

HELSINKI COMMISSION
THE LONG ARM OF INJUSTICE: DID A UN COMMISSION FOUNDED TO FIGHT
CORRUPTION HELP THE KREMLIN DESTROY A RUSSIAN FAMILY?

Statement for the Record
Commissioner Marco Rubio
April 27, 2018

Thank you Co-chair Smith for convening this important and timely hearing of the Helsinki Commission titled “The Long Arm of Injustice: Did a UN Commission Founded to Fight Corruption Help the Kremlin Destroy a Russian Family.”

As I am unable to attend today’s hearing, I would like to submit a statement for the record on the mistreatment of the Bitkov family by the Russian government and the apparent miscarriage of justice that has so far unfolded in Guatemala.

In 2008, the Bitkovs had their business stolen by a Kremlin-associated bank—which is currently under U.S. sanctions—and were forced from their home in Russia after threats from the Putin regime and its cronies, just like so many other entrepreneurs over the past two decades.

Having lost their business and their homeland, the Bitkovs fled to several countries before finally landing in Guatemala in hopes of a safe and secure future. But, in Putin’s Russia, merely stealing the Bitkovs livelihood wasn’t enough. The Kremlin and those associated with it have perpetrated an international campaign of aggression against the Bitkovs, pressuring the Guatemalan government—including troublingly, the Guatemalan judiciary—to prosecute the entire Bitkov family on potentially trump-up charges.

Unfortunately for the rule of law in Guatemala, Moscow seemed to have found a willing partner in the International Commission on Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), which was set-up through the auspices of the United Nations to prosecute official corruption and political intimidation, not participate in it. I am concerned that CICIG, a commission funded by the United States, had potentially been manipulated by radical elements and Russia’s campaign against the Bitkovs in Guatemala. And that this, in turn, may have led to the Bitkovs’ suspiciously long prison sentences for crimes that normally would be afforded administrative fines, if any penalty at all.

Moreover, the conditions that the Bitkovs have endured during their incarceration have been deplorable, as they have suffered malnourishment, disease, and the separation of the family, including the placement of Igor and Irina’s youngest child in an orphanage against their expressed wishes.

What all of this adds up to is Putin and his cronies apparently settling scores in the Western Hemisphere and undermining Guatemala’s anti-corruption watchdog.

This miscarriage of justice cannot be tolerated and today’s hearing is a strong first step in bringing this matter to light. It is important for both Kremlin and Guatemalan officials to understand that the world sees what is happening and will not accept Russian malign influence in the Western Hemisphere or the destruction of Guatemalan judiciary.

I was pleased to learn that on Thursday, April 26th, the Bitkov family was granted a protection order by the Guatemalan Constitutional Court.

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I am confident that the Guatemalan government under the leadership of President Morales will ensure this family's safety as they close this horrific chapter in their lives and begin a new journey away from the Kremlin's international campaign of aggression against them.