(PART FOUR)

LOSING CREDIBILITY

WHOSE INTERESTS DO NGOs REPRESENT?

On 20 July 2012, President Putin approved a law that requires foreign funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs), of which there are over 1000 on Russian soil according to the Itar-Tass news agency, to register with the Justice Ministry as “foreign agents”.

With characteristic hypocrisy, Washington denounced the new Russian law as “anti-democratic, but failed to mention that its Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) requires since 1938 all foreign-funded organizations, except those funded by Israel, to register as foreign agents with the Counterespionage Section in the National Security Division of the Justice Department. Such criticism is particularly distasteful at a time when Congress is debating laws to prosecute journalists for exposing violations against human rights activists.

Activists in Russia and abroad are rightfully worried and decry the law as a throwback to the Soviet era. They see it as an underhanded way to supress the protest movement and undermine their ability to protect citizens from corrupt officials and overbearing state institutions, of which Russia has never had a shortage. The government rightfully justifies the new law as necessary to improve transparency, which is the polite way of saying that it will no longer tolerate the subversion of its political process and the authority of the state by foreign entities and interests.

Russia Today reports that a recent opinion poll shows 64% of Russians agree foreign-funded NGOs should have no part in the country’s political life. The law has even stronger support across political parties, having passed through both houses of Parliament with overwhelming majorities.

To better understand the Russian government’s perspective let us imagine a world in which influential Russian NGOs, like the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group, begin to focus their activities on violations committed abroad while becoming indifferent to those at home.

Let us also imagine that the Russian state becomes the main source of funding for their exported NGO’s and that a revitalized communist party donates millions of rubles to their annual budgets. These internationally-minded Russian NGOs then begin to identify every economic prisoner in the West as a political victim by pointing out that in capitalist societies economic exploitation is the main vehicle of political control. They take issue with America’s unjust wars, drone strikes that have killed 175 innocent children to date and its terrifyingly high incarceration rate, which at 735 prisoners for every 100,000 citizens is nearly as high as that of the Soviet Union under Stalin at 830 prisoners for every 100,000 citizens. They also highlight through Amnesty-like appeals thousands of Westerners who file against their states at the European Court of Human Rights and who hunger and protest at the court’s gates in hope of justice only to be ignored.

Let us imagine that they become hyperactive and highly successful in showing drastic deterioration in the social, legal, economic and political fabric of Europe and North America and that Russian newspapers and broadcasters have the global reach to embarrass the West for each and every violation thus exposed.

Let us imagine that while these Russian NGOs are doing a fine job abroad addressing violations large and small, a near collapse of human rights and civil liberties at home in a new Russia expanding its economic influence and political ideology abroad by neo-imperialist means is treated as a taboo subject by Russia’s civil society and media because they have been fully subsumed in the government’s grand geopolitical agenda.

Last but not least, let us imagine that this new Russia controls the international legal infrastructure and the Bretton Woods organisations being their main source of funding and also contributes more than any other nation or bloc of nations to the running of the UN and its many subsidiary agencies and as such sets the international agenda, which is conceived solely by Russian and Chinese think-tanks and is called the People’s World Order.

How would Western nations treat these Russian-funded NGOs in their midst? It is safe to say that none of them would be allowed to operate for very long in the US or Europe. They would be perceived as Trojan Horses and pursued with extreme prejudice by a new brand of McCarthyism.

Seen in this light, the tolerance the Russian government has shown Western-funded NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch – who are funded in large part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and other CIA and State Department fronts as well as by billionaires like George Soros, whose interests are those of the world’s corporate elite – can only be described as exemplary compared to how the West would have acted under similar circumstances and a reversed tables scenario.

Russia, of course, is not the only country to have adopted such protective measures. Early 2011, Egypt expelled hundreds of people associated with foreign-funded NGOs for *“instilling dissent and meddling in domestic policies”*. In 2008, Venezuela expelled the Director and Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch (HRW) for *“meddling in the internal affairs of our country”*, which was a direct response to a HRW report that accused the government of Hugo Chavez of *“discrimination on political grounds”,* *“open disregard for the principle of separation of powers”* and for attacking *“journalists’ freedom of expression, workers’ freedom of association, and civil society’s ability to promote human rights”*; criticisms that could be levelled at the US, Canada and the UK with equal validity and, to a lesser extent, at the EU.

The ugly reality is that the double-standard of Western NGOs who see evil abroad but none at home is what has destroyed their credibility. Equally corrosive, the West’s erosion of the separation between civil society and the economic and political establishments has thrown every NGO operating abroad under suspicion. The destruction of the checks and balances of Western democracies in this post 9/11 era of surveillance and censorship under the pretext of fighting terrorism has caused a chronic lack of trust in media and civil society organizations that are too close to Washington or corporate interests, so much so that only 21% of Americans trust their media and fewer than ever donate to NGOs. America’s intolerance towards non-capitalist and non-Western forms of economic and political organization and the conformist attitudes of Western NGOs to Washington’s geopolitical agenda have shattered the world’s good will towards NGOs that see no evil at home but react to every violation of human rights abroad.

These are the unintended consequences of an aggressive policy of hegemony that insists on controlling the destinies and resources of every country on earth and has subsumed most Western NGOs in this grand and corporate dictated geopolitical agenda. What the world understands but Western NGOs and their governments completely ignore is that the vilest and most numerous violations of human rights are committed by corporate interests and are economic in nature or are derived from the greed with which the West pursues global control, causing conflict and hardship worldwide.

In a rare display of self-criticism, Jimmy Carter wrote in a recent article *(“A Cruel and Unusual Record”*) that the US government’s counterterrorism policies clearly violate at least 10 of the 30 articles written in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and that *“as a result, our country can no longer speak with moral authority on these critical issues”*.

Having lost its moral authority, the banner of freedom and democracy has passed to Western NGO’s, but as long as they remain indifferent to what happens at home and violations committed in the West under the pretext of fighting terrorism and radicalization are ignored by civil society and actively supressed by the domestic and international court systems as well as by the UN Human Rights Council, the result can only be a continuing and accelerated deterioration of human rights worldwide, along with the elevation of Western hypocrisy to a new and unprecedented level.

The cancer is spreading from the UN Security Council where anti-terrorism and counter-radicalization resolutions adopted post 9/11 provide the cover governments need to supress legitimate dissent and to institute evermore intrusive and illegal policies and programs that border on martial law in the US and facilitate gross violations throughout the West and elsewhere. The cancer causing agents, however, are Washington and London who sponsored these resolutions and are responsible for creating two proxy institutions, the Counter Terrorism Committee (CTC) and the Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED), to carry out their dictates and thus give them international legitimacy for crimes against democracy and the wholesale destruction of human rights.

The West insulates itself from the criticism of NGOs by holding the purse strings and by demanding that open societies are treated differently from closed societies. But in light of the fact that the governments of Western nations are becoming increasingly secretive one can hardly speak of them as being open societies. The US, using Executive Order 13526, and the UK, through its draconian Official Secrets Act, hide more secrets from their people than the governments of closed societies. The impact of their secrecy is also far more consequential than elsewhere because they are the countries that drive the global imperialist agenda.

In addition, they are great at hiding things in plain view and at manipulating the law and the system to create dead ends. And when that fails and determined individuals expose the machinations, violations and crimes of Western governments and suffer serious consequences at the hands of structural violence then both national and international courts shut down like clams and refuse to process lawsuits directed at Western nations. The rule of law therefore does not apply to Western nations and the freedom and democracy the West promotes are but delusions of a terminally ill, hopelessly dishonest and utterly lawless New World Order delegated from Washington and London.

In this new global environment NGOs have a dual and contradictory political role. On the positive side they criticize authoritarian regimes and expose human rights violations, while on the negative side they obscure the profound class divisions and economic exploitation of neoliberal economies to channel political dissent abroad into dependent relations on the dominant neo-liberal elites at home. As such, they no longer represent a Third Way between *“authoritarian statism”* and *“savage market capitalism”,* as they like to assert, but a forward assault team for the corporate/banking power structure of imperialist hegemony. The so-called ‘democratic transition’ they are entrusted with is a euphemism for neo-imperialist expansion and the final disenfranchisement of the people they purportedly want to help to freedom but whom they instead saddle with a new type of social and economic colonialism.

Professor James Petras explains that once NGOs achieve a country’s ‘democratic transition’ they *“emphasize projects not movements”,* depoliticize and demobilize the poor by diverting *“attention from the sources and solutions of poverty”*,and reorient *“people to produce at the margins not to struggle to control the basic means of production and wealth”*, thus preventing them from addressing *“the structural conditions that shape their everyday lives”*. NGOs have co-opted the language of the Left but linked it *“to a framework of collaboration with donors and government agencies that subordinate activity to non-confrontational politics”* and ensure that *“empowerment never goes beyond small areas of social life with limited resources within the conditions permitted by the neo-liberal state and macro-economy.”*

What the world needs is not more co-opted NGOs who are merely the refuge of a new and spoilt petit bourgeoisie that does more harm than good, but strong socio-political movements that challenge all authoritarian and elitist structures and wrestle power away from the few to empower the many. Alas the courage and determination for such a struggle is sorely missing and the only thing that brings people out on the street these days is economic necessity.

By then it is too late for peaceful change and the world invariably descends into chaos.