

**A Dangerous Slide Backwards:
Russia's Deteriorating Human Rights Situation**

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Joint hearing: Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy, and Global Women's Issues / Subcommittee on European Affairs

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Opening Statement by Hon. Boris Nemtsov

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Chairwoman Boxer, Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Paul, Ranking Member Johnson, esteemed Members of the Committee, I want to thank you for holding this timely and topical hearing and for giving me the opportunity to share my views on the situation in Russia.

With Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in May 2012, Russia's authoritarian regime has transitioned to a new stage of development—from the "sovereign democracy" characterized by election fraud, media censorship and the harassment of the opposition, to overt political repression. Critics of Mr. Putin's government—from opposition leaders to rank-and-file activists—are being put up for political show trials. The case of the participants of the May 2012 anti-Putin rally (the so-called "Bolotnaya case"); the case of anticorruption campaigner Alexei Navalny, and the possible third criminal case against Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's most prominent political prisoner, are only some of the examples of a rapidly worsening situation. Meanwhile, new laws targeting the freedom of assembly, expanding the definition of "treason," and labeling NGOs that receive funding from abroad as "foreign agents," (which in Russian is synonymous with "foreign spies") show that the regime is no longer satisfied with mere political control and seeks to subject society to fear and submission.

In this context, attempts by some in the West, including in the United States, to adopt a *realpolitik* approach and to conduct "business as usual" with the Putin regime contradict the most basic values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Such policy is also counterproductive, since the Kremlin considers it as a sign of weakness—and, therefore, as an invitation to behave even more aggressively, both at home and abroad.

This coming Monday, G8 leaders—including Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin—will gather for a summit in Northern Ireland. The agenda does not include any mention of human rights abuses in Russia. The G8 is still known as the group of leading industrialized democracies, which sounds increasingly grotesque given the situation in Russia. It would be more appropriate to refer to the group as "G7 plus Putin."

Last year, the U.S. Congress adopted the most pro-Russian law in the history of any foreign parliament. The Magnitsky Act, directed against crooks and abusers, finally ends the impunity for those who violate the rights and steal the money of Russian citizens. According to a recent poll by the Levada Center, 44 percent of Russians support the Magnitsky Act (with just 21 percent against, and 35 percent holding no firm opinion)—and this despite the massive Kremlin propaganda.

Unfortunately, the initial public list of violators that was published by the U.S. Administration in April includes only 18 names—none of them high-ranking. Too many of those responsible for repression and human rights abuses have been let off the hook. This is a grave strategic error. I hope that it will be corrected in the nearest future.

It is our task—the task of Russian citizens—to bring about democratic changes in our country. This cannot be done from outside. But if the U.S. wants to show solidarity with the Russian people, the best way to do it is to implement the Magnitsky Act in full accordance with its original intent.