

“Civil Society Perspectives on Russia”

U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations

Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Subcommittee

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Opening Statement by Vladimir Kara-Murza Vice Chairman, Open Russia

Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Leahy, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this important hearing, and for the opportunity to testify before you.

This past Sunday, March 26, marked seventeen years since Vladimir Putin was elected president of Russia. It was not a flawless election—there were credible reports of ballot-stuffing and serious doubts about whether Mr. Putin had obtained the 50 percent required for a first-round victory—but it was the last thing we had that was at least close to a democratic vote¹. Not a single election held in Russia since then has been assessed by OSCE monitors as free and fair².

Elections have not been the only target of Mr. Putin’s regime. Independent media outlets—especially ones with significant reach—have been silenced through political or economic pressure, or by direct government action. Many of the leading NGOs have been designated as “foreign agents”—which in Russian is synonymous with “foreign spies”—under a law targeting groups that receive international funding. These include the Levada Center polling agency, the vote-monitoring Golos Association, and—in what appears to be a calculated insult—*Memorial*, a human rights group co-founded by Andrei Sakharov³.

The courts and law enforcement bodies have become tools of political repression. According to *Memorial*, there are currently one-hundred political prisoners in our country, a number comparable with the late Soviet period⁴. They include opposition activists and their family members, such as Sergei Udaltsov and Oleg Navalny; regular citizens jailed for participating in peaceful demonstrations; Ukrainians arrested after the annexation of Crimea, including filmmaker Oleg Sentsov; as well as Alexei Pichugin, the remaining hostage of the “Yukos case” that saw Russia’s largest oil company dismantled and its CEO, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, imprisoned for more than a decade for having the tenacity to support opposition parties and civil society groups.

¹ “And the Winner Is?” *The Moscow Times*, September 9, 2000

<http://old.themoscowtimes.com/sitemap/free/2000/9/article/and-the-winner-is/258951.html>

² Elections in Russia, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/russia>

³ Register of Foreign Agent NGOs, Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation (*in Russian*)

<http://unro.minjust.ru/NKOForeignAgent.aspx>

⁴ Current List of Russian Political Prisoners, Memorial Human Rights Center (*in Russian*)

<http://memohrc.org/pzk-list>

Last Sunday, tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets across the country to protest against government corruption. More than 1,500 people were arrested, and there are indications that the authorities may be preparing criminal charges against some of the participants⁵.

But there are worse fates than imprisonment. In the last several years, investigative journalists, opposition figures, human rights activists, anticorruption campaigners, and whistleblowers have met untimely deaths. In the most brazen political assassination in decades, Boris Nemtsov—former deputy prime minister and the most prominent opponent of Vladimir Putin—was gunned down two-hundred yards from the Kremlin. The organizers and masterminds of this crime have not been identified or apprehended.

Sometimes, there are near-misses—and one happens to be sitting before you. Twice in the past two years—in May 2015 and in February 2017, both times in Moscow—I experienced a sudden onset of symptoms consistent with poisoning that led to multiple organ failure and left me in a coma and on life-support. The official diagnosis was “toxic action by an undefined substance.” Both times doctors assessed my chances of survival at about five percent, so I am very fortunate—and very grateful—to be here today.

But these crackdowns and repressions are only one side of the story. Because even in this atmosphere—and in spite of it—there are people and organizations that continue to work to promote and defend human rights, political freedoms, and the rule of law in Russia. Our movement, Open Russia, founded by Mr. Khodorkovsky, has launched a number of initiatives aimed at supporting civil society. Our Human Rights Project provides legal aid to those who face politically motivated prosecution, and in several cases has been successful in keeping activists out of prison⁶. Open Russia offers financial support to the families of political prisoners. Our Open Media project provides a platform for media startups that raise awareness of the issues avoided by state-run news outlets⁷. The Open Russia University is a growing online educational platform that seeks to present an unbiased view of contemporary Russia and create a community of informed citizens⁸. Open Russia’s election project is directed at supporting and training a new generation of democratic activists by providing them with opportunities to gain experience in political campaigns and civic engagement⁹.

In fact, most of our work is directed at the new generation, the young people—people who will shape the future post-Putin Russia.

⁵ “Against Dimon and Corruption”, Radio Svoboda, March 26, 2017 (*in Russian*)
<http://www.svoboda.org/a/28391550.html>

⁶ Open Russia Human Rights Project. 2016 Report (*in Russian*)
<https://pravo.openrussia.org/otchet-2016/>

⁷ Open Media (*in Russian*)
<https://openrussia.org/media/704056/>

⁸ Open Russia University (*in Russian*)
<https://openuni.io>

⁹ Open Elections (*in Russian*)
<https://ov.openrussia.org>

To work toward that post-Putin Russia is a task for Russian citizens. Contrary to claims by the Kremlin's propaganda, we never ask the United States for any political support. All we ask is that you are honest about what is happening in Russia. The statutes of the OSCE—of which both the U.S. and Russia are members—stipulate that “issues relating to human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law... are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned.”¹⁰ We also ask that you stay true to your values and not enable abusive or corrupt behavior. More than four years ago, this Congress passed the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act—groundbreaking legislation that imposed U.S. visa bans and asset freezes on Russian officials involved in human rights violations. Boris Nemtsov called it “the most pro-Russian law in the history of any foreign parliament.”¹¹ Forty-four individuals have been sanctioned under this law, including one of Mr. Putin's top lieutenants, General Alexander Bastrykin¹². We hope that the Magnitsky Act continues to be implemented to its full extent, without regard for rank or influence.

While taking a principled stand toward Vladimir Putin's regime, it is vital for the U.S. to continue to engage with Russia's civil society—including by maintaining public diplomacy programs; developing Russian-language media; creating opportunities for direct dialogue and people-to-people exchanges facilitated by special visa regimes, if necessary; and supporting the important work of organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy. This is not only about money. Much more importantly, it is about the message that the U.S. sends to Russia's civil society. Do you choose to engage or turn away?

It is also very important for the U.S. to appreciate the difference between Vladimir Putin's regime and Russia. Mr. Putin would certainly like you to equate the two. One of his close aides declared that “there is no Russia... if there is no Putin.”¹³ The Kremlin is trying to portray sanctions against itself and its actions, for example, in Ukraine as “sanctions on Russia.” Please don't help them. Words are important—including the words in the recently introduced Russia Sanctions Review Act. It is essential to make it clear that the U.S. does not seek to punish the Russian people for the actions of a regime they can neither unseat in a free election nor hold to account through independent media or a legitimate legislature.

Vladimir Putin will not be in power forever. Let us consider the long-term interests and prepare the groundwork for future cooperation between the United States and Russia by maintaining—even in these difficult times—an open, productive, and mutually beneficial dialogue between our peoples and our civil societies.

¹⁰ CSCE/OSCE Moscow Document

<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/14310?download=true>

¹¹ Testimony by the Hon. Boris Nemtsov, U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, June 13, 2013

https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Nemtsov_Testimony.pdf

¹² Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List, U.S. Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control

<https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/SDN-List/Pages/default.aspx>

¹³ “No Putin, No Russia,' Says Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff”, *The Moscow Times*, October 23, 2014

<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/no-putin-no-russia-says-kremlin-deputy-chief-of-staff-40702>