

In How Many Ways Will Russia Resemble Uzbekistan?

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The whole world knows of Sergei Kovalev's heroic efforts and sacrifices on behalf of human rights during the Soviet era. It says much, I fear, about today's Russia that his colleagues in parliament voted in March to remove him as head of the Duma's Commission on Human Rights. As they say, "No one is a prophet in his own country." But few countries need a prophet like Sergei Kovalev more than Russia.

This is the third Helsinki Commission hearing since January on the disastrous policy hatched in Moscow to resolve, by armed force, the problem of relations between the government of the Russian Federation and Chechnya. The results of that decision have been devastating in human terms: scores of thousands have been killed, hundreds of thousands have been made refugees. Many of the victims have been elderly civilians with no place to flee the onslaught, which they never imagined would wear the uniform of the Russian army.

In political terms, the consequences have been almost as lamentable. It's obvious to anyone with eyes to see that U.S. relations with Russia are deteriorating. But more troubling are the increasingly pessimistic prospects for democracy in Russia. This dreadful misadventure in Chechnya has strengthened imperialist, statist philosophies and politicians, coarsened political dialogue, and placed under a cloud the vision of a free Russia that respected human rights and observed its international commitments.

Sometimes a detail can illustrate an entire painting. In late April, Russian authorities refused a visa to an American journalist, Steve LeVine, who reported on the war in Chechnya and on political developments in Transcaucasia and Central Asia. The reason given—or should I say pretext?—was that Russia is obligated, according to the 1992 Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) treaty, to deny a visa to anyone denied a visa by, or expelled from, another CIS country, and Mr. LeVine, a respected journalist, was expelled from Uzbekistan last year. Is that what we've come to? Is democratic Russia, which we welcomed with such anticipation a few years ago, and on which we had placed such hopes, now on the level of repressive, authoritarian Uzbekistan when granting visas to foreign journalists who uncover and publicize what the authorities would prefer to keep hidden? In how many other ways will Russia come to resemble Uzbekistan?

At the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) summit last December in Budapest, President Yeltsin said "it is still too early to bury Russian democracy." Perhaps. We all pray that that's the case. But the hopes that remain are personified by Sergei Kovalev and the thousands of Russian citizens who oppose the war in Chechnya, not those who unleashed it.

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