellite television stations, severely undercutting the ability of these stations to remain viable.

Seventy journalists who collectively resigned in March in protest against crippling censorship of the news website Lenta.ru have set up shop in Latvia, in the hope of evading Russian governmental interference with their new venture, a news app called Meduza.

The crackdown on public opinion, coupled with the Russian government's aggressive pursuit of its strategic interests in areas that it considers its traditional sphere of influence, has resulted in an atmosphere that is toxic to those who dare to insist on adherence to even the most basic human rights norms. NGOs that provide a wide variety of social services are forced to denounce themselves as "foreign agents," and numerous activists have been gunned down or jailed. Last month, Russia's Justice Ministry even sought the outright closure of human rights organization Memorial.

Russian dissident Alexei Navalny — singled out for various forms of harassment, including house arrest and an avalanche of legal proceedings that have kept him on the sidelines of the domestic political process — recently told Bloomberg that with these methods "Putin is systematically stifling democratic freedoms. ... In this sense he is building a totalitarian system out of an authoritarian one." Putin's scheme of targeted repression — severely punishing the select few, as a form of deterrent — has worked. His overall approval ratings remain high, adding to the problems faced by human rights activists.

To counter the situation, Borchgrevink and Shvedov demand less talk — especially the tepid pronouncements issued on a regular basis by European Union officials — and more action on fighting against the abuse of human rights activists.

They propose four essential steps to halt the abuses, including an "advance warning system" of impending violations and special protection for human rights activists to be offered by diplomatic missions abroad. These should include multiple-entry visas for EU countries and the U.S., as well as special papers that would allow for a quick evacuation of activists at risk. In addition, their proposal calls for special funds to be set aside to provide help for persecuted individuals and their families, plus the creation of special job opportunities for dissidents at foreign universities and research centers.

Borchgrevink and Shvedov have brought attention to a very real problem that exists not only in Russia and the Caucasus but around the world. Their concerns underscore the difficulties that even the most committed parties have had in the 21st century, not only to define a set of universal rights and values, but to find effective means of enforcing this value system. No basic agreement exists about what such a system should entail. Deep divisions persist across the world about the rights of women, the protection of minorities and the need for religious tolerance.

As a result, a wide range of security concerns continues to dominate the bilateral and international political agenda among states. Unfortunately, in many countries the overarching theme of an unspecified "war on terror" has served as little more than a pretext for the leaders of authoritarian regimes to move against the members of the internal opposition. One glaring example is Uzbekistan.

Uzbek President Islam Karimov's human rights abuses are legendary. The fact that Uzbekistan served as an important hub for the U.S. and British military forces involved in the Afghan war after 2001, with Karimov's government receiving millions of dollars for the privilege, is one of the many manifestations of a Western realpolitik that may be necessary militarily, but it remains hard to swallow.

A major reason for the muted response from Western democracies to even the most troubling human rights offenses is the ascendancy of an ever more integrated, multipolar global economy. It has enhanced the tendency by Western democratic countries to enter into questionable business alliances and to forge dubious social and political compromises.

The fact that money talks is certainly not lost on anyone. Excessive greed has become as a major stumbling block for democratic societies that seek an effective response to human rights abuses.

Since 1945, large businesses and corporations have come to rival and in some cases substitute the traditional roles of state governments. This shift in power and priorities has undoubtedly further enhanced the trend toward a more "realistic" — some would say "relativistic" — approach to human rights.

So far, Putin and other autocratic leaders like him have successfully exploited the key contradiction at the core of Western democratic societies, in which a supposedly principled political system functions in direct competition with a highly pragmatic economic one.

Borchgrevink's and Shvedov's appeal is an important reminder that the line separating democracies from authoritarian regimes is a very thin one. Democratic governments and all of us who are committed to human rights must be willing to fight harder for them, and we simply must do a better job taking care of those who risk their lives on a daily basis in this battle.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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