Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has experienced the worst crackdown on human rights in decades while becoming one of the biggest kleptocratic regimes in the world. Anti-Western and anti-American rhetoric, directed by the Kremlin to justify its authoritarian methods, paints the United States, NATO, and the EU as threats to Russia. Opposition figures as well as journalists and commentators critical of the government are demonized as enemies of the state, creating an environment in which an opposition leader like Boris Nemtsov can be gunned down yards from the Kremlin and others are harassed and intimidated, and in a number of cases forced to flee the country.

Domestically, the Kremlin has waged a concerted campaign to limit NGOs from working on sensitive issues like human rights and/or receiving foreign funding. Amendments to the NGO law passed in 2012 required NGOs receiving outside funding to register as “foreign agents”, branding them with language reminiscent of Soviet times. In May 2015, Putin signed a law allowing foreign firms or NGOs to be designated as “undesirable”, requiring them to close their offices and any operations in Russia or else risk having their accounts frozen and their staff and any other partners subject to administrative or even criminal penalties. The so-called Yarovaya Law (named after its author in the lower house of parliament, or State Duma), enacted in July 2016 and ostensibly designed to combat terrorism, threatens civil liberties by significantly expanding the definition of terrorism, making it a crime to not report a very long list of other crimes, and requiring IT companies to provide a back door to the government for all encrypted networks and store telecom data for up to six months, which the telecommunications industry estimates could cost billions of dollars. Additional legislation has been passed restricting the work of missionary groups and organizations.

Parts of the country, especially the North Caucasus, suffer from brutal treatment by authorities, with one of the worst examples being the administration of Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya. Immigrants, LGBT, religious and ethnic minorities are discriminated against and harassed. Dozens of NGO workers and activists have been arrested and charged with political crimes, including terrorism, separatism, and incitement to racial hatred, especially after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Although some U.S. donors and many European ones continue to find ways of operating in Russia, the “undesirables” law has led
a number of major private American donors to pull out of Russia, leaving a big
gap in funding for local civil society organizations.

Elections are scheduled in the fall of 2016 for the State Duma, and United
Russia, the “party of power,” is once again expected to win the majority of seats;
the remaining seats will likely be won by parties that are not truly in opposition to
the government. In the lead-up to the vote, the government continues to stifle
opposition politicians and parties, even imprisoning the brother of Aleksey
Navalny, an anti-corruption campaigner and politician, in an attempt to rein him
in. At the same time, in an indication of Kremlin nervousness caused by major
protests the last time Duma elections took place in December 2011, Putin in April
announced the creation of a 400,000-man National Guard under his close ally,
Viktor Zolotov, to deal with domestic disturbances and protests. Its creation also
may have been a way to consolidate power in hands trusted by Putin.

Since Putin came to power, he and Russia have benefitted from the high
price of oil that has led to a significant improvement in the standard of living,
though Russia’s economic performance started stalling before the drop in the
price of oil. Last year, the economy shrunk by 3.7 percent due to falling oil prices,
Ukraine-related sanctions, and overall economic mismanagement by the
government, including a failure to diversify away from natural resource
dependency. Russian GDP is predicted to drop another 1.5 percent this year.
Putin’s approval ratings have fallen slightly, and Russian citizens are feeling the
pain of an insufficient social safety net, with sporadic protests breaking out in
various parts of the country. The Kremlin, meanwhile, continues to award
contracts in the billions of dollars to Putin’s cronies and pet projects, and its
kleptocrats launder and invest their stolen funds in the West – at the same time
that they lambaste the West.

As Russia’s domestic repression has deepened, its authoritarianism and
kleptocracy have gone global, constituting a serious threat to U.S. interests. The
Putin regime projects its malign influence internationally through state-backed
disinformation and propaganda via global media outlets, political manipulation
throughout Europe, the export of corruption, and old-fashioned hard power, as in
Ukraine and Syria. By propping up Syria’s dictator, Bashar al-Assad, Russia has
contributed to the ongoing and violent civil war there. It tries to stir up separatist
movements in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, not to mention its illegal
annexation of Crimea in 2014 and continued aggression in Ukraine’s Donbas
region. It has come to view efforts by its neighbors to deepen ties with the EU
almost as much of a threat as NATO enlargement. It has also supported parties in
Europe on both the extreme right and left flanks. At the same time, Russia is not
abiding by its commitments as a signatory of the OSCE, Council of Europe, and
Universal Declaration of Human Rights; on the contrary, it is attempting to place
candidates unfriendly to human rights in various UN and other seats, including
the seat of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. Russia’s actions
embolden and serve as a model for other authoritarian regimes, such as China,
Iran and Venezuela.
Although there has been limited cooperation between the U.S. and Russia on certain issues such as arms control, the Iran nuclear deal, and removal of chemical weapons and a ceasefire in Syria (that later broke down), U.S. relations with Russia for the most part have been badly strained, especially since Putin returned to the presidency in 2012. Putin’s ostensible internal popularity notwithstanding, the Russian people suffer from a government that is not accountable, trustworthy or representative, and the United States would have a better partner in an economically prosperous Russia that is also more democratic, albeit developed in its own way.

The challenge is not whether to engage or isolate Russia. Instead, it is the nature of the democracies’ engagement that must be rethought. Established democracies must pursue a more nimble and principled approach that takes into account the new environment in which Russia and other such authoritarian regimes are seeking to undermine democratic institutions and values. Accordingly, recommendations for the next U.S. administration working with Russia on democracy and human rights can be broken down into three broad categories:

**Defending Democratic Values**

- Articulating an overarching strategy on Russia that would include democracy and human rights issues and working with civil society as key components.

- Returning to a policy of “linkage” by making clear that the way Russian authorities treat their own people will affect broader U.S./Russia relations and that threats to Russian civil society will prevent both sides from having a productive, stable and mutually beneficial relationship.

- Meeting regularly at very senior levels with Russian dissidents and activists – both in Russia and in the United States – to demonstrate support for them.

- Expanding existing mechanisms and finding innovative ways to provide material and technical support to domestic civil society groups and grassroots initiatives that are working to support democracy, respect for human rights, and free and fair elections. This would include developing partnerships with European allies and international organizations to enhance such support.

- Exploring opportunities to support regional and local leaders who are working for democratic governance and rule of law.

**Combatting Russian Abuses and Kleptocracy**
• Developing partnerships with journalists and NGOs to investigate and expose the widespread kleptocracy in Russia and pressing for greater enforcement of existing laws. If the Russian people are more aware of the extent to which their government has been corrupted, they are more likely to demand accountability and transparency.

• Implementing more aggressively the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law and Accountability Act and enacting into law the Global Magnitsky Act to sanction human rights abusers and kleptocrats. The U.S. should also urge other countries to adopt and implement similar legislation. As part of this effort, the U.S. should conduct an overall review of its sanctions list to target more of the elite complicit in such abuses.

• Concentrating U.S. government resources on tracing illicit financial flows to prevent Russian kleptocrats from investing and parking funds in the West. Enabling entities, like financial institutions and clearing houses that launder and invest funds in other markets, should also be targeted. This requires cleaning up our own systems, abiding by our own laws and ethical obligations, and blocking illicit Russian funds and their corrupting influence in asset-buying and laundering.

• Bolstering cooperation with other law enforcement agencies to go after Russian organized crime and corruption and aggressively pursuing cases like the FIFA investigation.

Reinvigorating Soft Power

• Supporting a plurality of media organizations both in and outside Russia, individual citizen journalists, and the organizations that work in partnership with them to increase the availability of independent, professional news and information for Russians. A two-pronged approach where external media work together and in parallel with those within the country is needed to expose corruption, human rights violations, and infringements on political and civil liberties by the Russian government.

• Backing efforts to maintain internet freedom in Russia, which is in danger of being stifled as the Kremlin attempts to control it.

• Pressing Russia to live up to its UN, OSCE, Council of Europe and other international commitments on human rights. At the same time, resist calls to reconstitute the G-8 with Russia until it changes its ways internally and toward its neighbors.

• Conducting outreach to the Russian diaspora in the U.S. and other countries to mobilize them to support reform inside Russia and to press
Western governments to pursue better policies on democracy and human rights concerns.

- Using American LNG exports to support a strong spot market in Europe to further depress the price of Russian natural gas exports to Europe and supporting the shift of the American transportation sector to electric and natural gas vehicles to lessen American use of petroleum, reducing global oil demand and, most notably, squeezing Russian petroleum profits.

Supporting Russia’s Neighbors

- Reaffirming support for Russia’s neighbors, their sovereignty and territorial integrity, their Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and their development of a democratic, rule-of-law based foundation. This is important in its own right to help these countries succeed, but it has the added benefit of limiting Russia’s efforts to export its domestic policies and staunch the aspirations of other countries, as in Syria, where Russian adventurism, in a de facto alliance with Iran, is conspiring to maintain by force a repressive status quo.

- Maintaining sanctions -- both U.S. and EU -- on Russia for its illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of and ongoing aggression in eastern Ukraine while preparing for the possibility for additional measures should the situation there deteriorate as a result of stepped-up Russian action.

* The Democracy & Human Rights Working Group is a nonpartisan initiative bringing together academic and think tank experts and practitioners from NGOs and previous Democratic and Republican administrations, seeking to elevate the importance of democracy and human rights issues in U.S. foreign policy. It is convened by Arizona State University's McCain Institute for International Leadership. The views expressed here do not necessarily represent the positions of individual members of the group or of their organizations.