

Democracy and Human Rights Abuses in Russia: No End in Sight
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
April 26, 2017

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

Chairman Wicker, Co-Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Cardin, Ranking Member Hastings, Members of the Commission, thank you for holding this important hearing and for the opportunity to testify.

This coming Saturday, April 29, pro-democracy activists across Russia will take part in a nationwide campaign organized by the Open Russia movement with a single message: “Enough.” They will hold rallies and send petitions calling on Vladimir Putin to leave the Kremlin when his current term—officially third, in reality fourth—expires next spring. Mr. Putin has been in power for seventeen years. There is now an entire generation of Russians who have no memory of any other government.

This longevity has been the result of a deliberate suppression of the opposition, independent media and civil society, and continuous violations of the rights and freedoms guaranteed to Russian citizens by our Constitution and by our country’s commitments under the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Chief among these is the right to freely elect one’s own government. After March 2000, not a single national election in Russia—presidential or parliamentary—was assessed by OSCE observers as free and fair¹. Unequal media access, the removal of opposition candidates from the ballot, and outright fraud have become the unfortunate norm in Russian elections. The result has been a parliament devoid of real opposition—“not a place for discussion,” in the words of its own former speaker².

Major media outlets have also ceased to be places for discussion. Having taken control of all national television networks—the main source of news for Russian citizens—the Kremlin turned them into propaganda outlets that provide laudatory coverage of the authorities and portray Mr. Putin’s

¹ Elections in Russia. OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/russia>

² “Parliament is not a place for discussion.” *Kommersant*. December 12, 2011 (*in Russian*)
<http://kommersant.ru/doc/1838005>

opponents as a “fifth column” that works at the behest of foreign governments. Many of these opponents are in prison. According to *Memorial*, Russia’s most respected human rights organization, there are now 115 political prisoners in Russia—a number comparable with the late Soviet period³.

They include opposition activists and their family members, such as Sergei Udaltsov, Oleg Navalny, and Daria Polyudova; citizens jailed for taking part in antigovernment demonstrations, including construction engineer Ivan Nepomnyashchikh and history lecturer Dmitri Buchenkov (the latter was not even present at the rally for which he was charged—but a little Kafka never stopped the Russian judicial system); Ukrainians arrested after the annexation of Crimea, including the filmmaker Oleg Sentsov; and Alexei Pichugin, the remaining hostage of the “Yukos case” that saw the head of Russia’s largest oil company, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, imprisoned for more than a decade for having the tenacity to support opposition parties and expose government corruption.

Sometimes, political opponents are dealt with without a recourse to formal procedures. In October 2015, at a hearing of this Commission, I recalled a near-fatal poisoning I had experienced in Moscow earlier that year⁴. Today I could repeat that statement word for word, because I have now experienced this for the second time, also in Moscow, this past February. An identical picture: poisoning by an “undefined substance” leading to multiple organ failure and a coma. Doctors estimated the chance of survival at five percent, so I am very fortunate to be sitting here today.

Many of our colleagues have not been as fortunate. Several opposition activists, independent journalists, anticorruption campaigners, and whistleblowers have lost their lives in the last seventeen years. Two years ago, in the most brazen political assassination in modern Russia, opposition leader and former deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov was murdered on a bridge in front of the Kremlin. The official investigation is stalling: while the alleged perpetrators—all of them linked to the Kremlin-appointed

³ Current list of Russian political prisoners. *Memorial* Human Rights Center (*in Russian*)
<http://memohrc.org/pzk-list>

⁴ “Russian Violations of the Rule of Law: How Should the U.S. Respond?” U.S. Helsinki Commission Hearing, October 21, 2015. Testimony by Vladimir Kara-Murza
<https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/vkm-csce-testimony-21oct2015.pdf>

leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov—are on trial, the authorities have not pursued those who had ordered and organized the killing, and have refused to question potential persons of interest, including Mr. Kadyrov and the commander of the Russian National Guard, General Viktor Zolotov⁵.

Under the statutes of the OSCE—and contrary to repeated claims by Kremlin officials—human rights abuses in member states cannot be dismissed as an “internal affair” and are “matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States.”⁶ It is important that our OSCE partners speak openly and honestly about what is happening in Russia. It is also important—since human rights are a matter of international concern—that there be international accountability for those who violate them. The U.S. does have a mechanism for such accountability in the Magnitsky Act that provides for targeted sanctions on human rights abusers. This law should continue to be implemented to its full extent.

The main responsibility for ensuring respect for human rights, the rule of law, and democratic principles in Russia lies, of course, with Russian citizens. And I would respectfully disagree with the subtitle of this hearing that there is “no end in sight” to the abuses. Increasingly, the young generation in Russia—the very generation that grew up under Vladimir Putin—is demanding respect and accountability from those in power. Last month, protests against government corruption swept across Russia, with tens of thousands of people—mostly young people—taking to the streets despite arrests and intimidation⁷. This movement will continue. And these growing demands for accountability are the best guarantee that Russia will one day become a country where citizens can exercise the rights and freedoms to which they are entitled.

⁵ “Court refuses to call Kadyrov for questioning in Nemtsov murder case.” *RBC*. December 6, 2016 (*in Russian*)

<http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5846a3689a7947446ca6289e>

“Court rejects complaint in Boris Nemtsov murder case on the refusal to question Viktor Zolotov.” *Kommersant*. May 30, 2016 (*in Russian*)

<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3000683>

⁶ CSCE/OSCE Moscow Document

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

⁷ “A map of the protests.” *Meduza*. March 27, 2017 (*in Russian*)

<https://meduza.io/feature/2017/03/27/skolko-lyudey-vyshli-na-ulitsy-26-marta-i-skolko-zaderzhali-karta-protesta>