



**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 Senator Roger F. Wicker, Chairman

The Commission will come to order, and good morning to everybody.

The 115th Congress has already, in its very first months, devoted considerable attention to threats posed by Russia – to the states of the former USSR, to all of Europe, and even to the United States through Russia’s interference in our very own elections, a matter that remains under investigation by multiple U.S. authorities.

What we have not yet done, and this goes well back into the 114th Congress, is take a long hard look at the continuing violations of democratic norms and human rights within Russia itself, so I am happy that my first hearing as Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission can focus on this very important and timely topic.

I am especially glad that we have such an expert panel of witnesses to testify today on the impact these abuses have, not only on the people of the Russian Federation, but on the larger international community by effectively silencing the voices of the opposition within Russia and giving the Putin regime a free hand to act with impunity abroad.

We will begin with somebody who is no stranger to me, to the Helsinki Commission, nor to the halls of Congress thanks to his tireless work promoting democracy in Russia. Despite the Putin regime’s efforts to silence him through two poisonings, Mr. Vladimir Kara-Murza is still with us today, and I can’t think of anybody in a better position to tell us about the intense – and all too often lethal – pressure being applied to brave Russians like him who engage in opposition politics. Vladimir, thank you for joining us and for your courage and that of your family in facing the hardships that unfortunately befall critics of the Putin regime.

We are also very fortunate to have representatives of two of the top independent organizations promoting human rights and freedom of expression across the globe – Human Rights Watch and Freedom House. Rachel Denber will be sharing with us highlights of her years of work following human rights issues in Russia for Human Rights Watch, including the shocking stories of murder and repression in Chechnya that have recently come to light. Human Rights Watch has been the only international organization actively following that case.

Daniel Calingaert is the Executive Vice President of Freedom House, an organization that needs no introduction here. Freedom House's annual publications, *Freedom in the World*, *Freedom of the Press* and *Freedom of the Net*, have been invaluable in helping Congress and proponents of the freedom of expression and democracy all over the world track both progress and backsliding on these fundamental freedoms around the globe. In the case of Russia, the trends have not been positive, and we look forward to hearing much more about that.

Let me offer a word about the portraits of people you may have noticed on your way in, and which you will also see here at the front of the room. These represent several well-known political prisoners currently behind bars in Russia, we will hear about many of them during this morning's hearing. Let me stress that the people portrayed here represent only a fraction of the dozens of political prisoners held in Russia – indeed, some groups following this issue, like the NGO “Memorial,” estimate the number is in the hundreds. We wanted to be able to help our audience see at least a few of the faces behind some of the names you will hear today and, we will of course have much more information on political prisoners in the material that will be submitted for the written record.

We hope to accomplish two things at today's hearing. First of all, we want to draw much-needed attention to the ongoing serious abuses of human rights in Russia, to remind all members of Congress and the American public that the situation in Russia is grave and could continue to deteriorate. Secondly, with our witnesses' assistance, we would like to evaluate how our current approach to human rights abuses in Russia is working, and to consider what we can do to get things back on a positive trajectory in Russia. Ultimately, a Russia that fully respects all of its citizen's human rights, that allows for full freedom of expression and religion and for free and fair elections will be a place where all Russians can prosper. Those improvements would also make Russia a much better neighbor, and would go a long way towards promoting peace and security in the entire Eurasian region.

We have a lot to discuss, so I'd like to now yield to Senator Cardin.

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