HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN DRONE PRODUCTION AT YELABUGA

How China, Iran, and North Korea are enabling the Russian war machine

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General view of the Alabuga SEZ, 2017" by Alabuga Special Economic Zone (alabuga.ru), via Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, known collectively as CRINK, are seeking to undermine U.S. leadership by weakening the rules-based international order.[1] Human rights violations and trafficking at the Alabuga complex in the Russian town of Yelabuga illustrate the increasingly complex ties among the CRINK regimes.[2]

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created a demand for drones that Moscow could not initially meet. Its answer was an arrangement to manufacture the Iranian-designed Shahed on Russian soil. This report contends that the burgeoning labor force that powers the Alabuga drone factory has become a site of gross human rights abuses and human trafficking.

Between March and May, Russia fired more than 200 drones each day into Ukraine, totaling over 8,000 launches in May and taking a terrible toll on Ukrainians.[3] These drones, produced at Alabuga with trafficked labor, are fired indiscriminately at Ukrainian cities and power grids and used to kill Ukrainian soldiers and citizens. Global action is required to hold accountable the perpetrators of human rights abuses in this sector of Russia's war machine.

The CRINK countries, though not in a formal alliance, increasingly enable one another to evade pressure, sustain conflicts, and threaten the free world.[4] Democracies therefore must recognize that human rights and security are inextricably connected[5] and respond collectively:

- The U.S. Department of State should lead efforts to inform targeted Global South countries of false labor recruitment practices that support Russia's military industry.
- The U.S. Department of the Treasury should pursue and enforce sanctions against front companies and educational institutions that are enabling the human trafficking network.
- The United States, working through the United Nations, should establish a multilateral team to investigate the Alabuga complex.
- Democratic allies and the international community should consistently and publicly highlight the actions of complicit individuals, regimes, and firms to discourage future business partnerships and diplomatic engagement with CRINK.
- The U.S. administration should invest in existing alliances and build new coalitions with allies and partners to counter CRINK threats.

Yelabuga demonstrates how the converging interests of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are supporting Russian leader Vladimir Putin's unprovoked war in Ukraine, strengthening these authoritarian regimes' interests, and enabling gross and blatant human rights violations. The consequences of CRINK's growing coordination extend beyond Yelabuga.

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1 Joseph Kim and Igor Khrestin, "Malign Alignment: Human Rights and Democracy," George W. Bush Presidential Center, June 9, 2026, https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/malign-alignment-human-rights-and-democracy/.

2 Alabuga is a special economic zone located nearby Yelabuga a city in Russia's Republic of Tatarstan.

3 Igor Anokhin, "Monthly Analysis of Russian Shahed 136 Deployment Against Ukraine (August 2025–June 2026)," *Institute for Science and International Security*, July 7, 2026, https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/monthly-analysis-of-russian-shahed-136-deployment-against-ukraine.

4 Elizabeth Kennedy Trudeau, "CRINK Countries Increasingly Cooperate around the World. U.S. Policy Must Reflect This New Dynamic," George W. Bush Presidential Center, August 13, 2026, https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/crink-countries-increasingly-cooperate-around-the-world-u-s-policy-must-reflect-this-new-dynamic/.

5 Victor Cha, "Human Rights Is the Forgotten Issue in U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Catalyst*, no. 15 (Summer 2019), https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/global-challenges/cha-refugees-forgotten-in-us-foreign-policy/.

THE YELABUGA STORY

In just a few years, the factory at the Yelabuga special economic zone has grown to encompass roughly 17 facilities and as many as 116 buildings and has become capable of producing more than 5,500 drones each month.[6]

Iran initially supplied Russia with large numbers of completed Shahed drones but went on to play a critical role in establishing the capability, technology, and expertise that ultimately enabled Moscow to manufacture its own version of the drones domestically after localizing the supply chain.

Moscow now produces upgraded variants of the Shahed drone, redesignated as the Geran, at the Alabuga factory. Ukraine's Defence Intelligence estimates that Russia aims to produce 60,000 long-range drones and 50,000 decoys in 2026.[7]

Workers come from North Korea, Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and Eurasia, lured by fake job offers or coerced by their governments and the North Korea regime. Recruiters promise catering and hospitality jobs, educational prospects, or a "European" opportunity. But upon arrival, workers are instead placed on an assembly line to build weapons.

The North Korean regime specifically is selling the labor of its citizens under a state-to-state arrangement, controlling whether they may leave, and collecting most of their wages. A spokesperson for the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has said Russia's actions at Yelabuga "could potentially fulfill the criteria of trafficking if the recruitment is fraudulent and the purpose is exploitation."[8]

The United Nations defines human trafficking as the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of people through force, fraud, or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit." The labor recruitment process for the Alabuga drone factory meets this definition, based on independent assessments.[9] Wages earned by North Korean workers ultimately flow back to Pyongyang and the same regime that compels the labor.

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6 Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Victor Cha, and Jennifer Jun, "A Closer Look at the Yelabuga UAV Factory," *CSIS Beyond Parallel*, March 9, 2026, https://beyondparallel.csis.org/a-closer-look-at-the-yelabuga-uav-factory/.

7 Iryna Levtska, "Russia Plans to Increase Share of Jet-Powered Shahed Drones to 50%—Military Intelligence," *Ukrainska Pravda*, May 14, 2026, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2026/05/14/8034678/.

8 Emma Burrows and Lori Hinnant, "Africans Recruited to Work in Russia Say They Were Duped into Building Drones for Use in Ukraine," Associated Press, October 10, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-drones-shahed-africans-11602ab837f0ff4635926d884b422185.

9 "Who Is Making Russia's Drones? The Migrant Women Exploited for Russia's War Economy," Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, May 8, 2025, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/who-is-making-russias-drones/.

Figure 1. Satellite image of unmanned aerial vehicle factory at Yelabuga

Note: The UAV factory and related facilities at the Yelabuga special economic zone, Tatarstan, annotated by CSIS Beyond Parallel. Satellite imagery: Vantor, November 17, 2025.

Who are the trafficked victims?

The workers at Yelabuga belong to three broad groups: 1) Russia's domestic youth; 2) foreign workers; and 3) North Korean laborers. While the coercive practices of the Russian government should be examined in the first two groups, the North Korean government is openly renting out its own citizens as forced labor and pocketing the earnings in violation of U.N. sanctions. This is the core human rights abuse taking place at Yelabuga.

Table 1. Three labor groups at Alabuga

Group	Who	How are they held	Reported scale
Russian youth	Students as young as 15 are recruited by Alabuga Polytechnic college under a "work experience" label	Shifts of up to 12 hours, pay tied to strict quotas, with threats of fines if they tell their families what they build	Thousands; about one-third in drone production
Foreign workers	Women ages 16 to 22, mainly from Africa and the Global South as part of the Alabuga Start program	Promised hospitality work, then assigned to weapons production. Flights, housing and language classes are deducted from pay and passports confiscated on arrival	About 200 on site in 2024; about 90% in drone assembly
North Koreans	State-sent laborers and technicians	Minders restrict movement and the regime withholds 70% to 90% of wages	Up to 12,000

- The Alabuga Polytechnic college in Tatarstan, in east-central Moscow, recruits Russian youth, some as young as 15, for jobs at Alabuga under a "work experience" label. They reportedly work shifts of up to 12 hours. Their pay is tied to strict quotas. They also face threats of fines if they tell their families what they build.[10]
- The Alabuga Start program recruits foreign women ages 16 to 22 from the Global South. They are promised catering and hospitality work and high wages but then learn on arrival that their jobs are in weapons production. They also find their flights, housing, and language classes coming out of their pay, and their passports are confiscated upon their arrival.[11]
- North Korean laborers are sent to the factory by the regime. Defence Intelligence of Ukraine estimates up to 12,000 have been assigned to Alabuga out of more than 17,800 North Koreans.[12]

10 RFE/RL's Idel.Realities, "A Russian Factory Is Using Underage Workers to Assemble Iranian 'Suicide' Drones Destined for Ukraine," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 12, 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-iran-suicide-drones-assembled-underage-students-ukraine/32545386.html.

11 Burrows and Hinnant, "Africans Recruited to Work in Russia Say They Were Duped into Building Drones for Use in Ukraine."

12 "Moscow Plans to `Import' 12,000 North Korean Workers for the Alabuga SEZ," Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, November 14, 2025, https://gur.gov.ua/en/content/ruk-ne-vystachaie-moskva-planuie-importuvaty-12-tysiach-zbyrachiv-shakhediv-z-kndr.

Table 2. Foreign recruitment by region

Region	Source countries
Africa	Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Eurasia	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan
Latin America	Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela
South Asia	Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

How does the human trafficking process work for Global South contries?

1. **Recruitment:** Social-media advertising and paid influencers promise free airfare, a salary starting at over $500 a month, and work opportunities in catering, hospitality, and production operation. The recruiters target women ages 16 to 22 in countries with high youth unemployment. Advertising in several countries gains credibility from recruitment notices posted on government-related accounts.[13]
2. **Testing:** Applicants join a Telegram channel and are given a recruiter. They complete a short screening, including a computer game and a 100-word Russian- or English-language vocabulary test and provide documents to human resources, including a passport scan and medical records.
3. **Clearance:** Applicants' files are forwarded to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then to the Russian embassy in the applicant's home country. Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), the country's top domestic security and counterintelligence agency, clears prospective workers with a security review. Employment contracts are promised within three weeks of passing the interview process.
4. **Debt:** The Russian ministry issues an invitation to the applicant; the recruit pays for the visa appointment, and the program books the flight.
5. **Arrival:** Alabuga staff meet each recruit and escort them to the special economic zone, where the new worker is housed in a company hostel and enrolled in a mandatory Russian-language course.
6. **Job:** About 90% of foreign recruits are assigned to drone production, where they assemble airframes, handle caustic chemicals, and paint different types of drones.
7. **Restrictions:** The company deducts costs of airfare, housing, medical care, and language classes from the workers' pay. Their passports are confiscated, and their movement is restricted. They are fined or threatened if they discuss the drone work. Remitting money can be difficult because of banking sanctions.

The recruiting elements outlined above meet the common indicators of human trafficking outlined by the U.N.: fraudulent inducement, document confiscation, pay deduction, restricted movement, and concealed hazardous work.[14]

13 Max Lesser and Maria Riofrio, "Russia Recruits Young Migrant Women from Latin America to Build Iranian Drones," memo, *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 8, 2026, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2026/01/08/russia-recruits-young-migrant-women-from-latin-america-to-build-iranian-drones/.

14 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Human Trafficking," accessed September 18, 2026, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/human-trafficking.html.

North Korean state-sponsored trafficking

The foreign labor recruitment program constitutes trafficking by a Russian corporation; the North Korean arrangement is trafficking by the state. This practice is not new to the Kim Jong Un regime in Pyongyang, which has ruthlessly and profitably exported labor for decades to places like Chinese factories, Russian logging camps, and Gulf construction sites.

In December 2017, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2397 required every U.N. member state to send North Korean workers home by December 2019.[15] Human trafficking to Russia by the Kim regime openly defies that obligation.

The North Korean workers sent to Alabuga are handled through a sanctioned network – a front company for the Green Pine Associated Corporation, North Korea's principal arms-trading house.[16] Ukrainian Intelligence estimates some 12,000 North Korean workers earn roughly $2.50 an hour.[17] The U.S. State Department has reported that the North Korean government retains up to 90% of overseas workers' earnings, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue for the regime.[18]

China's participation in Alabuga

If Iran supplies the original design, Russia builds the plant, and North Korea contributes state-sponsored forced labor, then China, through a supply network it facilitates, provides the means for Russia to mass-produce the drones. China's participation exacerbates human rights abuses by enabling Russia to rapidly industrialize and scale the drone factory. Beijing has done this in three ways:

- As the main supplier of dual-use components, including batteries, electronics, engines and engine parts, and navigation systems.
- As an indirect financier, moving money to Russia through sanction-resistant payment networks.
- As a transit route for drone components, including Western products, which are shipped through China and Hong Kong.

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15 United Nations, "Security Council Tightens Sanctions on Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2397 (2017)," press release SC/13141, December 22, 2017, https://press.un.org/en/2017/sc13141.doc.htm.

16 Green Pine Associated Corporation was designated by the U.S. Treasury in 2010 (E.O. 13551) and listed by the UN Security Council 1718 Committee on May 2, 2012. See United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Committee Determines Entities, Goods Subject to Measures Imposed on Democratic People's Republic of Korea by Resolution 1718 (2006)," press release SC/10633, May 2, 2012, https://press.un.org/en/2012/sc10633.doc.htm.

17 Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, "Moscow Plans to `Import' 12,000 North Korean Workers for the Alabuga SEZ."

18 "North Korea" in *2024 Trafficking in Persons Report*, U.S. Department of State, June 2024, https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/north-korea/.

China is the main dual-use components supplier for Alabuga's drone production, including the well-documented provision of batteries, electronics, engines and engine parts, and navigation systems.

- China has become the main supplier of the drones' most critical subsystems: engines, navigation, and anti-jamming electronics.[19]
- There has been a discernible increase in components from Chinese manufacturers – not merely Western parts routed through China.
- Chinese-origin parts now account for roughly 80% of the critical electronics in Russia's drones.[20]

Table 3. China's contribution to Alabuga drone components

Category	Scale/evidence	Recipient
Engines & engine parts	Chinese supplier shipped 685,500+ engine parts from June to August 2024 $972,144 in aircraft-engine components imported in 2024[21]	Russia/Drake LLC
Lithium-polymer batteries	About 7,800 batteries; part of roughly $5 million in Chinese imports; end-use identified as the "special military operation"[22]	Russia/Morgan LLC
Satellite-navigation antennas & anti-jamming systems	Satellite-navigation antennas traced to Chinese manufacturer Harxon; reportedly shipped disguised as agricultural equipment[23]	Russia
Integrated circuits	Russian engineers replaced the U.S.-made Xilinx chip in the anti-jamming antenna with an integrated circuit from the Beijing Microelectronics Technology Institute[24]	Russian engineers

19 Austin Ramzy, "How the Iranian Shahed Drone Transformed War—with China's Help," *Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2026, https://www.wsj.com/world/how-the-iranian-shahed-drone-transformed-warwith-chinas-help-2671bb43.

20 Ukrinform, "China Supplies Special Chemicals, Gunpowder and Machine Tools to 20 Russian Military Factories—Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service," May 25, 2025, https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3996788-kitaj-postacae-spechimiu-poroh-i-verstati-na-20-vijskovih-zavodiv-rosii-golova-sluzbi-zovnisnoi-rozvidki.html.

21 "Shaheds, Dollars, and Beijing: How China Powers Russia's Drone Production in Alabuga," *Frontelligence Insight* (Substack), August 21, 2025, https://frontelligence.substack.com/p/shaheds-dollars-and-beijing-how-china.

22 "Shaheds, Dollars, and Beijing."

23 Ryan X, "Geraniums in Bloom: The Insider and Nordsint Reveal How a Large Chinese Firm Supplies Russian Drone Production," *The Insider*, May 8, 2026, https://theins.press/en/inv/292355.

24 Ryan X, "Geraniums in Bloom"; Roman Pryhodko, "Import Substitution in Russian Style: US Components in Shahed Drones Replaced with Chinese and Indian Alternatives for EW Protection," *Militarnyi*, April 7, 2025, https://militarnyi.com/en/news/import-substitution-in-russian-style-us-components-in-shahed-drones-replaced-with-chinese-and-indian-alternatives-for-ew-protection/.

Table 4. China's role beyond components

Manufacturing capacity	Supply-chain facilitation
UAV hull: Alabuga Machinery imported a Chinese production line for manufacturing UAV hulls[25]	China's trading network: The Shandong trading company's supply chain is linked to Drake LLC and Morgan LLC for procuring engine parts, batteries, and electronics[26]
Helps Russia manufacture drones domestically at an industrial scale, strengthening production capabilities	Bridging China's industrial suppliers with Russian procurement through a commercial supply network/channel
Time frame: 2024-2025	**Total transaction:** $6.4 million in transactions and clearances between April 2024 and January 2025

It is unclear whether China is directly financing the Alabuga drone factories with traditional cash or monetary investments. However, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission documents China's role in facilitating financial transactions that enable Russia and Iran to evade sanctions. China provides financial infrastructure that authorizes and settles payments between Russia and Iran, thereby enabling sanctions evasion.[27]

Table 5. Financial ecosystem supporting Alabuga

Category	Entities	Evidence
Direct financing	Russia/VTB	The Alabuga factory was financed by Russia; the Deng Xiaoping logistics terminal that serves the special economic zone was funded by a Russian bank, VTB[28]
Financial infrastructure	China/Hong Kong	Payment authorization & settlement (sanction evasion network)
Total transactions		Between 2023 and 2024, Chinese firms supplied at least $63 million in drone parts to Russia and roughly $96 million in contracts to Alabuga alone[29] Beijing provided Russia with over $4 billion worth of dual-use equipment. In 2024, China recorded more than $300 million a month in high-priority dual-use exports to Russia[30]

25 "Shaheds, Dollars, and Beijing."
26 "Shaheds, Dollars, and Beijing."
27 Graham Ayres and Lyndi Tsering, *China's Facilitation of Sanctions and Export Control Evasion*, staff research report (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2025), https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-facilitation-sanctions-and-export-control-evasion.
28 Jessica Seltzer and John Caves, "Alabuga Drone Plant: A Case Study of Key Relationships Enabling Iranian Support for Russian Military Production," *Iran Watch*, November 8, 2024, https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/articles-reports/alabuga-drone-plant-case-study-key-relationships-enabling-iranian-support-russian-military.
29 "Shaheds, Dollars, and Beijing."
30 "Why Does China Increase the Supply of Dual-Use Goods to Russia?" UATV, August 28, 2025, https://uatv.ua/en/why-does-china-increase-the-supply-of-dual-use-goods-to-russia/.

Why does it matter?

Violating and suppressing human rights are one of the central means by which dictators attain and retain power.

Authoritarianism rests on a false premise that the interests of the collective, the state, or the party supersede the rights of the individual, and that sacrificing individual liberty will yield greater security, stability, and prosperity. But at what cost? What happens when people forfeit their liberty in exchange for false promises on which authoritarian regimes never deliver?

As drone output escalates at Alabuga, so will the scale of human trafficking. Ukrainian military intelligence reports the Alabuga workforce started at roughly 1,000 employees and is planned to reach 40,000. Center for Strategic International Studies satellite imagery corroborated a dramatic expansion in the number of worker dormitories being built in the special economic zone to accommodate the massive influx of workers.[31]

Foreign women have been deceived onto weapons-production lines and have had their passports taken. Russian teenagers have been put to work assembling attack drones under a "work experience" label. North Korean laborers have their wages confiscated by the state that sent them. This is the definition of forced labor; moreover, the recruitment process is openly advertised on mainstream social media and internet platforms and expanding faster than the international response to it.

For the United States and its allies in Asia, the North Korean dimension carries a second cost. The money that North Korea receives from forced labor enables its nuclear and ballistic programs and bolsters the networks that keep dictator Kim Jong Un's family in power. North Korea's overseas labor program has more than 100,000 workers across at least 17 countries, generating between $450 million and $800 million a year for the state.[32] Disrupting the trafficking would cut into Kim's coffers.

North Korean labor also transfers technical know-how. Technicians sent to Alabuga will return to Pyongyang with invaluable lessons from working at a mass-production drone assembly line, having observed Russian refinements to the constantly improving Geran drones. A North Korea with a more sophisticated and growing drone program poses a new order of military challenge for South Korea, Japan, and U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific.

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31 Bermudez Jr. et al., "A Closer Look at the Yelabuga UAV Factory."

32 *The DPRK's Use of Overseas Labour to Violate and Evade UN Sanctions*, Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, September 16, 2026, https://msmt.info/Publications/detail/MSMT%20Report/4232.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The State Department should lead efforts to identify the human trafficking networks and enablers.

- The U.S. Department of State, in coordination and consultation with the U.S. intelligence community and other governments whose citizens have been victims of the human trafficking networks connected to the Alabuga drone factory, should conduct and publicly release an unclassified, comprehensive assessment to identify the networking platforms, recruiters, program managers, and intermediaries that enable the system.

The Treasury Department should coordinate work to disrupt the human trafficking network and disable its enablers.

- The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), in coordination with the Department of State, should further investigate, identify, and sanction individuals and entities that enable the operation of the Alabuga recruitment network. The Global Magnitsky Act authorizes the United States to impose and implement sanctions on foreign individuals responsible for or complicit in gross human rights abuses.
- The departments of State and Treasury should provide social media companies, such as Facebook owner Meta, with information identifying sanctioned or documented recruitment actors and urge Meta and other social media companies to label, ban, or remove accounts used to lure and recruit foreign workers to Alabuga.
- Social media platforms should also independently and actively investigate suspected accounts and coordinated recruitment networks. Meta has a precedent of banning accounts affiliated with Burma's military, such as Tatmadaw, from its platforms. That includes from Instagram in 2021.[33]

The United States, working through the United Nations, should establish a multilateral team to investigate the complex.

- The U.S. Governernment should convene a multilateral team of legal, human rights, and national security policy experts from allies and partners, including countries whose citizens are trafficked to Alabuga, to investigate and document evidence of human rights abuses.
- The team should develop comprehensive, actionable recommendations that extend beyond identifying and disrupting the network to include accountability measures, victim protection and remediation, and options to prevent further exploitation.
- The initiative could be modeled on the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT), which tracks North Korean sanctions violations and evasions for a group of 11 nations including the United States. The framework of the MSMT's recent investigation of North Korea's use of overseas labor to violate and evade U.N. sanctions could be used to coordinate evidence collection, assess cross-border activity, and develop joint policy responses.[34]

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33 Abigail Ng, "Facebook Bans Myanmar's Military Accounts after Deadly Coup," CNBC, February 25, 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/25/facebook-bans-myanmars-military-on-fb-instagram-platforms-over-coup.html.

34 *DPRK's Use of Overseas Labour*

Democratic allies and the international community should raise reputational costs for countries and corporations still operating in Yelabuga.

- Democracies should name the multinational companies operating in the Yelabuga special economic zone and press them to leave. The European Union suggested that countries and companies leave the Yelabuga special economic zone by Jan. 25, 2026. There were still several European firms and one American company operating within or adjacent to the special economic zone.[35]

The U.S. administration should build coalitions with allies and partners to counter CRINK threats.

- The U.S. government should continue to incorporate human rights considerations into national security policy priorities and recognize that regimes that violate their own citizens' human rights are more likely to pose a threat to the United States and its allies.

35 Alisa Yurchenko, "Investigation: Western Companies Miss Deadline to Exit Russia's Main Drone Production Site," *Kyiv Independent*, April 13, 2026, https://kyivindependent.com/investigation-eu-us-companies-still-operate-in-russias-main-drone-production-hub/.

CONCLUSION

CRINK is not a formal alliance, and its members often act bilaterally and according to their own interests. Yet their growing coordination demonstrates how authoritarian regimes can reinforce one another while challenging a rules-based global order, international norms, accountability, and respect for individual rights and human dignity. This can and must stop.

The contest between democracy and authoritarianism goes beyond the question of which system is superior. At its core is a more fundamental choice: Whether individuals exist to serve the state, or the state exists to protect the liberty and dignity of individuals. The choice is not and must not be abstract.

Authoritarianism does not stop at national borders. When dictators regard their citizens as instruments – or even expendable resources – of the state, rather than independent masters of their rights, dignity, and liberty, human lives and human dignity become political tools for pursuing geopolitical objectives. Labor can be exploited, wages confiscated, information controlled, and people deployed in service of the regime. What begins as repression at home can and will become a source of authoritarian power projection abroad; when the free world chooses not to listen and act, authoritarianism will become stronger.

The Yelabuga story is more than just a series of human rights abuse cases. It is a clear illustration of how CRINK regimes are coordinating with and supporting one another. The challenge this creates is that the United States no longer has the luxury of countering crises one by one.

Additionally, there is never a good time to neglect or deprioritize human rights. In fast-changing geopolitics, where transactionalism, interest-based relationships, and tit-for-tat diplomacy are cast as the currency of international politics, deprioritizing human rights may appear not only tempting but also pragmatic and strategic. It is not.

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