



## The Eurasia Center's Civil Society Program

October 15, 2021

# Civil Society Hijacked in the Nations of the Former Soviet Union



Protestors in Belarus being arrested for disputing the Presidential Elections  
Photo Credit: Tatyana Zenkovich

**Kevin Fay**

The Eurasia Center

[www.EurasiaCenter.org](http://www.EurasiaCenter.org)

**Eurasia Brief – Civil Society**

# Civil Society Highjacked in the Nations of the Former Soviet Union

Since the fall of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, several former Soviet bloc states possess authoritarian regimes. States such as Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, are victims of rulers who suppress the population's political expression, free speech, and other civil liberties.



**Anti-corruption Alexei Navalny faced off with Russian President Vladimir Putin and ended up poisoned and imprisoned. Photo Credit AFP**

## RUSSIA

Prominent in many news outlets describing the situation of Russian politics, one name beside Vladimir Putin is making headlines, Alexei Navalny. Navalny, a vocal opposition leader against Putin, has had numerous disagreements with the Russian President. One incident, in particular, the documentary "*Putin's Palace*" sheds light on corruption in the Putin Administration. This documentary describes how a mansion owned by a prominent Russian billionaire and friend of Putin, Arkady Rotenberg, is Putin's. It tackles corruption issues and accuses Putin of misusing state funds. Not long after Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation released it, he was poisoned and later imprisoned.<sup>1</sup> This is a prime example of how Putin views criticism and opposition.

This past week Navalny has been in the headlines again. US companies Apple and Google removed Navalny's Party from voting for opposition candidates from their app stores. This is made more relevant due to the timing of the removal, just three days before the parliamentary elections. In a recent interview from prison, Navalny openly criticized the two companies as cowardly and have complied with the Kremlin's demands. The app, "The Smart Voting Tool", was designed to

---

<sup>1</sup> Rosenberg, "Jailed Critic's 'Putin Palace' Film", 21

coordinate opposition voting tools for the parliamentary elections.<sup>2</sup> As of the writing of this article, United Russia obtained the majority rule of the State House lower Duma, the political party that supports Putin. The Kremlin officially states that the election was honest and fair. In response to the election, accusations of fraud by Navalny and his allies have arisen.<sup>3</sup> Between the imprisonment of critics such as Navalny and the suppression of free speech, Putin's Russia does not appreciate criticism. Criticism that goes against Putin's political narrative to justify his power, corruption accusations, are constantly denied.



**Elections are approaching in Ukraine; will they turn violent?**  
**Photo Credit: Brendan Hoffman/The New York Times**

## **UKRAINE**

Aside from the primary headlines of Navalny and Putin in Russia, other former Soviet states have been suppressing civil liberties. Elections were held in the Russian-occupied territories of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk, in Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> This act undermines the Ukrainian sovereignty in the region and is an effort to legitimize Russian claims in those regions. On the other hand, positive efforts were made to promote accountability and stop corruption in the country. This past Thursday, the Ukraine parliament passed a law forbidding oligarchs from participating in politics.<sup>5</sup> President Zelensky says it is an effort to keep top businessmen out of politics and curb corruption in Ukraine. However, Zelensky's rival's worry that this places too much power in the hands of the President.<sup>6</sup> This law could set a precedent for Eastern European states to stop corruption in politics or has the capability to create an increase in corruption of power by the president. Recently, Zelensky's himself, considered to be an honest candidate, placed a number of his assets in offshore accounts before running for President.

---

<sup>2</sup> Soldatkin, "Russia's Navalny Criticizes Apple, Google over App Removal", 21

<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, "Russian Election Results in Criticism", 21

<sup>4</sup> Socor, "Russian Elections in Ukraine's Donbas", 21

<sup>5</sup> Zinets and Polityuk. "Ukrainian Lawmakers Pass Law on Oligarchs", 21

<sup>6</sup> Zinets and Polityuk. "Ukrainian Lawmakers Pass Law on Oligarchs", 21



Former President Nursultan Nazarbayev became President for life before stepping down in 2019. Photo Credit: Kazakhstan's Presidential Press Service

## KAZAKHSTAN

In Kazakhstan, an authoritarian regime remains dominant in domestic politics. After the collapse of the USSR, President Nazarbayev rose to power in 1990 and was the ruler for 29 years. Qasym-Jomart Tokayev, was elected as Nazarbayev's successor in 2019.<sup>7</sup> In response to the change in power, numerous protests ensued against the election results. Another factor was the suppression of internet access by the government.<sup>8</sup> These two factors, lead to negative external views from Western observers.

The future of civil liberties remains unclear in Kazakhstan. In a recently published 2020 Freedom House report, Kazakhstan is not considered free and lacks basic civil liberties.<sup>9</sup> This is due to corruption scandals and the suppression of the media. One instance, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, former Health Minister Elzhan Birtanov was caught embezzling 526 million tenges, which is equal to \$1.2 Billion.<sup>10</sup> Also, during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a doctor was brought up on criminal charges for spreading false information. Dr. Duman Aitzhanov published a video that stated the dangers of COVID-19 and the call for measures to be put in place. Then in 2021, Tokayev proposed an act on the 'right to public order' which goes against the regime's original tactics of suppression opposition views. According to the Kazak new source, *The Astana Times*, it was a massive victory for human rights and is a step towards the modernization of the civil rights sphere.<sup>11</sup> This is a positive first step towards civil equality, however, it is doubtful

---

<sup>7</sup> Vaal and Gordeyeva, "Handpicked Successor Tokayev Elected", 19

<sup>8</sup> Freedom House, "Report on Kazakhstan", 20

<sup>9</sup> Freedom House, "Report on Kazakhstan", 20

<sup>10</sup> Reuters Staff. "Kazakh Health Minister Resigns amid Coronavirus Crisis", 20

<sup>11</sup> Arystanbek, "New Decree on Human Rights", 21

that measures could be fully implemented. This doubt is derived from the history of the measures set by the regime.



**Protestors in Belarus being arrested for disputing the Presidential Elections**  
Photo Credit: Tatyana Zenkovich

## **BELARUS**

In Belarus, President Alexander Lukashenko, similarly to his counterparts, is responsible for repressing civil liberties. He stole the Presidential election from the opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Lukashenko aims to maintain power in his country by adapting the Constitution further to meet his political needs. These changes consist of preventing the opposition to rise to power. In these initial claims, Lukashenko does not outline any specifics on these changes, just that the referendum should take place before February 2022.<sup>12</sup> Corresponding, with the planned changes of the Constitution, there was much public outcry. According to a United Nations Human Rights Chief, Michelle Bachelet, approximately 650 people are believed to be imprisoned.<sup>13</sup> The Lukashenko regime suppresses any beliefs of opposition and the results of the last election.

## **CONCLUSION**

Throughout the conduction of research, these former Soviet states have maintained an authoritarian political system. These systems are responsible for suspending essential human liberties and do not accept diverging viewpoints from their state's narrative. Each state covered has been ruled by a dominating ruling party. As seen in each country, there is a distinct lack of opposition parties and candidates, as qualified individuals and competitive independent parties are

---

<sup>12</sup> Reuters. "Belarus Leader: Change Constitution to Prevent Opposition", 21

<sup>13</sup> UN, "Human Rights in Belarus Continue Downward Spiral", 21

disqualified prior to elections. Furthermore, imprisonment of opposition candidates and members of opposition parties to stifle any chances for an open election. The same scenario occurs regarding free speech and access to the public media. Although, each of the countries claim to be at the forefront of civil liberties, each one suppresses opposition viewpoints through crackdowns on social media. These measures are used to help maintain control of those who hold political power and influence.

To develop democracy and freedom in the post-Soviet space, nations need to start developing a process that protect the basic civic freedoms which good civil societies enjoy – freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, an independent judiciary, freedom of the press, and freedom to protest. These notions are hindered by the fear of retaliation by the individual regimes if a person acts against the rule of the authoritarian regimes. The world is becoming more polarized by the fact that authoritarian regimes are banding together and creating a divide reminiscent of the Cold War. The community of nations, established after WWII ushered in the United Nations as an important milestone in human development. In order to continue to trade and maintain good relations with Western nations and their allies, it has become more difficult to ignore the flagrant violations of human rights within these nations. Countries with functioning freedoms increase their status on the world stage. This international option is crucial to continue to develop positive trade and commerce. Hopefully, as these states' domestic policies become politically free, this would lead to economic and civil prosperity in each country, however, it remains to be seen when that would occur, given the fact that if the regime loses power, the rulers may end up behind bars.

### *News Sources*

Arystanbek, Aizada. “New Decree on Human Rights Helps Establish Effective Protective Mechanisms, Experts Say.” *The Astana Times*, June 10, 2021.

<https://astanatimes.com/2021/06/new-decree-on-human-rights-helps-establish-effective-protective-mechanisms-experts-say/>.

“Human Rights in Belarus Continue Downward Spiral, Warns Bachelet | | UN News.” *United Nations*. United Nations, September 24, 2021. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1101102>.

“Kazakhstan: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report.” *Freedom House*, n.d.

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-net/2020>.

Person, and Natalia Zinets Pavel Polityuk. “Ukrainian Lawmakers Pass Law on Oligarchs after Assassination Attempt.” *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, September 23, 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainian-parliament-passes-law-oligarchs-final-reading-2021-09-23/>.

Person, and Natalia Zinets Pavel Polityuk. “Ukrainian Lawmakers Pass Law on Oligarchs after Assassination Attempt.” *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, September 23, 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainian-parliament-passes-law-oligarchs-final-reading-2021-09-23/>.

Reuters Staff. "Kazakh Health Minister Resigns amid Coronavirus Crisis." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, June 25, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-kazakhstan/kazakh-health-minister-resigns-amid-coronavirus-crisis-idUSKBN23W1NT>.

Reuters . "Belarus Leader: Change Constitution to Prevent Opposition from Taking Power." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, September 28, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/belarus-leader-change-constitution-prevent-opposition-taking-power-2021-09-28/>.

Rosenberg, Steven. "Alexei Navalny: Millions Watch Jailed Critic's 'Putin Palace' Film." BBC News. BBC, January 20, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55732296>.

Rosenberg, Steven. "Russia Election: Putin's Party Wins Election Marred by Fraud Claims." BBC News. BBC, September 20, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58614227>.

Socor, Vladimir. "Russian Elections in Ukraine's Donbas: Annexing People before Annexing Territory." Jamestown, September 23, 2021. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-elections-in-ukraines-donbas-annexing-people-before-annexing-territory/>.

Soldatkin, Vladimir. "Russia's Navalny Criticizes Apple, Google over App Removal, Social Media Posts Say." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, September 23, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-navalny-criticises-apple-google-over-app-removal-social-media-posts-say-2021-09-23/>.

Vaal, Tamara, and Mariya Gordeyeva. "Nazarbayev's Handpicked Successor Tokayev Elected Kazakh President." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, June 10, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-election/nazarbayevs-handpicked-successor-tokayev-elected-kazakh-president-idUSKCN1TB0JA>.

