
Freedom House: Authoritarian Regimes Rule Most of Former Soviet Union

By James Brooke

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The human rights monitoring group Freedom House reports that 80 percent of residents of the former Soviet Union live under entrenched authoritarian regimes. Of the 15 former Soviet republics, Russia recorded the biggest drop in democracy indicators during the last decade, according to the report.

Corruption, censorship, rigged elections and government-controlled courts are increasingly common across the lands of the former Soviet Union. Those are the findings of Freedom House's annual survey of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Christopher Walker, director of research for Freedom House, said backsliding on democracy is the dominant trend in the 29-country report.

"It is quite remarkable, if you think about this, 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall that you have this sort of structuralized authoritarianism in the non-Baltic former Soviet Union," he said. "It is also remarkable that as a practical matter, political dissent is restricted systematically in the countries of the region."

A panel convened in Washington D.C. by Freedom House to discuss the report identified three democracy battlegrounds - Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and the Internet.

Alexander Motyl, an expert on Ukraine at Rutgers University in New Jersey, said that Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's new president, has curtailed democratic freedoms in his country since taking power four months ago. But Motyl said that Ukraine's split along East-West lines might stop what he called Mr. Yanukovich's authoritarian drive.

"The independent media and civil society are still quite vigorous and they are fighting back," he said. "It is striking that there are very many people, very many NGOs [non-governmental organizations], very many institutions that are taking part in various actions involving civil obedience, civil disobedience of one kind or other. So far it all has been very peaceful and above board, and I expect it to remain that way. The important thing, it is taking place and that people have not given up."

In Kyrgyzstan, inter-ethnic riots earlier this month claimed an estimated 2,000 lives. On Sunday, Kyrgyz voters overwhelmingly approved a new constitution, paving the way for parliamentary elections in October.

Erica Marat, who wrote the Kyrgyzstan section of the Freedom House report, said a parliamentary system is an experiment designed to accommodate the regional and ethnic stresses in that Central Asian nation.

"At the referendum, the overwhelming majority supported the new constitution," she said. "But the criticism goes as following: that citizens of Kyrgyzstan did not vote for the constitution per se, they voted for stability. Not all of them really know what the constitution really says."

Two Russian opposition leaders on the panel warned that self-censorship and government control are creeping into Russia's Internet. They said businessmen allied with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin are buying up Internet companies in Russia.

Oleg Kozlovsky, coordinator of Oborona, a youth opposition movement, said that the recent trial of two Russian bloggers for hate speech, put web writers on notice that the government is monitoring online sites.

Vladimir Milov, a leader of Russia's Solidarity opposition group, said that his country's new nationalists might know how to use cellular phones and computers, but he warned that they are more interested in building strong Kremlin rule than participatory democracy.

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