

24 April 2018

**Opening Statement by Vladimir V. Kara-Murza**  
**Vice-Chairman, Open Russia; Chairman, Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom**

Madam Chairperson, Members of the Commission, thank you for holding this important hearing and for the opportunity to testify before you.

Last month, the Russian Federation held what most of the world media, by force of habit, still referred to as a “presidential election”. On paper, we had political competition, multiple candidates, campaigning, and the casting of ballots—everything you would expect from a normal contest. But the reality of Russia’s 2018 vote had no more in common with a democratic election than the painted façades of “Potemkin Villages” had with real towns. All major media were under government control; voters were often subjected to pressure and coercion; ballot-stuffing was witnessed across the country; and several regions have reported Soviet-style “results” of 90 percent or more in favour of Vladimir Putin.<sup>1</sup>

But the truth is that these violations were largely irrelevant. In the most important sense, this election was rigged long before the first polling station has opened. Two prominent opposition leaders were planning to challenge Mr. Putin in 2018: Boris Nemtsov, former deputy prime minister; and Alexei Navalny, founder of the Anti-Corruption Foundation. Neither was on the ballot on 18 March: Nemtsov, because three years ago he was killed on a bridge steps away from the Kremlin; Navalny, because he was deliberately barred from standing by a Russian court sentence that the European Court of Human Rights has found “arbitrary”.<sup>2</sup>

It is not difficult to win an election when your opponents are not on the ballot.

As the head of the observer mission from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has stated, “choice without real competition, as we have seen here, is not real choice... Where the legal framework restricts many fundamental freedoms and the outcome is not in doubt, elections almost lose their purpose”.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the institutions that are supposed to safeguard the rights and freedoms of Russian citizens – guaranteed not only by our own Constitution, but by our country’s obligations under its membership in the OSCE and the Council of Europe – have long lost their purpose, turning

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<sup>1</sup> Golos, Preliminary Statement on the Results of the Observation of the 18 March 2018 Election for President of Russia (*in Russian*), 19 March 2018

<https://www.golosinfo.org/ru/articles/142563>

Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation, Official Results of the 18 March 2018 Election for President of Russia (*in Russian*)

[http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100084849066&vrn=100100084849062&region=0&global=1&sub\\_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vid=100100084849066&type=227](http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100084849066&vrn=100100084849062&region=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vid=100100084849066&type=227)

<sup>2</sup> *The Guardian*, 23 February 2016

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/24/russias-conviction-of-opposition-leader-alexei-navalny-arbitrary-european-court-says>

<sup>3</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Statement, 19 March 2018

<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/375661>

into mere decorations. Parliament has become a Kremlin rubber-stamp devoid of real opposition; “not a place for discussion”, in the apt description of its own former speaker.<sup>4</sup> The judicial system has become a tool for punishing opponents of the government. According to the latest (conservative) estimate by the Memorial Human Rights Center, there are currently 46 political prisoners in Russia, a number comparable with the late Soviet period.<sup>5</sup> They include Oleg Sentsov, a Crimean film director who protested against the annexation; Oleg Navalny, the brother and co-defendant of Alexei Navalny; and Alexei Pichugin, the remaining hostage of the Yukos case who, after fifteen years, is Russia’s longest-serving political prisoner. National television channels, brought under government control in the early years of Mr. Putin’s rule, serve as mouthpieces for official propaganda, providing laudatory coverage of the authorities and denouncing critics as “traitors” and “foreign agents”.

In fact, “foreign agent” is now an official designation, introduced by a recent law that targets non-governmental organisations. Some of the most respected Russian NGOs, including the Memorial Human Rights Center, the Golos vote-monitoring association, and the Levada Center polling agency, have been compulsorily (and slanderously) labeled as “foreign agents”, hindering their work in Russia.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, groups with an international reach – including our own Open Russia movement – have been designated as “undesirable organisations” and formally prohibited from operating in Russia altogether.<sup>7</sup> On the basis of this designation, websites associated with Open Russia have been blocked on the Prosecutor-General’s orders, as have the websites of several other opposition and media organisations. Just last week, the Russian authorities have begun blocking Telegram, a popular online messenger, in a further sign that the Kremlin is persisting in its attempts to control the Internet. Peaceful opposition demonstrations are routinely – and aggressively – dispersed by riot police and the newly established National Guard, with their participants detained and imprisoned. On one single day, 12 June 2017, more than 1,700 people were arrested across Russia for taking part in peaceful protests against government corruption.<sup>8</sup> “The Russian authorities’ stranglehold on freedom of expression grows tighter by the day”, *Amnesty International* said in a statement. “Peaceful protest is a fundamental human right, not a privilege to be bestowed or refused on a whim”.<sup>9</sup>

But arbitrary detention, slanderous propaganda, electoral disenfranchisement, and even long-term imprisonment are not the worst consequences for those who oppose the regime. Increasingly, murder or attempted murder is becoming a tool of political reprisals in Russia. I am very fortunate to be sitting before you today after being twice – in 2015 and in 2017 – subjected to near-fatal poisoning attempts in Moscow. Others have been less fortunate. Several high-profile

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<sup>4</sup> *Kommersant*. 14 December 2011 (*in Russian*)

<http://kommersant.ru/doc/1838005>

<sup>5</sup> Memorial Human Rights Center, Current List of Political Prisoners (*in Russian*)

<https://memohrc.org/ru/pzk-list>

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, Register of NGOs Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent (*in Russian*)

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

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, Register of Foreign and International Undesirable Organisations (*in Russian*)

<http://minjust.ru/ru/activity/nko/unwanted>

<sup>8</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 2017

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/13/opposition-leader-alexei-navalny-jailed-1500-arrested-protests/>

<sup>9</sup> *Amnesty International*, Statement, 12 June 2017

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/russia-mass-arrests-tighten-authorities-stranglehold-on-freedom-of-expression/>

critics of the Russian government have met with untimely death, both inside and outside of Russia. As I have mentioned, on 27 February 2015 opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was gunned down near the Kremlin in what was the most brazen and high-profile political assassination in modern Russia. Three years on, none of the organisers or masterminds have been identified or brought to justice. I want to take this opportunity to ask British representatives in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE to support efforts to engage international oversight over the Nemtsov case and not to allow the Russian authorities to forget and move on.

International oversight is essential for protecting human rights. In fact, the OSCE Moscow Document explicitly states 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”.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to assertions by Kremlin propaganda, we do not want Western governments to meddle in the political affairs of Russia. What we do expect from our fellow member states in the OSCE and the Council of Europe is that they abide by the fundamental principles of these organisations and exercise their right – indeed, their obligation – to call the Russian government to account when it violates those principles.

We also expect our fellow member states in the OSCE and the Council of Europe – the countries that pride themselves on democratic governance and the rule of law – not to enable corruption and human rights abuses in Russia by providing a welcome to their perpetrators. It is no secret that the people who are undermining the basic norms of democracy and the rule of law in Russia are often enjoying the protections and privileges provided by these same norms in the West, where they buy real estate, hold bank accounts, educate their children. And the United Kingdom has long been a favoured destination for these individuals and for their illicit assets. It is time to end this corrosive practice. Those who are complicit in corruption or human rights abuses in Russia – or anywhere else – should not be allowed to treat Western democracies as safe havens.

Last year, the British Parliament made an important first step by passing a government-proposed amendment to the Criminal Finances Act that provided law enforcement agencies with the ability to seize assets from people who have carried out “a gross human rights abuse” abroad.<sup>11</sup> It is my hope that the United Kingdom will now go further and will join the growing ranks of countries – including Canada and the United States – that have enacted full-fledged Magnitsky Laws imposing visa bans and asset freezes on those complicit in corrupt and abusive behaviour. It is time to bring long-overdue personal accountability for the perpetrators of such actions and to send a clear message that they will no longer be welcome on British soil or in British banks.

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<sup>10</sup> CSCE / OSCE Moscow Document, 3 October 1991  
<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/14310?download=true>

<sup>11</sup> Criminal Finances Act 2017  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/22/contents/enacted>