



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Bill Browder: Russia could join the civilised world only without Putin



Bill Browder is convinced that Putin would not have attacked Ukraine if the West had been tougher on him over the previous 22 years, in the course of which he committed numerous crimes. The man whose Magnitsky Act became a universal weapon in the fight against corrupt and violent autocrats has been Putin's number one enemy for years. Today, he happily relinquishes that title to Volodymyr Zelenskyy, but remains enemy number two or three of Vladimir Putin and his regime. Bill Browder speaks with Tomorrow's Affairs about the effectiveness of sanctions against Russia, the indecision, slowness to implement them, the future of Russia without Putin, and China, which was only partially affected by the Magnitsky Act.

“It was very frustrating that Putin was able to get away with so many atrocities over the last 22 years with almost no consequences”, says Browder to Tomorrow's Affairs, and regrets that the pressure on Putin has not been more decisive. “He invaded Georgia, he took Crimea, he carpet bombed Syria, he's poisoned people in Salisbury and the West did nothing in each instance. I believe that had we been tougher in the past, it might have deterred Putin from invading Ukraine now. I'm happy to see the Magnitsky sanctions template being used now, but it feels too little too late.”

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As someone familiar with Russia under Putin, Browder is the right person to assess whether Russia can be reformed into a more or less democratic and market-oriented society where laws rule, and whether, after the aggression against Ukraine, Russian society is capable of undergoing catharsis and transforming itself into a state that could be an acceptable partner for the democratic world? Bill Browder is not convinced:

“I think the only way that Russia could join the civilised world is if there is a complete defeat of Russia, that Putin steps down (or is overthrown) and there's a whole new

government based on the rule of law and democracy. I think it's possible but not probable.”

Following announcements from the EU that the frozen money of the Russian central bank and Putin's oligarchs could be used for the reconstruction of Ukraine, Browder is “sure that the EU will eventually include corruption offences in their Magnitsky Act”. “The only question is how long it will take. Because the decision making process involves 27 member states and there's such a lack of political accountability, everything takes much longer. But the fact that the president of the European Commission has announced this as a specific intention, I'm sure it will ultimately happen.”

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“The UK is the Russian money laundering capital of the world”, says Bill Browder, referring to matters he is not satisfied regarding the implementation of the Magnitsky Act in the UK, one of the first countries after the USA which adopted that law. “There's a huge amount of dirty money poisoning the political process and as a result, many Russian oligarchs are still floating around London. I think there needs to be much tougher sanctions against oligarchs in the UK and I think there needs to be much tougher enforcement of money laundering legislation.”

Asked if this means the Magnitsky Act is applied selectively in the UK, Browder says, “So far, the British have sanctioned about 75% less individuals and entities than the US. The numbers speak for themselves.”

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Given that the original Magnitsky Act, passed in the USA, was limited only to persons from the top of the government in Russia, and that

jurisdiction was later extended to other countries, Browder talks to Tomorrow's Affairs about its application to those responsible for corruption and human rights violations in China.

“So far, the Magnitsky law has been used on China both for the Uighur genocide and for the repression in Hong Kong. Unfortunately, very few individuals have been sanctioned relative to the enormity of the offences. Because China has such huge economic power, countries in the West are scared, but I hope that our collective economic power in the West should give lawmakers confidence that China can and should be confronted with Magnitsky sanctions in the future.”

Bill Browder's book *Freezing Order* was published at a time when the Russian aggression against Ukraine was already in progress. His story immediately became a bestseller and brought an authentic and rarely exciting first-hand account of how someone who is Putin's enemy No. 1 lives. Bill Browder replies to the question of whether he still has that status. “I used to be Putin's number one enemy because of the Magnitsky Act. I think that since the invasion of Ukraine and the remarkable job that Volodymyr Zelenskyy has fought back, he's now taken my number one spot. But I still sit solidly at number two or three.”