

Russian Civil Society and U.S. Policy

Prepared statement by

Stephen Sestanovich

*George F. Kennan Senior Fellow for Russian and Eurasian Studies
Council on Foreign Relations*

*Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of International Diplomacy
School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University*

Before the

Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Subcommittees on European Affairs and on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy and Global Women's Issues

United States Senate

1 Session, 113th Congress

Hearing on "A Dangerous Slide Backwards: Russia's Deteriorating Human Rights Situation"

Senator Boxer, Senator Murphy, Members of the Committee: Thank you for inviting me to join this timely and important discussion. America's concern for the state of Russian democracy is sometimes portrayed as an intrusion into another country's affairs. The truth is different. Our concern reflects a strong commitment to partnership between the two countries. We have many reasons to hope for democratic consolidation in Russia, but one reason is perhaps more important than any other. Without it, Russian-American cooperation – which is very much in our national interest -- will never take secure root.

From the other witnesses on today's panel, you will receive a full and informed assessment of Russian political developments. It is a discouraging picture. Over the past year and a half President Putin and his supporters have put in place a new strategy to re-stabilize their rule after the protest of 2011-2012. One key element of their strategy is to portray challengers to the status quo as instruments of foreign manipulation. This was Mr. Putin's first rhetorical jab at those who demonstrated against fraud in the parliamentary

elections of December 2011. (It was Hillary Clinton, he claimed, who had ordered them into the streets.) The same impulse lives on in the new law requiring Russian NGO's to register as "foreign agents" if they receive any part of their funding from abroad.

There are some puzzling elements of Putin's strategy, but his political calculation is pretty obvious. He hopes to benefit by blurring the distinction between political movements and civil society. Many Russian NGO's do get support from abroad. Putin's political opponents do not. They do not need, do not want, and should not get foreign funds. Even so, if Putin can convince people that the two are one and the same – that the protesters are paid by foreigners to rally against him – then he has a better chance of keeping Russia's "silent majority" on his side. This is an obnoxious strategy, but it has clearly won some converts for him.

How should the United States respond? Let me suggest five things that we – and especially you as members of Congress – can do.

First, we need to stay out of the political struggle that is underway in Russia. We are of course, inspired by the efforts of those who want to bring Russia into the European democratic mainstream. But they are not asking us for direct assistance. They recognize that Putin wants to draw us into the middle of Russian politics because he thinks it will help him to stay on top. The U.S. should leave no confusion on this score. Russia's political course is for Russians to set. We may have our favorites, but we don't fund them. Sharpening the line between what we do and what we won't do can only help us.

Second, we should be emphatic that it is an international norm for non-governmental organizations to be able to reach out to foreign donors. Doing so does not make them "foreign agents." Claiming that they are is a crude attack on civil society that pits Russia against principles around which European countries have rallied since the end of the Cold War. And not just European countries. Consider the recent resolution of the U.N. Human Rights Council, which declared that no state should "delegitimize activities in defense of human rights on account of the origins of funding thereto." When Putin has a majority against him at the U.N., you know he's on shaky ground.

Third, even as we stay out of Russian politics, we should increase our support for civil society in Russia. Congress can take an important step in this direction by reviving consideration of a U.S.-Russia Civil Society Fund. A year and a half ago the Obama Administration notified Congress of its intention to use some of the proceeds from the now-liquidated U.S.-Russia Investment Fund to create such a fund. In light of recent development, two adjustments in the Administration's plan are called for. The amount should be bigger (use all the proceeds – a full \$162 million), and it should not be focused just on Russia. A fund to support civil society in all the countries of the former Soviet Union would advance American interests in this entire region.

Fourth, Congress should remind the Administration that the Freedom Support Act is still on the books – and that our national commitment to its goals is intact. For many years, the U.S. Agency for International Development oversaw most of the spending that Congress made possible in this area. But AID has ceased to operate in Russia. Congress should insist on hearing a credible plan for how the funds it has made available are to be spent effectively.

Fifth, we should remember that American strategy since the end of the Cold War has reflected the unusual weakness of civil society in countries that were ruled for decades by Soviet-style dictatorships. Eventually non-governmental organizations of the kind that we take for granted in modern societies need to be self-sustaining. They need support from domestic donors. Congress should ask the Administration what strategy it has for encouraging support for Russian NGO's from within Russia itself.

For the past two years, as it contemplated Russia's "graduation" from the Jackson-Vanik amendment, Congress has wrestled with the question of how to modernize our support for human rights and democracy in Russia. The measures I have described, and others like them, would be a sign that we still have the ideas, the resources, and the commitment to advance our interests in this way.

Thank you.