



Looking Outward

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Columnist

Deals with thugs

A lie told often enough becomes the truth.

— Vladimir Lenin

The fall of the Soviet Union took just four days, and left huge vacuums in the affected countries. Russia and Central and Eastern Europe simultaneously found themselves between a rock and a hard place in countless ways.

Determining what laws applied to which situations and which ones took precedence was an incredibly difficult situation, and major institutions had many challenges. How to deal with the rule of law was a daunting task as these countries rapidly had to evolve to democracies. Institution — building was needed — and needed quickly.

The American Bar Association developed a program called ABA/CEELI (Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative) in 1990, and the goal was to help in the process of institution-building and strengthening in these budding democracies.

The genesis of the idea was simple: bring in American attorneys as liaisons, supervise them and have them share their expertise with their host countries. I was in Moscow 2004 to 2008, and during that time I went from being a liaison to the country director for Russia. We worked on

several projects: assessing the status of women for the U.N., developing a best-practices manual for law enforcement in dealing with human trafficking case investigations, teaching lawyers how to conduct jury trials (a relatively new thing there), teaching lawyers how to present cases to the European Court of Human Rights, local anti-corruption enforcement, strengthening and building bar associations and other projects. Russians were eager then to try new things.

We moved to Moscow in early 2004. My office had four American lawyers and 25 staff including six Russian lawyers. This was an exciting, changing time for Russia as it was beginning of the second term of Putin's first presidency. We found it to be a magnificent and exquisite experience, as life in this unique megacity (about 12 million) was a different experience for us and the culture, language, diversity and customs were incredibly rich and interesting.

George W. Bush was the president at the time, and he had a very naive idea regarding democracy. He seemed to think we were Johnny Appleseeds of democracy and all we had to do was scatter the seeds of democratic institutions and water them with information and opportunity and the seeds would grow into full-blown democracies where human rights were acknowledged, valued and defended. Hogwash.

The Russia bureaucracies had a different idea and at glacial speed the inertia tried to keep everything as it was. The young Russian lawyers in my office often got discouraged, and I had to remind them that our 200-plus-year-old democracy was a result of a very difficult, painful and checkered past regarding human rights.

I was there to see the beginning of the end to the Russian democratic

experiment.

During my four-year tenure, Anna Politkovskaja, a Russian journalist, was assassinated not too far from where we lived. She was one of many. The broadcast media and much of the print media came under state control. As a result, the government has sole control over the message they send the people. Truth is what they say it is. Political opponents were and are assassinated or tried on trumped-up charges and sent to prisons far and wide. The number of political parties declined, and only one remains in control: United Russia.

Regional governors went from elected to appointed by Putin. Life, tenured supreme court judges went to term-limited positions appointed by the president. Rallies were suppressed and assembly became difficult. Free speech was thwarted; opposition suppressed.

The old KGB way of handling things returned. Heck, Putin's career was with the KGB.

NGOs (non-governmental organizations) were forced to close their doors. The ABA office I worked in closed this past October 1. Oftentimes people at NGOs just show up for work and there is an official seal across the door barring entry. Human-rights NGOs are hard to find these days, fewer in number and harassed constantly. All NGOs are listed as "foreign agents" and treated with suspicion.

The way things are done in Russia is murky. No one would tell an NGO they had to close, but rather the process for staying becomes so burdensome you pack up your tent and go home.

No one really knows what happens to political opponents, and everyone who opposes Putin and his gang of thugs suffer grave consequences — even death — for advocating for a more open

society. There never is crime solved when it comes to an opponent's assassination. No real investigation, no prosecution. One thing I realized is you can never really put your finger on or prove anything.

It is not a good idea to generalize, but it seemed to me there were two groups of Russians we worked with: older ones, my age, who had spent a good deal of their adult life in Soviet times; and younger Russians who perhaps had seen Soviet times as a kid or not at all. In the former group we got along well but there was a slight air of a "you come here and tell us what to do" attitude. We were viewed a little suspiciously by the older group and embraced whole-heartedly by the younger group. From friends I have there now, it appears this line is blurred and since the government controls the messaging all Americans are looked to with distrust and we are blamed for all that is wrong with their country. It's not only the older group who reminisces about old glories, power and national respect.

Putin has whipped many Russians up into an anti-American frenzy. He is placing heavy weapons into Kaliningrad (a small part of Russia on the Baltic Sea), entered into agreements with

Nicaragua to support their military, is beefing up his nuclear arsenal, launching a cyber war in this country, in Western democracies and in central and eastern Europe, manipulating elections in many places, getting very territorial with former pieces of the old Soviet Union, and he is generally fanning the flames of nationalism.

There was a group of advisors who were discredited during the 1990s but who now exclusively have his ear.

I am worried; you should be, too.

But, our president-elect somehow thinks he can cut deals with this brutal dictator. In fact, 37 percent of Republicans think Putin is a decent guy and regard him favorably.

Trump has no idea what or who he is dealing with. I am not sure if it is naiveté, gross stupidity, or perhaps a desire not to diminish his business interests there. His loose talk on our nuclear arsenal has initiated another cold war. If he ever read a book he might recall that alliances between dictators don't fare well. You never make deals with thugs. Two likes repel.

I was beginning to think I may be able to survive four years of Trump — but now that I think about it I am not sure anyone will.



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