



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Human Rights in Russia** **on the 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Nemtsov Assassination**

**Thursday, February 27, 2020**

**10:00 – 11:30 a.m.**

**2200 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good morning and welcome to this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on the state of human rights in Russia.

I especially want to welcome our distinguished panel of witnesses. I thank them for their commitment to advancing human rights and for taking the time to share their expertise with us this morning.

Today is the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the brazen assassination of Boris Nemtsov, a respected opposition leader, democracy advocate and fierce critic of corruption and abuse of power under Vladimir Putin, president of the Russian Federation. Mr. Nemtsov was shot to death on February 27, 2015, within sight of the Kremlin – literally, right under Mr. Putin’s nose.

Five years after the fact, the killing is still unresolved. Just last week, the O.S.C.E. Parliamentary Assembly issued a report calling for a new and full investigation of the assassination as a first step to address a climate of impunity. The Swedish Member of Parliament who led the inquiry into the case has submitted a statement for the record for this hearing.

One of the hallmarks of a society governed by the rule of law is that those who criticize or oppose a sitting government are able to express their views and act on them without fear of reprisal, or worse.

But over the years, a number of opposition-minded or critical Russian journalists, human rights activists, politicians, whistleblowers and others have been reported murdered or have died under mysterious circumstances, both in Russia and overseas.

Boris Nemtsov was one of them.

Others were shot to death before him:

- Paul Klebnikov, journalist and editor of Forbes, in 2004;
- Anna Politkovskaya, journalist, writer and human rights activist, in 2006;
- Natalya Estemirova, human rights activist and board member of Memorial, in 2009.

Alexander Litinenko, a former spy and dissident, was poisoned in London in 2006.

Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian accountant and auditor who investigated corruption, died in prison in 2009 after being deprived of health care and beaten.

This is not an exhaustive list.

I encourage all of us to take this moment to remember Boris Nemtsov and the many others whose lives have been cut short because they were an obstacle to the unceasing efforts of some Russian leaders, including Mr. Putin, to consolidate authoritarian rule in Russia.

Unfortunately, as we will hear this morning, human rights violations in Russia are not limited to these killings.

Since 2012, the Russian government has imposed increasingly broad restrictions on the practice of freedom of assembly. Police routinely break up protests by force. Participants are detained on a mass scale and some end up in prison.

Laws restrict freedom of expression and access to information and enable widespread digital surveillance.

Laws and policies have been used to target members of the LGBTQI community. In 2017, more than 100 men were rounded up in Chechnya for suspected homosexuality. Some were beaten and tortured, and at least three died.

A second round of detentions and torture of individuals believed to be gay happened in the winter of 2018-2019. Yelena Grigoryeva, an LGBT activist, was murdered in July 2019.

Today we will also hear about restrictions on religious freedom that target Jehovah's Witnesses among others.

Of the 311 cases of political prisoners that the prominent Russian human rights organization Memorial has documented, a six-fold increase since 2015, 248 of them are members of prohibited religious organizations.

We will hear about restrictions that limit the ability of civic and media organizations, including environmental organizations, to receive financial support from abroad, and the effort to stigmatize them by forcing them to identify as "foreign agents."

As of this month, the Russian government has classified 71 NGOs and some U.S.-funded broadcasters as foreign agents. Another 19 organizations have been barred from Russia for "undesirable" activities said to threaten the constitutional order.

The targeted organizations are a distinguished group: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America, Memorial, the National Endowment for Democracy, N.D.I., I.R.I., the Atlantic Council, the German Marshall Fund, the MacArthur Foundation, the Open Society Foundations.

Clearly a bunch of rabble rousers.

Here's the thing.

Russia claims to be a great power. But it consistently fails to behave like one.

As a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, Russia is obligated to uphold the U.N. Charter, including the commitment to promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.

As a state party to the major international human rights treaties and a member of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Russia is obligated to guarantee all human rights for all its people.

But it does not do so.

We in Congress have taken steps to respond to human rights abuses in Russia. We passed the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012 that I authored and which has been used to sanction some of those responsible for abuses in Chechnya and for the murder of Paul Klebnikov.

Russia is on the Special Watch List created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, and is designated a Tier 3 country under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

So we have acted. The question today is what more we can do – not only to respond to human rights abuses, but also to support efforts in Russia to prevent abuses in the first place, and to end the rampant impunity which allows them to continue. I look forward to hearing the witnesses' recommendations in this regard.

Without objection, I enter into the record your testimonies and the following:

- A statement from Ms. Margareta Cederholt, Swedish Member of Parliament, President of Parliamentarian for Global Action, and the special rapporteur for the Nemtsov Enquiry of the O.S.C.E. Parliamentary Assembly, and excerpts from the enquiry's final report.
- An excerpt from the *Congressional Record* for June 27, 2017 recording the debate and approval by unanimous consent of House Resolution 351 condemning the abduction, detention and torturing of over 100 men in Chechnya due to their actual or suspected sexual orientation.
- A statement from Congressman David Cicilline of Rhode Island.
- A statement from the Human Rights Campaign.

I will now introduce our witnesses.