

## **“Putin’s War on Truth: Propaganda and Censorship in Russia”**

Hearing at the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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### **Opening statement by Vladimir Kara-Murza**

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Co-Chairman Cohen, Members of the Commission, thank you for holding this important hearing and for the opportunity to testify before you.

On February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin launched two wars. One, which continues to this day, was his unprovoked and unlawful aggression against Ukraine. The other, which was concluded effectively and swiftly, was his *blitzkrieg* against what remained of independent media in Russia.

I say “what remained” because Putin’s drive against media freedom has been going on for decades. In fact, independent television became the first target of his regime when he came to power in the year 2000. We have a saying in Russian: «Кто нас обидит, три дня не проживет» (“Those who offend us won’t survive three days”). Almost in the exact keeping with this saying, on the fourth day of his inauguration in May 2000 Putin sent armed operatives from the tax police and the prosecution service to raid the offices of Russia’s largest private media holding.

Within a year, its flagship network, NTV — Russia’s most popular television channel known for its professional news coverage, honest political analysis, and hard-hitting satire, was seized by the state-run energy giant Gazprom in an early-dawn raid at Moscow’s Ostankino television center. By the summer of 2003, the remaining independent networks, TV6 and TVS, were taken down as well. Just as in Soviet times, the state established a complete monopoly on television — by far the leading source of information for Russian citizens. The fact that so many Russians have been brainwashed by the Kremlin’s propaganda is the direct result of this monopoly.

But until the beginning of this month, there were still pockets of independent media in Russia that gave our citizens access to the truth. The most prominent among them were Echo of Moscow radio, where I had the honour of hosting a weekly programme, and TV Rain, an online television network. Both were closed in the first days of Putin’s war against Ukraine. So were many other news outlets, both national and regional — including the highly respected TV2 in Tomsk. At the same time, the Russian government’s censorship agency, Roskomnadzor, blocked access to social media networks used by millions of Russians — including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. All of this happened within days.

I have been involved in Russian journalism and politics for more than twenty years. But it still shocked me how quickly this new “iron curtain” has descended.

Today, most Russians live in an Orwellian parallel reality created by the Kremlin’s propaganda. And I mean “Orwellian” in the literal sense. What’s being said on state television might as well have come out of George Orwell’s *1984*. War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength. Most Russians are not even aware of the horrendous war crimes committed by Putin in Ukraine. Those who speak out against this war are now liable for criminal prosecution. So are those who

simply *call* it a war. Up to 15 years in prison, according to a new law hurriedly passed by our so-called “parliament” and just as hurriedly signed by Putin, all in one day. And these new penalties target not only journalists or opposition activists. A Russian Orthodox Priest in Kostroma, Father Ioann Burdin, was charged, convicted, and fined for speaking out against war in his Sunday sermon. This is the reality of Russia under Putin.

Needless to say, only Russians can (and should) change the political situation in our country. That change is coming — and, I think, faster than many thought before February 24. But the world’s democracies have an important role to play — not only in standing in solidarity with Ukraine, but also in helping provide truth to the Russian people. Helping open the eyes of Russian society to the unspeakable crimes being committed supposedly on its behalf.

This has been done before. In Communist times, broadcasters such as Radio Free Europe, the BBC or Deutsche Welle beamed radio signals literally across the “iron curtain” to reach millions of people, in their own languages, inside the Soviet bloc. In the USSR itself, according to expert estimates, these radio broadcasts were listened to by some 30 million people — 15 percent of the adult population. Nothing beats totalitarian propaganda better than the truth. And when the Soviet system collapsed, it was primarily because it had been discredited and delegitimized in the eyes of its own people who saw its true nature.

If this was done with the technologies of the 1970s, it can be certainly done today. It is only a question of having the will and dedicating the resources. I want to thank you for holding this hearing and showing your commitment to doing both.