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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Kremlin Can't Have It Both Ways

By KATI MARTON and NINA OGNIANOVA

“It’s time to stop treating Russia as a ‘handicapped person,’” former Czech President Vaclav Havel said recently, responding to suggestions that Russia cannot be expected to reach democracy anytime soon. He urged that Russia be treated as a “partner country like any other,” applying the same standards to Russia as we do “to Burma, Brazil, the Czech Republic or any other country.” We agree.

During a recent mission by representatives of the Committee to Protect Journalists to urge the end of impunity in the killing of journalists in Russia, we were struck by Moscow investigators and prosecutors using the familiar excuses: “Give us time,” they told us. “Russia is where the United States was in the days of the Wild West.”

But a great nation claiming equal status with other great nations cannot plead exemption when it comes to press freedom and human rights. Russia cannot have it both ways.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s recent censure of impunity in the killing of journalists, as well as her public support for Russia’s embattled human rights defenders, comes at a critical time. Such messages not only boost the morale of the Kremlin’s marginalized critics, they can act as real protection for what is left of Russian civil society. Mrs. Clinton singled out the murders of 18 journalists — only one of which has been solved — when she declared: “When violence like this goes unpunished in any society, it undermines the rule of law, chills public discourse, which is, after all, the lifeblood of an open society, and it diminishes the public’s confidence and trust in their government.”

In Moscow we met with dozens of reporters, press freedom advocates and relatives of murdered journalists. We also met with officials, including detectives with Russia’s top investigative agency responsible for bringing the murders of our colleagues to justice. Our purpose was to share the findings of our own investigative report on the murders as well as our recommendations for specific action by Russian authorities and the international community. Our report, “Anatomy of Injustice,” is full of leads that have not been followed and witnesses that have not been interviewed. It is a record of systematic failure to prosecute 17 murders. Grieving relatives and colleagues of murdered reporters repeatedly told us what a difference international attention can make. “Journalists are always more protected when their fates are monitored from abroad,” Musa Muradov, a reporter with Kommersant, told us. “To a certain extent,” he said, “it can save us.”

One of the greatest barriers to establishing a safe environment for journalists is the collective shrug with which the Russian public has responded to the murders. Most Russians get their news from state-sanctioned media and are simply unaware of the problem. The Kremlin virtually controls the top television channels. Only Internet outlets and a handful of brave but low-circulation publications carry a range of opinions. For the rest of society, mostly good news streams into their living rooms. With the economy relatively stable and streets relatively safe, the average Russian opts for a see-no-evil, hear-no-evil attitude.

But the evil is getting too big not to see, and too loud not to hear. Russia is now the third deadliest country in the world for journalists. When 18 journalists are killed for asking tough questions on behalf of all Russians the government is failing at its job.

This is not only an internal matter. Russia's partners in Europe and around the world have an obvious interest in stopping these killings. Nations need transparency in their associations with other nations.

Following Mrs. Clinton's lead, other world leaders should voice their support for Russia's embattled journalists and human rights defenders. The health of Russia's civil society cannot be left to nongovernmental groups alone. Russia is too great a nation to be treated, in Mr. Havel's words, as "a handicapped person."

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