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COMMENTARY

Mr. Putin, for Democracy's Sake, Tear Down This Wall of Censorship

By Tom Lantos

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Ted Koppel had a scare a couple of years ago when word got out that ABC wanted to replace his respected news program with a popular talk show. Amid an outcry, the threat quickly passed, and "Nightline" emerged bruised but all the more esteemed.

Now imagine what would have happened if Koppel had been summarily canned and his program canceled — not in an effort to lure more viewers but simply to rap the knuckles of a top journalist and to send a message to others, possibly on the insistence of the White House.

That's basically what happened last week when Leonid Parfyonov, Russian TV's most influential news anchor and one of the few remaining independent voices on a major network, was fired in a censorship dispute that evidently was pressed at the behest of the Kremlin.

This is one more development in a disturbing trend under President Vladimir V. Putin: the reversion to Soviet-style authoritarianism. You can see it not just in the unrelenting expansion of state power over the media but also in the tightening of Kremlin control over regional legislatures and the courts and the Kremlin's growing intolerance of civil-society groups that try to keep the government in check.

This leads to the question of why, at this week's summit of the heads of the leading industrialized democracies — which is one way to define the Group of 8 — there was no discussion of the many ways in which Russia falls short of being democratic. Even if it meant embarrassing a partner in the war on terrorism, Russia should have been censured for repeatedly violating the principles of an open society.

In November last year, I co-founded the bipartisan Russia Democracy Caucus in order to focus congressional attention on the vanishing vestiges of freedom in Russia. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the business leader who pioneered Western-style corporate transparency and governance, had been summarily arrested the month before as a clear warning that he was not to meddle in upcoming elections.

Rep. Christopher Cox (R-Newport Beach) and I introduced a resolution in the House calling on the United States and our G-8 partners to revisit the wisdom of Russia's membership. On the heels of his reelection in March, Putin announced that during his second term he would shore up democracy and the rule of law. However, knowing how he had moved during his first term to consolidate the power of the

state and increase his control over civil society, I had the eerie feeling that I was listening to a recycled speech by a Soviet Communist Party leader in which the rhetoric was totally divorced from reality.

Our reality check came in late May when Putin slammed nongovernmental organizations during his annual state-of-the-nation address to parliament. He claimed that rather than defending "the real interests of the people," some groups were merely pandering to foreign sources in order to secure funding, or working for "dubious group and commercial interests." Putin's menacing intent could not have been clearer: Most of the voices of dissent in Russia today depend on funding from pro-democracy groups overseas or from Russian mavericks such as Khodorkovsky.

Fellow members of the G-8 must provide moral support to Russia's democratic forces by making it clear that we are opposed to Putin's crackdown. The G-8 has evolved into an engine of economic growth and a beacon for development. When the U.S. and our G-7 partners invited Russia to join our ranks in the mid-1990s, then-President Boris N. Yeltsin committed to implementing far-reaching democratic and free-market reforms. But under Putin, democratic reforms have been rolled back, breaking Russia's commitment.

Russia's leaders know what real democracy should look like. Jailing your critics and throwing a cloak of government control over privately owned media are not part of that picture. These practices are unacceptable anywhere, but especially in a country that seeks recognition as a legitimate global leader.

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