

Russia Tries to Turn Tables on Human Rights

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In an attempt to deflect criticism against crackdowns on political protests at home, senior Russian officials on Monday shot back at Western critics, lambasting racism and xenophobia in Europe.

Foreign Ministry and State Duma officials joined researchers and members of nongovernmental organizations in urging representatives of the European Union present at a round-table discussion not to use Russia's human rights record as a political tool.

"The West doesn't tolerate criticism of its own human rights violations," said Vasily Nebenzya, head of the Foreign Ministry's department for humanitarian cooperation and human rights.

"Human rights have become a weapon," he said, adding that Russia would treat its critics "with mistrust when they try to teach us [to observe] human rights ... as long as our concern

[about human rights violations in Europe] is ignored."

The speeches presented few figures and were very heavy with emotion and personal opinion.

Vladimir Chizhov, Russia's permanent representative to the European Union, suggested that the EU was guilty of hypocrisy for having not yet joined the 1953 Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which Russia partially ratified in 1998.

"Until this is done, calls [on Russia] to observe human rights look somewhat ambiguous," Chizhov said.

He also noted that "at a time of economic crisis more attention should be paid to social and economic rights," rather than to freedom of assembly. Western critics have been quick to fault Russia's hostility to opposition protests.

Chizhov said Europe had many of its own problems, the most common being a rise in nationalism and xenophobia.

Konstantin Dolgov, the Foreign Ministry's ombudsman for human rights, specifically accused Latvia and Estonia of harassing Russian-speaking minorities, Great Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands and Poland of discriminating against immigrants and the United States of creating secret prisons where suspected terrorists were allegedly tortured.

He said Europe and Russia had to have "equal rights" in their dialogue on human rights, a point repeated by many on the panel.

"We are told that [human rights] values are universal but somehow, when the political situation changes, they change," said Alexei Pushkov, head of the Duma's international affairs committee and a United Russia member.

Andrei Klimov, first deputy head of the Duma's international affairs committee, said the round-table participants would recommend that members of delegations in the European Parliament "more actively concentrate [their] attention on [Europe's] own human rights record."

Fernando Valenzuela, head of the European Union's delegation to Russia, admitted that Europe had some work to do.

"We do not claim that everything is perfect," he said. "Our own institutions are weak to detect shortcomings."

Valenzuela said the European Union was "committed to combat all forms of racism and xenophobia."

But he decried the 15-day prison terms meted out to opposition protesters, the pretrial detention of the punk band Pussy Riot, the killings of journalists, the death in jail of Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky and imprisonment of Yukos founder Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

He also said the Foreign Ministry's December 2011 report on human rights violations in Europe "could have been more accurate on a broader range of countries."

Valenzuela told The Moscow Times after the round table that a number of points raised such as racism and xenophobia in the EU states were "important," but that some statements didn't "correspond to reality," such as accusations of discrimination against Russian speakers in the Baltics.

Valenzuela said some issues were "matters for discussion, but not human rights violations."

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