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Open Society and Its Enemies in Putin's Russia (Op-Ed)

By Victor Davidoff

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George Soros, Chairman of the Open Society Institute, speaks at a forum sponsored by the New America Foundation in Washington.

What's going on in Russia? It's simple to understand if you remember history.

In 1921, the Soviet Union was experiencing a terrible famine, the likes of which hadn't been seen since the Middle Ages. The Soviet government had to ask foreign governments and international organizations for aid. The American Relief Administration, the precursor of USAID — the United States Agency for International Development — responded with tons of food and medicine. In two years the ARA provided $42 million of aid, a huge sum at the time, and saved almost 10 million people from dying of starvation or disease. The ARA only stopped their work in Russia when the situation ceased to be critical.

But instead of being grateful, the Soviet government began a campaign to discredit the organization. First they declared it "a spy organization." Then members of the committee

to aid famine victims — the Soviet organization that liaised with the ARA — were arrested and exiled — some abroad, some to Siberia.

Fast forward to 1991. There wasn't a famine, but the country was deep in crisis, and once again Western governments and private foundations came to the rescue.

The Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute was one of the first Western charities to begin work in the Soviet Union. Activities began in 1987 with educational projects. In 1991, the foundation switched to direct funding of people who had suffered most from the crisis — what had been the Soviet middle class. The new government had simply stopped fulfilling their responsibilities to anyone dependent on the state budget. Hyperinflation had wiped away their savings, and scientists, teachers, librarians, and doctors found themselves in dire economic straits. And so the Soros Foundation initiated an enormous program to provide direct financial aid to Soviet scholars and scientists.

I remember going into a bank in those years and seeing a line of scholars and scientists standing at a special window for their "Soros checks." These people were once the Soviet elite, but now they looked like a crowd of refugees who had lost their property and status. Their once stylish Polish jeans and Romanian shoes looked pathetic next to the Christian Dior suits worn by the fashion-forward New Russians.

The Academy of Sciences was in a state of permanent disintegration. Research centers and universities paid their employees $5-$10 a month. One person couldn't survive on that salary, leave alone support a family. But when they got those "Soros checks," scientists, scholars, and professors could return to their universities and continue to do what they had done all their lives: conduct research and teach students.

It's no exaggeration to say that those "Soros checks" saved Russian science in the early 1990s. But they couldn't save everyone. I still recall a newspaper headline from the 1990s: "Math Teacher Jumps Out a Window, Unable to Support His Family."

And then Putin came to power and everything changed. The new regime began with an attack on independent media, but its next targets were foreign charities. First the Soros Foundation was unceremoniously kicked out of its office space in an old manor house that they'd leased for 49 years. Suddenly documents appeared showing that the owner of the house had sold it just a few days before signing the lease with the Soros Foundation.

The new owner tore up the lease and locked up the house. For several days the Foundation's employees had to climb in windows to get into their offices. In 2003, it finally closed its representative office in Russia, but it continued to support civil society institutions.

Finally, at the very end of November this year, the Prosecutor General's Office declared the Soros Foundation an "undesirable organization" on the territory of the Russian Federation. This ruling does not just prohibit the Foundation's work in Russia. According to a new article in the Criminal Code, Article 284.1, not only Foundation staff but also their grantees and even people who have provided consulting services are threatened with prison sentences of up to six years. To put this into perspective, the same sentence is prescribed by the Criminal Code for rape.

It's pretty clear why the Kremlin declared war against the Open Society Foundation. It's the same attempt to turn the country into a closed system that obsessed Soviet leaders in the last century. People are just waiting for the next measures taken against Soros grantees. The Sova Human Rights Center has reported that for several years some books on history — including books funded by Soros — have been removed from research and other libraries. And when they are removed, the libraries and their directors have been forced to pay significant fines.

But fines aren't all. Since October Natalya Sharina, head of the Library of Ukrainian Literature, has been under house arrest. In a search conducted of the library, they found two banned books including one written by one of the leaders of the Maidan uprising in Kiev. Now she is facing up to five years in prison for "inciting hatred or enmity."

In this situation, Russians have been trying to console themselves with the famous axiom Karl Marx attributed to Hegel: History repeats itself first as a tragedy and then as a farce. But this was said about Europe. In Russia, history repeats itself over and over again as tragedy.

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