

## **“Exposing and Demanding Accountability for Kremlin Crimes Abroad”**

U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment

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### **Opening Statement by Vladimir Kara-Murza**

Chairman, Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom

Vice President, Free Russia Foundation

Chairman Keating, Representative Wilson, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this important hearing and for the opportunity to testify before you.

Two decades ago, when Vladimir Putin first came to power, many in the West were asking who this man was and where he would take Russia. I remember the day I and many of my colleagues in the Russian democracy movement knew the answer. On December 20, 1999, Mr. Putin, then still prime minister, went to the former KGB headquarters on Lubyanka Square in Moscow to officially unveil a memorial plaque to Yuri Andropov.

Andropov was someone who epitomized both the domestic repression and the external aggressiveness of the Soviet system. As ambassador in Hungary, he was among those who oversaw the 1956 invasion. As chairman of the KGB, he directed the suppression of the domestic opposition, targeting and imprisoning dissidents.

Russia is a country of symbols. A symbol like a memorial plaque to Andropov is unmistakable.

Domestic repression and external aggression often go hand in hand for authoritarian regimes. Mr. Putin has demonstrated this linkage most clearly. His early years were dedicated to consolidating his rule at home – turning Russia from an imperfect democracy into a perfect dictatorship. Independent television networks were taken down; political opponents were exiled and imprisoned; elections were turned into meaningless rituals; and parliament into a rubberstamp. In the most high-profile political assassination in modern Russia, in February 2015 opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was gunned down in front of the Kremlin. To this day, the organizers and masterminds of his murder remain unidentified and unindicted.

But autocrats rarely stop at their own borders. The invasion of Georgia; the military incursions in eastern Ukraine; the annexation of Crimea – this is only what was done by official means. In many other instances, the Kremlin hid behind plausible – or less than plausible – deniability. A slate of murders and attacks against opponents or perceived “traitors” abroad – from the United Kingdom to Germany to Austria – serves as a case in point.

The Kremlin has set up a shadow security force – a private mercenary organization known as the Wagner Group and overseen by close Putin confidant Yevgeniy Prigozhin – to carry out military action, subversive operations, and disinformation campaigns abroad. Wagner mercenaries have been fighting in eastern Ukraine; supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria – where they led a direct assault on U.S. troops; operating in Libya against the internationally recognized

government; propping up Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela in the face of popular protests; and effectively running several countries in Africa, most notably the Central African Republic, where three Russian journalists – Orkhan Dzhemal, Kirill Radchenko, and Alexander Rastorguyev – were murdered in July 2018 while investigating Wagner’s activities.

In the absence of an independent judicial system, a democratically elected parliament, and a viable free press in Russia, the Kremlin must be held accountable for its abuses through international mechanisms.

I would like to emphasize three areas in particular.

The U.S. legislative framework provides for targeted sanctions against individuals responsible for human rights abuse. I am referring, of course, to the Magnitsky Act and the Global Magnitsky Act, which have been used by the U.S. government to sanction, for example, an organizer in the assassination of Boris Nemtsov and the perpetrators of the murder of Alexander Litvinenko. These laws are effective and should be used more actively.

Individual Congressional measures are important for focusing attention on these abusers and countering the impunity they have become used to at home. In this regard, I would like to highlight House Resolution 996 that designates the activities of Yevgeniy Prigozhin and the Wagner Group as a threat to U.S. national security and urges further sanctions in coordination with the European Union. I want to take this opportunity to thank the Chairman and Ranking Member of this Subcommittee, Rep. William Keating (D-Ma.) and Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-Il.), for co-sponsoring this resolution, and express my hope that it will be passed in the current Congress.

Third and very important. As you know, last week Vladimir Putin signed constitutional amendments that waive presidential term-limits and allow him to remain in power until 2036. This measure was rubberstamped in a plebiscite that violated the most basic democratic standards and that was widely assessed as fraudulent. As the bipartisan leaders of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-Fla.) and Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.), have said, “state-sponsored fraud, coercion, and obfuscation make it impossible to know the true will of the Russian people.” By flagrantly subverting term-limits, Mr. Putin is becoming illegitimate not only de facto, but also de jure – in the same league with rogue dictators who had used this trick before him. This change should be reflected in policy. In particular, the leaders of Western democracies should not afford Mr. Putin the prestige and legitimacy he no longer has a claim to – be it in the form of invitations to international summits or high-level bilateral visits.

I look forward to the day Russia returns to the G8 as a full member. But this should only happen once my country has a democratically elected government that will respect the rights of its own people and behave as a responsible citizen on the global stage.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify and look forward to your questions.