

Opening statement to Senate Foreign Affairs Committee

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Allow me to commence by asserting that the notion of exclusively domestic repression is a misconception. Any malevolent regime, if left unchecked in its pursuit of suppressing domestic competitors, critics, or inconveniences, will inevitably extend its repressive machinery beyond its borders. Initially directed toward its own citizens globally, this apparatus ultimately targets anyone perceived to obstruct its perpetual authority.

Over the course of nearly a decade, I and my investigative partners have scrutinized Russia's repressive operations, encompassing both judicial and extrajudicial methods, against its own citizens. Our investigative team, comprised of colleagues from Bellingcat, The Insider, and Der Spiegel, has laid bare a systemic, industrial-scale repressive machine. This apparatus targets hundreds of Russian political activists, journalists, and former intelligence officers who have been perceived as having turned against the regime. The overarching objectives of these repressive operations appear to be either assassination or intimidation through attempted assassinations.

While the initial belief was that these repressive measures exclusively targeted Russian citizens or former citizens, a broader scope became evident. Notable instances include the poisoning of Russian activists on Russian soil, such as Vladimir Kara-Murza twice, and the near-fatal poisoning of Alexei Navalny in August 2020. Beyond Russia's borders, individuals like Sergey Skripal and his daughter Yulia barely survived Novichok poisonings by a group of GRU spies in Salisbury. An innocent and random British woman became an unintended victim of this bungled operation. Additionally, at least seven men of Chechen origin were killed by undercover agents of the FSB's Vypel unit in Turkey and Germany. The most recent victim, Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, was shot and killed by an FSB assassin in a crowded park in Berlin.

As our investigations unfolded, it became apparent that Russia's assassination and intimidation attempts were not confined to Russians alone. In 2015, a group of GRU spies poisoned a Bulgarian arms manufacturer supplying defensive munitions to Ukraine. In the past 12 months, my Russian investigative partner Roman Dobrokhov and I have become targets of both judicial and extrajudicial persecution. Roman's residence in Moscow was subjected to a police raid in front of his minor children, and he narrowly evaded arrest under the scrutiny of approaching FSB operatives.

Last Christmas, I found myself on Russia's official wanted list, with a succinct explanation: "wanted for a crime," without specifics, depriving me of any opportunity for a defense. Barely a month later, law enforcement agencies advised against my return to Austria, citing a clear and present danger posed by a clandestine Russian intelligence operation targeting both me and my colleague. I discovered that Russian intelligence officers had surveilled and trailed Roman and me for nearly two years, monitoring our movements and awaiting the opportune moment to strike.

Regrettably, I am not at liberty to disclose the specifics of this operation as the case is currently under official investigation in several countries. My, as well as Roman's, work as journalists has been restricted to our new, accidental, domiciles – myself in the United States and Roman in the United Kingdom. The constraints on travel for work or leisure with our families persist, as uncertainty looms regarding which country may choose to enforce Kremlin's extradition requests or where undercover agents may await us.

In the past year, the Kremlin's transnational repressive operations have seen a surge in both frequency and audacity. Judicially, or within the questionable semblance of justice practiced in Russia, arrest warrants have been issued for U.S. journalist Masha Gessen and Facebook's spokesperson Andy Stone. Similar to my case, Andy stands accused of "a crime," leaving the world puzzled about what crime that is, and him unable to disprove his alleged criminality.

These measures, however, pale in comparison to the Kremlin's extrajudicial, kinetic operations against Russian journalists opposing the war or the regime. In the past year alone, at least three women – two journalists and one political activist – have exhibited signs of poisoning with prohibited chemical agents. These cases, involving Elena Kostyuchenko, Irina Babloyan, and Natalia Arno, remain unresolved, but align with Russia's GRU methods. Our investigation has exposed the infiltration of GRU undercover spies within Russian human rights groups and diaspora organizations, with a recent case involving an undercover GRU officer infiltrating human rights organizations, participating in sanction-list drafting bodies, and seeking proximity to Gary Kasparov, an outspoken critic of Putin's regime.

The fallacy of domestic-only repression becomes evident. Russia's regime has been permitted to persecute its opponents domestically without legal consequences for decades. Adhering to the outdated principle of legal sovereignty, civilized countries abstain from conducting independent judicial inquiries into incidents such as the poisoning of Kara-Murza or Navalny, or the assassination of Boris Nemtsov. Russian colleagues, journalists, and activists have long shouted warnings to Western leaders against hand-shaking and dancing at weddings with Putin, cautioning against energy deals that embolden him while he suppresses dissent domestically. Unfortunately, Western leaders only heeded these warnings when Putin invaded a neighboring country, and there is a risk of them growing weary amid the protracted war.

It is imperative to acknowledge that as long as rogue states like Russia benefit from judicial sovereignty over their own people, they remain incentivized to treat the rest of the world as a realm for pursuing their so-called national interest against an expanding list of targets.