

**Statement by Laura Jewett
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before the**

**Subcommittee on Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
of the Senate Committee on Appropriations**

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Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Leahy and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to share with you some reflections on the impact that authoritarian aggression is having on civil society in Eurasia, as well as on the responses that activists in the region are undertaking and the kinds of support they would welcome.

It is an honor to testify before this subcommittee and to represent a panel that includes Jan Surotchak from our sister organization, IRI, and Vladimir Kara-Murza. Vladimir personifies courage. His integrity and determination in fighting for democracy, at great personal cost, are an inspiration to so many around the world, myself included.

It is particularly fitting that *this* subcommittee is holding this hearing on Russia's role in the region, in that one of the messages emanating from Moscow for many years has been the distortion and discrediting of international democracy assistance in Eurasia. So when there are calls to cut democracy assistance -- using language and arguments that echo narratives coming from Moscow -- the motives should be questioned. Are there genuine concerns about the proper use of funds? Or is it a tactic that wittingly or unwittingly plays into a larger scheme to undermine challenges to authoritarian rule throughout the region?

It is critical that we distinguish clearly between our own democratic values and another country's hostile efforts to have us abandon those principles. To give credence to Russian government narratives about democracy assistance, in particular, would be to abet authoritarian aggression.

Hybrid Warfare

The U.S. intelligence community and many other analysts have described in detail how the Russian regime is pursuing the suppression of fundamental freedoms at home matched by "hybrid warfare" abroad. This hybrid warfare encompasses propaganda and misinformation; espionage; cyberattacks; corruption as a tool for buying influence; financing of political parties, think tanks, nongovernmental organizations, and academic institutions; coercive economic measures; and covert and overt military actions. These efforts fan the flames of broader anti-democratic trends, such as extreme polarization, xenophobia, and isolationism, while simultaneously exploiting the fundamental characteristics of open societies, such as political

rivalry and competition, free press and speech, and unrestricted social media. They aim to tear down democratic institutions.

The tactics of hybrid warfare picked up momentum in 2014 with the occupation of Crimea and have spread more recently to Western Europe and the U.S. But they have been standard operating procedure throughout Eurasia for more than 15 years.

Democracy and Global Security

This authoritarian aggression poses urgent threats -- not just to the sovereignty and stability of the countries being targeted, but also to global democracy and security. We ignore it at our peril.

In this interconnected and interdependent world, what happens for good or for bad within the borders of states has regional and, sometimes, global impact. At a basic level, we have a direct interest in how people live and how they are treated by their governments.

We are not alone in this enterprise. Over the past three decades, nongovernmental groups around the world, other governments and intergovernmental organizations have joined the effort to promote and sustain open, responsive and accountable governance, along with citizen engagement.

Our ultimate foreign policy goal is a world that is secure, stable, humane and safe, where the risk of war is minimal. Yet the reality is that hotspots most likely to erupt into violence are found, for the most part, in areas of the world that are nondemocratic -- places that have been defined by the Defense Department as the "arc of instability." These are places that experience ethnic conflict and civil war, they generate refugee flows across borders, they are places where terrorists and traffickers are harbored. The international community has rightly worked to restore order by helping to establish a democratic framework for governance in a number of these countries. The response has not always been entirely successful, but on the whole, the introduction of democratic processes and citizen engagement has made these countries less dangerous than they had been. The cost for the United States in that effort has been small. Foreign assistance is only about 1 percent of the total U.S. budget, and democracy assistance represents just 4 percent of our foreign aid.

As Tom Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment points out, "In most of the dozens of countries where the United States is employing diplomatic, economic, and assistance measures to support potential or struggling democratic transitions -- from Cambodia, Indonesia, and Mongolia to El Salvador, Kenya, Nigeria, and Venezuela -- such efforts align closely with and serve a critical array of unquestionably hard interests. These include limiting the strategic reach of the United

States' autocratic rivals, fighting terrorism, reducing international drug trafficking, and undercutting drivers of massive refugee flows.”

The ‘hard interests’ in Eurasia demand a commitment to democracy assistance as a minimal response to hybrid warfare and authoritarian aggression in the region.

False Equivalencies

False equivalencies are a common distraction technique in misinformation campaigns. Thus, one of the tropes of authoritarian propaganda is an equation between hostile external pressure on the one hand and good-faith international assistance on the other. In this warped view, meddling in other countries’ sovereign political processes is fair game since it shares some superficial characteristics with democracy assistance. As though there is moral equivalence between two doctors -- one of whom prescribes medicine and the other of whom administers poison -- because they both attended to the patient. But make no mistake: democracy assistance has absolutely nothing in common with authoritarian aggression.

Take elections as an example. Russian electoral interference has included, among other tactics, the hacking, theft and broadcasting of private data; deliberate distribution of false news and misinformation; malicious trolling; blackmail and discrediting of targets; and manipulation of voter registries or results tabulation. By design, it pollutes political discourse, undermines public confidence in the process, and tips the scales through subterfuge. It corrodes the electoral environment regardless of whether it impacts the ultimate vote count. It is a violation of citizens’ sovereign right to freely choose their own representatives. These forms of electoral interference are a weapon that is potentially more powerful than warships or missiles. The aggressor can deprive the opposing side of its sovereignty without seizing territory.

Democracy assistance around elections could not be more different. Consider the electoral environment in authoritarian countries. Opposition political parties are harassed, delegitimized, and frequently barred from the ballot. Those opposition parties that manage to register find they are unable to communicate with voters -- their campaign activities are shut down and they are denied access to the state-controlled media. The media itself is muzzled. Citizens are intimidated or bribed into voting as the regime sees fit. Civil society groups seeking to monitor the process are shut down and persecuted, and in some cases their leaders are sent to prison. Election administrators, prosecutors and judges answer directly to the regime. Results are predetermined in favor of the incumbent, often with grossly inflated turnout figures and victory tallies above 90 percent. In short, voters are denied the right to express their free will. These are elections in name only. They violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among other international conventions.

When governments, intergovernmental organizations and nongovernmental groups offer democracy assistance to partners in authoritarian or reforming countries, the objective is to promote citizens' fundamental right to express their political will freely. That means responding to requests from governments, parliaments, political parties, civic groups, and election administrators to help promote integrity, transparency, participation and accountability in the elections – first and foremost so that basic human rights are defended, but also so that everyone involved can have confidence in the outcome. The purpose of these efforts is not to influence outcomes or change regimes. Rather, it is to help give voice to people who might otherwise be excluded from the process due to a tilted playing field. The assistance is offered openly and in good faith and democratic leaders welcome it because they understand that credible elections are a pillar of a country's stability and sovereignty.

To give credence to the false equivalence between hybrid warfare and democracy assistance is to do a grave disservice to courageous democracy activists around the world who have made tremendous sacrifices, including risking their lives, because they simply seek free elections, free speech, and a voice in their country's future. The very least they deserve is solidarity from democratic societies around the world.

Perspectives from Civil Society

Let me share with you just a few examples to illustrate how authoritarian aggression plays out on the ground in Eurasia.

Evgenia Chirikova is a leading Russian environmental activist. She started a movement in 2010 to defend the Khimki forest near St. Petersburg from construction of a highway. She mobilized thousands of protesters and collected tens of thousands of signatures on petitions, showing that activism ran much deeper than many assumed. As a consequence of her own activism, Evgenia was arrested several times. Some of her fellow activists and journalists were harassed and beaten. In 2011, state authorities threatened to take her children away on the grounds that they were being abused. To keep her family intact, Evgenia was forced to move to Estonia and, undaunted, she continues to support civic activism from there. She has submitted written testimony to this subcommittee in which she outlines the many examples of grassroots organizing that are underway in Russia, despite the risks and obstacles. The peaceful anti-corruption demonstrations that took place just this past weekend appear to reflect her viewpoint.

Russia is a participating state in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Under the OSCE's Copenhagen Document, Russia is committed to facilitating international and domestic observation of elections. Yet Russia's nonpartisan citizen election monitors are routinely vilified for simply exercising their right to support electoral integrity. They face fines, arrests and closure of their organizations. When international observers, including those from the OSCE, reported that the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential

elections were fundamentally flawed, these criticisms were deemed tantamount to interference -- in another example of false equivalence.

One of the impacts of the repression in Russia has been the isolation of activists from their peers in the international community. Under the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, Russian citizens have the basic rights to freedom of association and expression, which includes the ability to see, receive and impart information, including across borders. Yet international organizations working in Russia have faced smear campaigns in the media, spurious investigations and legal challenges, threats of blackmail and violence, physical assaults, and laws designed explicitly to restrict contact with Russian citizens. The net effect is to intimidate civic and political activists, who have reason to fear that engaging with an international organization would cause them to be targeted themselves.

Anar Mammadli is the head of a respected nonpartisan citizen election monitoring group in Azerbaijan called the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center. EMDS, as it is called, issued a report that described substantial fraud in Azerbaijan's 2013 presidential election, echoing the findings of other credible observer groups such as the OSCE. As a consequence, Anar served 2.5 years in prison.

Anar will tell you that Azerbaijan's repressive techniques are not necessarily *imposed* from Russia, but rather borrowed quite willingly. They include "black PR" or smear campaigns in the state-controlled media, travel bans, blackmail, harassment of family members, loss of employment, fabricated tax assessments and legal charges, conscription, and arrest and imprisonment. Earlier this month, Amnesty International reported on a sustained "spear-phishing" campaign in which the passwords, contacts and private communications of Azerbaijani activists were compromised, resulting in the arrest and imprisonment of some of those people. Currently there are more than 100 political prisoners in Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, most Azerbaijani citizens have access to news primarily from state-controlled Russian or Azerbaijani television, both of which promote an anti-democratic and anti-Western perspective. Yet Anar Mammadli, like Evgenia Chirikova, continues his work to promote democracy and human rights in the face of these risks.

Belarus is quite dependent, economically and militarily, on its neighbor to the East. The regime of President Lukashenko chafes at these vulnerabilities and periodically turns to the West in an effort to increase its room for maneuver. In times of domestic dissent, however, the government reverts to the authoritarian example set by Russia and reinforced by the dominance of Russian media in the region.

Events this month are a vivid example. Citizens across the country have taken to the streets to protest an ill-conceived tax on unemployment. At first it appeared that the government might try

to defuse the situation, but it has since lashed out, reverting to a pattern familiar in Moscow but not seen in Belarus for several years. The government is labeling the protesters “fifth columnists” and “bandits” under the control of the West. This is a clear echo of the overused and fabricated Kremlin claim that all dissent or opposition is organized from the West. More than 300 Belarusians have been arrested or detained in the last three weeks -- some brutally. Nearly half of these have been sentenced to jail terms.

The picture from Georgia is more promising, but equally complicated. Georgia’s foreign policy is explicitly Western-oriented: it is pro-EU and, for the most part, pro-NATO. NDI’s public opinion surveys show that most Georgians aspire to a democratic and European future. It is thus no coincidence that in 2008, six years before the occupation of Crimea, Russia invaded and occupied Georgian territory in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, effectively obstructing Georgia’s NATO aspirations while granting Russia untold political, economic, and military leverage.

In addition, the influence of external propaganda is strongly felt. Rural Georgians and ethnic minorities who feel neglected by politicians in Tbilisi are particularly likely to be exposed to, and sympathetic toward, Russian messages about alleged threats emanating from the West. One example is the elevation of anti-gay, anti-feminist, and xenophobic campaigns to the forefront of the political agenda. This narrative holds that embracing Europe will force Georgians to violate long-held conservative values. An emphasis on the overriding importance of culture and tradition has the effect of legitimizing violence and exclusion. These campaigns did not originate in Georgia, but once introduced they took root and are now impacting the political landscape. Another prominent narrative is that EU and NATO aspirations are nothing more than naive fantasies. And, as in Belarus, a third narrative is that if Georgia *does* stray too far toward the West, it will face further military consequences from Moscow.

The presence and tolerance of vocal civic watchdog groups is a sign of a country’s democratic strength. The subcommittee has received testimony from representatives of two such groups in Georgia, Transparency International-Georgia and the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association. Ana Natsvlishvili, Eka Gigauri and Giorgi Oniani paint a vivid picture of the costs that hybrid warfare is imposing on Georgian democracy and sovereignty.

I would like to focus particular attention on Ukraine. The outcome of Ukraine’s struggle to defend its sovereignty and democratic aspirations will have far-reaching consequences for the broader region. Success in Ukraine would be a victory for Ukrainians, first and foremost, but also a major setback for authoritarian aggressors in the neighborhood. It is thus no coincidence that Ukraine has served as a laboratory for every weapon in the hybrid warfare arsenal, particularly since the occupation of Crimea three years ago.

Ukraine of course continues to face grave challenges, including economic disruptions, political turmoil, the illegal occupation of Crimea and a war in the East. A favorable resolution of these crises is by no means guaranteed.

Mustafa Nayyem, a journalist, was one of the first activists to call his fellow Ukrainians to Independence Square for the pro-democracy demonstrations now known as the Revolution of Dignity. Svitlana Zalishchuk, a journalist and a civic activist, was also a leader on the Maidan. Remember that more than a hundred people were killed in those demonstrations. Both Mustafa and Svitlana were elected to parliament in 2014 as part of a wave of young democratic activists for whom the Revolution of Dignity was a call to public service. Mustafa and Svitlana have submitted written testimony to this subcommittee describing numerous examples of information warfare that have disrupted Ukraine's sovereign political processes.

The prevailing misinformation would have us believe that Ukraine is deeply divided and that those Ukrainians who are not supporting fascism are desperate to be rescued by Russia. But recent NDI public opinion research paints an entirely different picture.

First, Ukrainians are overwhelmingly united on the big issues facing their country. The vast majority -- 86 percent -- says it is "important" or "very important" that Ukraine become a fully-functioning democracy. Large majorities support this point regardless of where they live in the country or which party they support. Ukrainians also have a clear and consistent view about how to define democracy: it means equal justice for all, free elections and fundamental freedoms. On the flip side of the coin, 74 percent assess Russia's influence on their country as negative. Only 4 percent consider it positive.

Ukrainians are also clear and consistent about the path they want to follow. Asked whether they would accept peace in exchange for losing the right to determine their own future, 80 percent said "no." Only 5 percent said "yes." Despite the many pressures they are under, Ukrainians are not willing to give up their territory: 77 percent want the occupied parts of Donbas to be returned to Ukrainian control.

Ukraine's path to democracy is being driven from the bottom-up, rather than from the top-down. It is propelled by a popular determination, solidified on the Maidan during the Revolution of Dignity, to root out corruption and build a democratic system in which leaders serve the people, and not the other way around. The bottom-up nature of the process means that reforms may proceed relatively slowly, but the end result is likely to be more sustainable.

Further, the polling demonstrates the optimism the Ukrainian people have in the slow but steady progress they are making. By a ratio of two-to-one, Ukrainians expect the next generation to be better off than their own. The ratio hits to five- or six-to-one in places like Kherson in the South

and Khmelnytskyi oblast and Lviv in the West. These numbers are significant because they mean that people are willing to make sacrifices now in order to deliver a better future for their children.

Citizens without prior experience in any kind of activism are participating in local decision-making in ever-increasing numbers. One quarter has attended community meetings since 2014 and a further 29 percent are willing to do so. These would be respectable figures anywhere, but they are particularly impressive in a country that was known, until relatively recently, for its politically-disengaged population. In other words, the Ukrainian people themselves are committed to the reforms that can make Ukraine more democratic, stable and prosperous. They hold these convictions independently of their current government and despite external pressures to the contrary.

These findings illustrate that hostile external pressure is meeting fierce resistance in Ukraine. At the same time, international assistance that is offered and accepted in good faith is falling on exceedingly fertile soil.

Recommendations

Russia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia and the other countries of Eurasia have been training grounds for hybrid warfare. It is thus in the US national security interest to help the countries of Eurasia build resilience so that they can be responsible partners in the community of democracies rather than breeding grounds for global instability.

Which brings us to the question of how the international community can help resist this threat. As we consider ways to address authoritarian aggression, we should bear in mind that the trends we are seeing in Eurasia and Europe are part of a broader pattern. Much of the world is experiencing a rising tide of “illiberalism,” by which I mean elected regimes that hollow out democratic structures, eliminate checks and balances on executive power, and deprive citizens of basic rights and freedoms. The backlash against democracy is driven by authoritarian aggression, to be sure, but also by home-grown extremism and anti-elitism; corruption; migration; economic inequality and insecurity; technological disruptions; and weakened political institutions. All of these elements are powerful in their own right, but they also feed upon and reinforce one another. We see these tendencies in Eurasia and Europe, to be sure, but also to varying degrees in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa.

This broader global context reminds us that there is no one-stop solution to the problem of authoritarian aggression.

I would propose that we think in terms of four large baskets of responses:

First, we need to reaffirm our transatlantic alliances and our own commitment to democratic principles while supporting the efforts of a new generation of democracy champions. Unless

democracy's defenders are putting forward a compelling and positive narrative of their own, no amount of technical fixes will make a difference.

Second, we need to strengthen democratic institutions in the affected countries. This is the first line of defense. When governments are not responsive to citizens and not delivering improvements to their lives, populist and extremist appeals gain traction. This basket has several corollaries.

We need to help citizens engage in politics, by taking civic action, joining parties or running for office. This is particularly true for traditionally marginalized and underrepresented groups. The impact of information warfare is to drive people away from politics, which provides a vacuum for extremists to fill. Ordinary people need incentives to get back into politics to fill the political center.

Political parties need to rise above their partisan interests and take the position, as Senator Graham said at an earlier hearing, that an attack on one is an attack on all.

We need to fight corruption, which is simultaneously a cause, a tool, and an effect of hybrid warfare.

Third, governments in affected countries need to treat hybrid warfare like the urgent national security threat that it is. Anything less is to do the aggressor's work for him. Political leaders need to develop proactive and whole-of-government counter-strategies. They need to communicate about these strategies in a straightforward way with the public and enlist public-private collaboration.

And fourth, Citizens, civil society organizations, political parties, journalists and editors need information, tools and strategies so they can protect themselves and each other from these threats.

For example, NDI will be conducting pilot public opinion research to determine who is most vulnerable to propaganda in target countries and to learn the best ways of building their resilience.

More broadly, there is a need in the vulnerable countries for coalitions to form around the goal of "taking back our elections." These networks would include civil society groups, political parties, governments, academics, journalists, technology experts, and traditional and social media companies.

Depending on local circumstances, specific programs should focus on civic education and media literacy campaigns; training for political parties, civic watchdog groups, journalists and editors; support for investigative journalism; strengthening and expansion of credible Russian-language news sources; assistance for election authorities; development of

norms and standards for the integrity of online political discourse; and corporate responsibility campaigns for traditional and social media companies.

Hybrid warfare in Eurasia is an urgent threat -- not just to Eurasia, but to Europe and the U.S. There are courageous and tireless champions throughout the region who are committed to defending democratic values -- Vladimir, Evgenia, Anar, Ana, Giorgi, Eka, Mustafa and Svitlana are just a few examples. And the story of resolve and resilience from Ukraine tells us that it *is* possible to defend against a military invasion and every other weapon in the hybrid warfare arsenal while still building democracy, slowly and steadily, from below.

But they cannot do it alone. Nor should they. We know from recent experience in our own elections that the tools and techniques of hybrid warfare being tested in Eurasia today will be deployed on our own shores tomorrow.

From our founding days, Americans have held the conviction that to secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our country, we must establish government that derives legitimacy and power from the consent of the people. We received the help of others in our founding, and from that point onward have embraced the ethic of assisting those around the world who step forward -- sometimes at great risk -- to promote, establish and sustain democracy. We have benefited from the peace that global democratic development produces and from the economic opportunities that it creates.

Democracy assistance as a defense against authoritarian aggression in Eurasia remains an essential investment in sovereignty, stability and global security.