



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

**Hearing on
“Democracy and Human Rights Abuses in Russia: No End in Sight”
Wednesday, April 26, 2017
124 Dirksen Senate Office Building**

Opening Statement of Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, Commissioner

Good morning Chairmen Wicker and Smith, and Ranking Members Cardin and Hastings and thank you for holding this hearing before the Helsinki Commission to discuss the Grim State of Human Rights Abuses and Democracy in the Russian Federation.

Russia’s overt external aggression against countries such as Ukraine, its support for the Assad regime in Syria, and its efforts to disrupt western democracies are made possible by the internal repression of its own people.

For example, Russia has not had a free and fair election since March 2000.

It shocks the American conscience to grapple with the somber realities that opposition activists like witness Vladimir Kara-Murza are routinely assaulted or even murdered, giving rise to a new term: “Sudden Kremlin Death Syndrome.”

Political prisoner numbers now match those of the late Soviet era, and on March 26, tens of thousands of people in cities across 11 time zones protested widespread government corruption, with more than 1,000 arrested.

And more nationwide protests are expected on June 12th, the national holiday of the Russian Federation.

The Kremlin’s crackdown on civil society, media, and the Internet took a more sinister turn in 2015 as the government further intensified harassment and persecution of independent critics.

For the fourth year in a row, parliament has adopted laws and authorities engaged in repressive practices that increasingly isolated the country.

Against the backdrop of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine and sanctions against Russia over Crimea, anti-Western hysteria has been at its peak since the end of the Cold War.

This hearing will examine the grim state of human rights and democracy in the Russian Federation.

I look forward to hearing from the following witnesses scheduled to testify here today:

1. Vladimir Kara-Murza, Vice Chairman, Open Russia;
2. Rachel Denber, Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia Division, Human Rights Watch; and
3. Daniel Calingaert, Executive Vice President, Freedom House