

**Simon Ostrovsky's written testimony for the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Hearing titled "Antagonizing the Neighborhood: Putin's Frozen Conflicts and the Conflict in Ukraine" scheduled for March 11, 2020.**

Six years ago today when I was a reporter for VICE News I was running around the streets of Simferopol, in Ukraine's Crimea region. I was filming a pro-Ukraine protest, which was one of the last public displays in support of Ukrainian statehood that would be permitted in Crimea before Moscow would take total control of the region and formally annex it just a few days later. Today, in accordance with the Russian Constitution, public manifestations and protests are permitted. However, what happens in practice and what's written on paper are two very different things.

I know this because I've covered Russia and the former Soviet Union for the better part of the last two decades. I actually started my reporting career covering the second Chechen war, which ended that Russian region's aspirations for independence. The Chechen-independence movement is considered illegitimate in Russia. However, I found Moscow's attitude towards ethnic Russians living under Ukrainian rule to be very different. Independence-minded Chechen's are illegal separatists. Independence minded Russians, have historic rights to self-determination. Since Russia took effective control of Crimea, those who disagree with what's happened have had to flee or have been jailed. The few that dare occasionally to protest openly are quickly bundled away in police vans and handed severe sentences. In some cases, they have disappeared entirely.

How did it come to this? Well, the day after Crimea held it's unrecognized referendum on independence -- which, by the way, was made possible by Russian troops who had taken control of the region -- I was travelling around the peninsula asking everybody I met what country they thought we were in. It was a confusing time so the answers varied. At one point I actually shouted "What's this country called?" to a group of teenagers who were drinking. They replied in unison: "Russia." Others told me it was still Ukraine. In one case - a guy told me we were back in the Soviet Union. One woman I filmed at a rally responded by saying something along the lines of "the West hasn't tasted the Russian jackboot in a while and it's about time they woke up and smelled the coffee." I thought that was a pretty colorful way for someone to express themselves. But after my story was broadcast, I started getting strange messages from viewers. They had seen the very same woman appear under different names at different anti-Ukraine protests in different locations around the country. They even sent screenshots from other TV reports she'd already been in. Same woman, different names. I started to realize that the grassroot support for splitting from Ukraine might not be so grassroots after all. The protests that were gathering in front of administration buildings and Ukrainian military bases were actually part of a massive propaganda effort that would become the hallmark of Russia's campaign to destabilize and dismember its southern neighbor. I didn't know it at the time, but we'd see echoes of this strategy in the US 2016 presidential vote, where people - ginned up by Russian puppet accounts on social media - were told to come out into the streets and face each other in protests.

The social media aspect of the strategy might be new. But the messages being put out aren't. We saw the same thing happen during the Rwandan genocide. The Hutus used radio broadcasts to dehumanize Tutsis as cockroaches, resulting in a slaughter. In Bosnia, media aligned with Belgrade told Bosnian Serbs gangs of Muslims were on their way to rape and murder their wives and daughters. That one started a regional ethnic war. When I was in Crimea, the story being pushed on Russian-speakers was that a "Fascist Junta" had taken power in Kyiv and gangs of violent skinheads were on their way to ban the Russian language through force. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

But Russian broadcasts that were blaring at full tilt out of every television in Russian-speaking homes of Ukraine sparked a war that has lasted six years and claimed close to 14,000 lives. The last time I was in Eastern Ukraine was in December while filming a report for PBS NewsHour Weekend. After nearly six years of war, attitudes had really shifted. No longer did I hear from residents a full-throated defense of Russia's military presence in the region. Unlike Crimea, Russia-occupied Eastern Ukraine has never been formally annexed by Moscow. Its Russian speaking residents have been left in limbo living under puppet regimes with no international status and no future. Many have realized that Moscow's real plan for them is not integration into Russia, but re-integration into Ukraine. Moscow is seeking a special status for the Donbas that would give it veto powers over decisions being made in the Ukrainian capital, like NATO membership or joining the EU. Its residents are simply pawns in that plan and are beginning to think that maybe things weren't so bad before the war started, after all.