



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Human Rights in Russia on the 5th Anniversary of the Nemtsov Assassination

Thursday, February 27, 2020

10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

2200 Rayburn House Office Building

Excerpts of Remarks by Rep. Christopher H. Smith

Good morning. Today's Hearing marks five years since the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, a true advocate for democracy and freedom of speech in Russia.

It is tragic that it sometimes takes a death to put a problem into focus, but his death was not the end of his movement. I would like to thank my co-chair, Congressman McGovern, for honoring Mr. Nemstov's memory by convening this hearing so that the Commission can continue to shine a light on human rights abuses in Russia.

Like many of you, I was shocked to hear about the brutal murder of Boris Nemtsov. It should also shock us, though perhaps not surprise us, that those who masterminded this murder are still at large.

We similarly saw a lack of true accountability with the murder of Sergei Magnitsky. Yes, people were disciplined, trials of doctors were held, money was recovered. Two laws in this country named after Sergei Magnitsky were enacted to address grand corruption and gross violations of internationally-recognized human rights, first in Russia, and then globally. Jim and I introduced the House version of the Global Magnitsky Act. But were the masterminds ever fully brought to Justice?

We need to hold those who call the shots accountable, not just those that fire them.

When I chaired Helsinki Commission, I had the opportunity to meet Ms. Zhanna Nemtsova, Boris' daughter, at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. In addition to her courage and powerful testimony, she stated that "Sunshine" is what the Russians fear the most. In truly undemocratic fashions, they want to shut down conversation on sensitive subjects: so, let's shine a light today on the very real human rights abuses in Russia.

I want to focus for just a moment on one issue: the illegal seizure of corporate assets by individuals and entities connected to the Putin-government.

Perhaps some of you are aware of the plight of Igor Bitkov and his family. The Helsinki Commission held a hearing on this businessman who defied the Kremlin, the long-arm of which caught up to him and his family in Guatemala, where they sought refuge.

The Bitkovs ran a successful timber and paper company in Russia. Igor was asked to support Putin's United Party. But because Igor wanted to remain independent, he became a target. When he and his company were economically vulnerable, were targeted by predatory state-owned banks. They were given 48 hours to pay hundreds of millions of dollars, and then faced fabricated fraud charges – a practice known as "reiderstvo." The Bitkovs received death

threats. They were assaulted. Their daughter was raped by goons. They fled Russia, eventually arriving in Guatemala, under assumed names and using false papers.

The Russians tracked them down in 2013. VTB Bank – an entity sanctioned by the US Treasury Department as an agent of the Russian government -- corrupted a supposed anti-corruption body, and Igor was sentenced to 19 years in prison, and his wife and daughter to 14 years. Yes, they used false names and obtained false documents to save themselves. The sentence they received was utterly disproportionate, and those Guatemalan officials who were complicit in selling false papers went unpunished.

Today the Bitkovs are out of prison and under house arrest where they remain, thanks in large part to the efforts of Bill Browder, a name known to many here, the father of the Magnitsky Act and thus one could say the grandfather of the Global Magnitsky Act. Mr. Bitkov has recently joined the Center for Business Transparency and Countering Corporate Raids in Russia, a London-based organization, as a co-director. This will give him a platform to spread the word about corruption in Russia and the thuggish practice of corporate raiding by State-affiliated actors and their corrupt cronies.

I will conclude with one other point. Russia is not just a self-contained bad actor. It works to consistently spread its influence throughout the world, from Ukraine to Syria to the Central African Republic, where we have seen Russia seeking to gain access to gold mines aided by Wagner Group mercenaries. Russia, despite its reduced power since the days of the Soviet Union, has played a weak hand extremely well, asserting its influence throughout the world, exploiting vulnerabilities. I hope we might hear some testimony today regarding Russia's international influence.

With that, I look forward to hearing our witnesses' testimonies.