

Helsinki Summit: A Review of Vladimir Putin's Record of Human Rights Violations and Attacks on Democratic Institutions

On July 16, U.S. President Donald Trump is scheduled to meet one-on-one with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, Finland. According to White House officials, President Trump is prepared to use the meeting to discuss arms control, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, its meddling in U.S. and European elections, and its backing of Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria, among other topics.¹

Given President Putin's abhorrent record concerning human rights and his attacks on democratic institutions at home and abroad, President Trump should, in addition to these topics, underscore America's support for a rules-based international order, the rule of law, and universal rights. Reaffirming the U.S. support for the promotion and protection of human rights would increase American leverage in any negotiation with the Russian leader, while allaying the concern of America's democratic allies that the United States has abandoned shared ideals.

By all indications, President Trump will not raise these issues. Instead, it is likely that he will adhere to his consistent record of praising Putin, despite the latter leader's repressive, kleptocratic policies at home, the Russian government's interference in democratic elections in the United States and multiple European countries, its military invasions of

neighboring countries, its support for a Syrian regime accused of war crimes, its use of a deadly nerve agent on the territory of an American ally, and its stated strategy of seeking to weaken American influence.²

As a primer in advance of the Helsinki summit, this factsheet briefly documents the many ways the Russian government under President Putin maintains power at home by suppressing the fundamental freedoms of its people, and the ways it undermines the rules-based international order and supports human rights violations abroad.

Human Rights in Russia

Attacks on Freedom of Assembly and Association

In 2012 the Russian Duma passed a law on so-called "foreign agents" that requires all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) receiving foreign funding to register with the government and undergo extensive audits.³ The law has resulted in the stigmatization and/or closure of dozens of Russian NGOs working on human rights, health, and the environment. Expanded to apply to media outlets, in July 2018 the Duma announced an intention to apply the law to individual bloggers and journalists.⁴ In 2015 the Duma further curtailed the activities of civil society by passing a law on so-

¹ <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/05/trump-putin-meeting-695287>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/us/politics/trump-putin-congratulate.html>

³ <https://www.hrw.org/russia-government-against-rights-groups-battle-chronicle>

⁴ <https://cpi.org/2018/07/russian-duma-committee-approves-legislation-labeli.php>

called “undesirable organizations,” which allows the Russian government to prosecute Russian NGOs that accept funds from certain international grant-makers including the National Endowment for Democracy and German Marshall Fund.⁵

Severe Limits on Free Expression

According to Human Rights Watch, 94 individuals were imprisoned last year for “extremist speech,” a pretextual charge used to imprison individuals who criticize the government.⁶ Russian NGO Agora has documented additional cases.⁷ Thousands of individuals have been arbitrarily arrested for participating in “unsanctioned” protests, including young activists participating in anti-corruption rallies led by opposition figure Alexey Navalny.⁸ Prominent activist Ildar Dadin was tortured in prison after being arrested for engaging in one-man protests.⁹

Sham Elections and the Elimination of Political Pluralism

According to the OSCE, elections in Russia since 2004 have been neither free nor fair.¹⁰ During the 2018 presidential election, for example, opposition figure Alexey Navalny was prevented from running for president after Putin had him arrested and convicted on trumped-up charges of embezzlement.¹¹

⁵ See <http://minjust.ru/ru/activity/nko/unwanted> and <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-investigates-sova-center-undesirable-law-extremism-watchdog/28722638.html>

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/18/online-and-all-fronts/russias-assault-freedom-expression>.

⁷ http://en.agora.legal/fs/a_delo2doc/17_file_Russia_v_History_ENG.pdf

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/thousands-of-russians-rally-against-putin-ahead-of-inauguration/2018/05/05/3007a9a2-503d-11e8-b725-92c89fe3ca4c_story.html?utm_term=.aa173349bcb5.

⁹ <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2017/03/ildar-dadin-russian-activist/>.

¹⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/01/31/western-leaders-shouldnt-recognize-russias-sham-election/?utm_term=.976aeef0f2b.

Political and Religious Prisoners

Russia currently imprisons over 150 individuals on political or religious grounds as a means to suppress dissent and peaceful religious practice.¹² Of particular concern are Ukrainians arbitrarily detained for political and religious activism. In May 2015, Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian filmmaker and outspoken critic of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, was convicted by the Russian state of “terrorism”—charges widely believed to be groundless—and sentenced to 20 years in prison.¹³ Demanding that all Ukrainian political prisoners be released from Russian prisons, Sentsov has been on hunger strike since May 14, 2018.¹⁴

Extrajudicial Killings and Assaults of Political Dissidents

The Putin regime often uses violence against political activists to silence dissent. Across Russia, political opponents of the Putin regime are commonly assaulted and often killed.¹⁵ The Kremlin routinely denies involvement in such attacks, while assailants are rarely prosecuted. In 2015, Boris Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister and vocal Putin critic, was gunned down just yards away from the Kremlin.¹⁶ Dozens of other political activists have since been attacked, several fatally.¹⁷

¹¹ The ECtHR ruled that the criminal proceedings leading to Navalny’s conviction were arbitrary and unfair . . .” See <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-161060%22%5D%7D>.

¹² <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/06/283289.htm>.

¹³ <https://pen.org/advocacy-case/oleg-sentsov/>.

¹⁴ <https://pen.org/advocacy-case/oleg-sentsov/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/world/europe/moscow-kremlin-silence-critics-poison.html>; <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/ahead-fake-election-russia-remembers-murder-real-opposition-leader>.

¹⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/28/dispatches-opposition-leader-gunned-down-steps-kremlin>.

¹⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/ahead-fake-election-russia-remembers-murder-real-opposition-leader>.

Extrajudicial Killings Abroad

Political opponents of Putin have also died under mysterious circumstances outside of Russia. American officials reportedly believe a total of 14 Russian citizens have been murdered in the United Kingdom on Putin's orders.¹⁸ In March 2018, a nerve agent linked to the Russian military was used in the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian military intelligence officer turned British spy.¹⁹ In March 2018, former Aeroflot executive and exiled Putin critic Nikolai Glushkov was strangled to death in London just before he was set to testify regarding Kremlin persecution.²⁰

Unlawful Detention, Torture, and Murder of Gay Men in Chechnya

In Chechnya, strongman Ramzan Kadyrov's regime has arbitrarily detained, tortured, and in some cases killed dozens of gay men in what human rights organizations have identified as a "gay purge."²¹ Russian officials have so far refused to open an investigation into these shocking crimes, leaving Mr. Kadyrov to operate with impunity.²²

Massive Corruption

Putin's hold on power depends on a system grounded in corruption and used to enrich loyal economic and political elites.²³ Under this system, Putin and his allies have amassed vast fortunes at the expense of the Russian people—according to

the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, they have a combined wealth of nearly \$24 billion.²⁴

Russian Actions Abroad

Interference in U.S. and European Elections

In January 2017, the U.S. Intelligence Community publicly announced its finding that President Putin "ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election," the goals of which were to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, assist then-candidate Trump, and weaken support for his opponent.²⁵ The coalition's findings were recently affirmed, on a bipartisan basis, by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.²⁶ Officials from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have additionally stated that hackers with links to the Russian government likely targeted voting systems in 21 states during the 2016 election.²⁷ [NOTE: President Trump has frequently called into question basic facts surrounding Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, despite the Intelligence Community's finding.²⁸] In recent years, Russian disinformation campaigns have also targeted national elections in France and Germany, and referendums in the United Kingdom (on Brexit and Scottish independence) and Spain (on Catalan secession).²⁹

¹⁸ https://www.buzzfeed.com/heidiblake/from-russia-with-blood-14-suspected-hits-on-british-soil?utm_term=.dd3bZXNPb#.vpx4PRvE4.

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/salisbury-attack-joint-statement-from-the-leaders-of-france-germany-the-united-states-and-the-united-kingdom>.

²⁰ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russian-dissident-nikolai-glushkov-killed-on-day-of-court-hearing-ngwx603cz>.

²¹ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/26/they-have-long-arms-and-they-can-find-me/anti-gay-purge-local-authorities-russias>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/chechnya-stop-abducting-and-killing-gay-men/>; <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russia-paper-chechnya-killed-these-27-men-in-anti-gay-purge>

²² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/04/russia-one-year-after-gay-purge-in-chechnya-still-no-justice-for-victims/>.

²³ <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/Report%20-%20Corruption%20in%20Russia%20-%20Design%20FINAL.pdf>.

²⁴ <https://www.occrp.org/en/putinandtheproxies/>.

²⁵ https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

²⁶ https://www.burr.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SSC%20ICA%20ASSESSMENT_FINALJULY3.pdf

²⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/21/politics/russia-hacking-hearing-states-targeted/index.html>

²⁸ For example, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-gaggle-aboard-air-force-one-en-route-hanoi-vietnam/>

²⁹ <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Policy-Blueprint.pdf>

Support for Bashar al-Assad's War Crimes in Syria

The Putin regime is directly participating in the mass murder of the Syrian people, including through the targeting of civilian populations and use of indiscriminate force against cities and towns.³⁰ In March 2018, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria issued a finding that the Russian military had likely committed war crimes during its campaign over Aleppo between 2016 and 2017.³¹

Invasion of Ukraine and Annexation of Crimea

In 2014 Russia flouted the post-WWII world order by using military force to invade eastern Ukraine and forcibly annex the Crimean Peninsula.³² Since its 2014 invasion, the Russian government has provided military support and training to insurgent forces in eastern Ukraine, which seek to break away from the government in Kyiv.³³ In 2017 the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated that ten thousand people had been killed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.³⁴ Russia's military support for Ukrainian rebels also directly led to the downing of Malaysia Flight 17 and the death of all 298 passengers.³⁵

Support for Far-right Political Movements Abroad

Putin actively uses the media, public and private corporations, and Russian government resources to

support far-right and extremist groups in foreign countries.³⁶ In 2014 Putin arranged for a \$9 million loan to France's far-right National Front party.³⁷ In 2017 Kremlin funds were used to underwrite the parliamentary bids of politicians from Germany's far-right Alternative for Deutschland.³⁸ During the June 2016 British referendum on exiting the European Union (aka "Brexit"), organizations under the Russian government's control actively spread disinformation to support the anti-EU movement.³⁹

³⁰ For example, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo>.

³¹ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-37-72_EN.pdf.

³² <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/268482.htm>.

³³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/11/eastern-ukraine-questions-and-answers-about-laws-war>.

³⁴ <https://www.voanews.com/a/united-nations-human-right-council-ukraine-conflict/3910072.html>.

³⁵ <https://www.government.nl/topics/mh17-incident/news/2018/05/25/mh17-the-netherlands-and-australia-hold-russia-responsible>.

³⁶ <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>.

³⁷ https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/241114/how-russian-bank-gave-frances-far-right-front-national-party-9mln-euros?_locale=en&onglet=full.

³⁸ <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>.

³⁹ <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>.