

Russia's New Totalitarianism Depends on Silence

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Back in June 2013, Moscow Helsinki Group head, famous Soviet-era dissident and human rights activist Lyudmila Alexeyeva warned that Russia, having already long previously become an authoritarian state, risked mutating into something much worse — a new totalitarianism. With the recent murder of Boris Nemtsov still unsolved and pressure growing daily on freedom of expression "on moral and religious grounds," that warning takes on even greater urgency today.

Can we really see the ominous harbingers of totalitarianism in modern Russia? Does a crackdown against dissident voices loom on the close horizon? Will the authorities ban books and movies? Will they begin using force and aggression?

Many signs of totalitarianism are already visible in daily life here. For the first time, the authorities banned the showing of a Hollywood film, "Child 44," for allegedly distorting historical truth. Not long before that, a number of Russian regions banned showings of the Oscar-nominated film "Leviathan" by Andrei Zvyagintsev on grounds that it "denigrates"

modern Russian reality.

Still earlier, officials either shut down or prohibited the opening of art projects by famed curator Marat Gelman in Perm, prompting him to relocate to Montenegro to develop modern art there. The authorities also pulled the plug on a production of Wagner's opera "Tannhauser" at the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater and fired the theater's director. Those moves came in response to complaints and protests by the "Russian Orthodox community" that the staging of the show was "insulting to Christ."

Other totalitarian practices include the wholesale use of propaganda on state television, the widespread and constantly growing censorship of the Russian Internet, political repression against critics of the regime and civil activists, the continued homogeneity of an only nominally multi-party parliament and the ever-growing powers and activities of Russia's various secret police — the Federal Security Service, the Federal Guard Service and special units of the Russian Interior Ministry.

Former Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, who liked the general opinion that his was a totalitarian regime, gave a succinct definition of that system: "All within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state." That means the state holds total control over all important aspects of life: politics, the economy, society, culture and even morality.

In her new book "Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956" — recently released in Moscow in Russian — Anne Applebaum details the basic mechanisms and rules by which former Soviet leader Josef Stalin imposed totalitarian regimes on eight Central and Eastern European states. Knowing this history helps form a better understanding of what is happening in Russia today.

In the strict sense of the word, totalitarianism is a system that abolishes all institutions except those authorized by the ruling regime. Totalitarianism tolerates only one political party, one education system, one creed in art, one centrally planned economy and one set of morals. Totalitarian regimes suppress independent schools, civil society and critical thought — including with regard to history.

Applebaum shows that each of the countries liberated from the Nazis immediately began building totalitarian political systems on the Soviet Stalinist model. It is interesting to note in which order key steps were taken. What was the top priority for successfully adopting totalitarianism in societies that had no experience with it?

The Soviet liberators first created local secret police that immediately began carrying out reprisals against former fascists and their accomplices, and at the same time, against opponents and critics of the new government. The secret police also took control of the local police, and sometimes even the Defense Ministry — that is, all of the state's siloviki structures.

Second, they immediately seized full control over the radio — the main form of media at that time.

Third, the authorities began systematically bullying and harassing independent nongovernmental organizations — churches as well as groups of youth, athletes and even

chess clubs. First they applied pressure, and then they banned them.

In 1945, the leader of the pro-Moscow German Communists Walter Ulbricht told his inner circle, "The situation is very clear: It should look like democracy, but we must keep everything under close control."

Creating local versions of the NKVD, seizing control of radio stations and disbanding NGOs were the top three objectives. They were even more important than eliminating democratic political parties and squeezing the private sector out of the economy — both of which were of only secondary or tertiary importance.

As the experience of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe demonstrates, the existence of secret political police that carry out either selective or mass crackdowns on dissent, the total control over information and the evisceration of civil society are key prerequisites for successfully establishing and maintaining a totalitarian regime.

It is easy to see the obvious parallels with the political trajectory Russia has taken ever since President Vladimir Putin came to power. Political scientists can best determine whether this country is now more authoritarian or totalitarian. But what is clear to even the casual observer is that Russia's future is now critically dependent on organizations of civil society such as independent associations and NGOs — the most powerful opponents of any totalitarianism.

And that is precisely where the authorities have now focused their attack. The ability of those organizations to withstand that onslaught will determine the fate of freedom in Russia.

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