



OPEN RUSSIA

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The Hon. Bob Corker, Chairman
The Hon. Ben Cardin, Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee

January 9, 2017

Dear Senators:

December 31, 2016 marked seventeen years since Vladimir Putin assumed power in Russia. His nearly generation-long rule has been marked by the dismantlement of the nascent democratic institutions that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Freedom of the media has been an early target, with independent television networks either shut down or transferred under state control. Most Russian media outlets today serve as mouthpieces for government propaganda, with Kremlin critics denounced as “national traitors.” In its 2016 World Press Freedom index, *Reporters Without Borders* ranked Russia 148th of 180 countries¹. Some of the most respected nongovernmental organizations have been designated as “foreign agents”—which in Russian is synonymous with “foreign spies”—under a new law passed on the Kremlin’s initiative².

Neither the executive nor the legislative branch of the Russian government are products of a democratic election. Elections have turned into a largely meaningless ritual, with opposition candidates often disqualified from the ballot, and with voting marred by intimidation and fraud. After 2000, no national election in Russia has been assessed by international observers as free and fair. This includes the most recent parliamentary election in September 2016. In its final report, the OSCE/ODIHR mission has concluded that “democratic commitments continue to be challenged and the electoral environment was negatively affected by restrictions to fundamental freedoms and political rights, firmly controlled media and a tightening grip on civil society³.”

The judiciary and law enforcement are used to punish the government’s political opponents. According to *Memorial*, Russia’s leading human rights group,

¹ *Reporters Without Borders*, 2016 World Press Freedom Index <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

² Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, Register of NGOs acting as foreign agents (in Russian) <http://unro.minjust.ru>

³ Russian Federation State Duma Elections, 18 September 2016, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/russia/290861?download=true>

there are currently 102 political prisoners in the country—a number comparable with the late Soviet period⁴. They include protesters jailed for peaceful antigovernment demonstrations, such as Ildar Dadin; opposition activists and their family members, including Sergei Udaltsov and Oleg Navalny; as well as Alexei Pichugin, the remaining hostage of the “Yukos case” that saw Russia’s largest private oil company seized by the state in a process that the European Court of Human Rights found to have been in violation of its rights⁵.

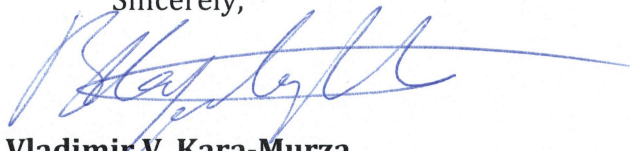
But there are higher risks than slander or imprisonment for the those who oppose the regime. On February 27, 2015, Boris Nemtsov, former deputy prime minister and leader of Russia’s pro-democracy opposition, was killed by five gunshots in the back as he walked home over the Bolshoi Moskvoretsky Bridge, two-hundred yards from the Kremlin wall. The investigation into his murder is stalling: while the alleged gunmen—all of them linked to Kremlin-backed Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov—have been apprehended, attempts to pursue the organizers were blocked by Gen. Alexander Bastrykin, the chairman of Russia’s Investigative Committee⁶.

It is not the task of outside powers to influence the political situation in Russia. Only Russian citizens can and should do that. But it is important to consider the nature of our current government in the context of international relations.

It is also important to remember that, according to the statutes of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—of which both the United States and Russia are full members— “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 concerned⁷.”

I trust that you will take these issues into account as you consider the nomination for Secretary of State and the next steps in U.S.–Russia relations.

Sincerely,



Vladimir V. Kara-Murza
Vice Chairman, Open Russia

⁴ List of people recognized as political prisoners by *Memorial* Human Rights Center (in Russian) <http://memohrc.org/pzk-list>

⁵ ECHR, *OA O Neftyanaya Kompaniya YUKOS v. Russia*, Application no. 14902/04 [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{"fulltext":\["yukos"\],"documentcollectionid2":\["GRANDCHAMBER"\],"C_HAMBER"},"itemid":\["001-145730"\]}\]](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{)

⁶ “RBC Investigation: Where the Nemtsov Case Has Led” (in Russian) *RBC*, January 20, 2016 <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/20/01/2016/569e4b2a9a794709eaff2a9d>

⁷ 1991 CSCE/OSCE Moscow Document <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/14310?download=true>