Russia’s crackdown on civil society shows the regime’s weakness

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/putins-fear-of-civil-society/2015/07/28/3d873d0a-3569-11e5-8e66-07b4603ec92a_story.html>

Russia’s newest anti-NGO law, under which the National Endowment for Democracy on Tuesday was [declared an “undesirable organization”](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/28/national-endowment-for-democracy-banned-russia) prohibited from operating in Russia, is the latest evidence that the regime of President Vladimir Putin faces a worsening crisis of political legitimacy. Putin may claim that the National Endowment for Democracy and other nongovernmental organizations are “a threat to Russia’s basic constitutional order,” and his labeling them as dangerous enemies, along with the Russian democrats he calls “national traitors,” is his typical way of rallying political support by appealing to nationalist fears and hostilities. But it is the regime itself that has been undermining Russia’s constitutional order through repression, corruption and international aggression; and the pressures are now building toward what many in Russia believe is a major political turning point.

Putin rose to power in 1999 on a wave of anti-Chechen hysteria, but it was steady economic growth over the next decade fueled by rising oil prices that accounted for his popularity. Now that growth has come to a screeching halt, and the gross domestic product could decline by as much as 8 percent this year, [according to economist Anders Aslund](http://www.bfna.org/sites/default/files/publications/Anders%20Aslund%20Russia%20Paper%20FINAL%207%2018%20%282%29.pdf).

The economic crisis is beginning to be felt at the local level. Real wages fell by 9 percent in the first quarter of 2015, and social spending on health and pensions has been cut sharply, even as military spending has continued to increase. With Russia’s foreign debt of $570 billion exceeding its $157 billion in liquid reserves by more than three times, Russia faces the danger of bankruptcy, especially with Western financial sanctions cutting off Russia’s access to international funding.

The crisis’s political repercussions could grow because of rampant elite corruption, which is essential to the functioning of Russia’s system of power. An example was the corruption surrounding the Sochi Olympics that was the subject of [an extensive report](http://www.interpretermag.com/winter-olympics-in-the-sub-tropics-corruption-and-abuse-in-sochi/) by Boris Nemtsov, the opposition leader who was murdered in February just steps from the Kremlin. According to Nemtsov, the majority of construction contracts were awarded to companies with ties to Putin, and all were dramatically inflated to several times the international average for similar projects. Karen Dawisha, a leading expert on elite corruption in Russia, estimates Putin’s worth, conservatively, [at $40 billion](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/30/books/review/putins-kleptocracy-by-karen-dawisha.html).

In addition to economic crisis and elite corruption, Russia’s war in Ukraine is a third factor undermining the regime’s political legitimacy. Even without meaningful assistance from the United States and Europe, the Ukrainians have fought the Russians to a standstill in eastern Ukraine, and this is a far cry from the decisive victory that Putin predicted when he annexed Crimea last year. Putin has tried to hide the casualties Russia has suffered in the conflict, knowing that the war does not enjoy widespread popular support. He also knows from Russia’s experience in Afghanistan and other conflicts in Russian history that failure in war could threaten the regime’s survival.

The regime’s fear over its own lack of political legitimacy is apparent in the lengths to which it is going to prevent any electoral competition. Not only has Russia [moved up the date of 2016 national parliamentary elections](http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/07/01/russias-highest-court-oks-early-parliamentary-vote-in-2016) , making it more difficult for the opposition to challenge incumbent officeholders, but also it is cracking down on three regional parliamentary campaigns in which a coalition of democratic opposition parties are trying to win seats in elections to be held in September. In Novosibirsk, [three opposition activists](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/28/russian-opposition-activists-hunger-strike-election-disqualification-novosibirsk) are on a hunger strike protesting authorities’ decision to exclude them from the ballot. In Kostroma, the [opposition campaign manager is in jail](https://meduza.io/en/news/2015/07/28/campaign-manager-for-russia-s-democratic-coalition-now-in-police-custody) and faces politically-motivated criminal charges. These efforts to deny the opposition a chance to win a handful of seats in Russia’s equivalent of a state legislature demonstrate that the regime sees any alternative to its own politics as a serious threat that must be eliminated.

This is the context in which Russia has passed the law prohibiting Russian democrats from getting any international assistance to promote freedom of expression, the rule of law and a democratic political system. Significantly, democrats have not backed down. They have not been deterred by the criminal penalties contained in the “[foreign agents](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/mr-putin-tightens-the-screws/2012/07/07/gJQA5VZbUW_story.html)” law and other repressive laws. They know that these laws contradict international law, which allows for such aid, and that the laws are meant to block a better future for Russia. They are not even frightened by the threat of being killed, which has already been the fate of Nemtsov and other Russian democrats.

The least the United States and other Western democracies can do is to continue to provide moral and political solidarity to such brave people. It serves not just their interests but our own as well.