

Fears of New 'Iron Curtain' between Russia and Europe

A hearing at the European Parliament on the 1st of April considered the current sanctions regime imposed against Russian President Vladimir Putin in the wake of the political crisis in the Crimean Peninsula. As necessary as sanctions are at this time, said speakers, a distinction must be drawn between the strong-arm policies of Mr Putin's government and the overall political outlook of the Russian people.

Punishing the Russian population would only fuel embolden Putin's political power. Instead, bridge building is needed between citizens of Russia and Europe to help Russians adopt more democratic values. This was the key message expressed during the event: 'Putin's Russia: Soviet Union reloaded?' sponsored by MEP Werner Schultz.

The hearing featured two speakers from the Pussy Riot band, Nadeshda Tolokonnikova and Maria Aliokhina, who detailed restrictive measures already being carried out against civil society and nongovernmental organisations in Russia, including judicial inspections, physical beatings and other repressive actions directed toward representatives of civil society.

Oleg Orlov, chairman of the Board of Human Rights Centre 'Memorial,' noted that Mr Putin's position has been strengthened by his role in the Chechnyan war, enabling the Russian leader to exert a more authoritarian control over the country. Putin's actions in Crimea, he said, were an effort to stimulate patriotism to his political advantage, thereby further consolidating power.

There is a systematic violation of human rights under Putin's regime, continued Mr Orlov, which includes assassinations, torture and forced disappearances. Alternative sources of information have also been repressed, since any credible source of information is considered a threat to state power.

Nadeshda Tolokonnikova warned of Putin's desire to 'adopt a new iron curtain between Russia and Europe.' Citizens needed to be presented with other ideas, she contended, so they can have a better grasp of their political options.

"We must break through the information vacuum and make information as accessible as possible to Russian and Crimean citizens," said Ms Tolokonnikova. "At the moment people don't have a platform to protect their rights."

Ms. Tolokonnikova discussed the rights violations which take place in Russian prisons, including forced labour, noting that there were particularly deplorable conditions in female prisons, with women working 12-16 hours without leave and up to 100 people living in one cell. Furthermore, prisoners are prohibited from accessing mass media or allowed to speak to relatives or the press.

The importance of directing economic sanctions at the 'pillars of the regime' was stressed during this hearing. Ms Maria Aliokhina called for sanctions to be imposed on more people at the heart of the regime who are actually responsible for the repression.

"If we really want to help Russians obtain true democracy with freedom, we need to keep as many doors open as possible and let them take things at their own pace. I believe that human rights are a universal thing. We need to stand for one another so as not to be divided. We need to bring freedom and truth to people and show them European values," said Ms Aliokhina.