



**STATEMENT BY THE HONORABLE ALCEE L. HASTINGS – CHAIRMAN
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“LOOKING AHEAD TO THE MEDVEDEV ADMINISTRATION”

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, and colleagues. Welcome to this Helsinki Commission hearing on Russia under the new Medvedev administration.

This hearing comes at a time when relations between the United States and Russia are at a low point, some would say the lowest since Russia threw off the Soviet yoke and regained its rightful place among the free nations of the world. President Vladimir Putin has turned the presidency over to Dmitry Medvedev, his designated successor and former subordinate in the St. Petersburg power structures. In turn, President Medvedev has appointed Mr. Putin as Prime Minister and the Duma swiftly confirmed Mr. Putin to this post.

Now that Russia is, officially, under new management, I sincerely hope that our Administration will do its best to seize this opportunity to reinvigorate our bilateral relations and, for my part, I plan to play a role in boosting this Congress' ties with leaders in the Russian Duma.

To what extent Mr. Medvedev will follow the policies of Mr. Putin seems to be an open question. Perhaps our experts will be able to shed some light on this important point.

Among the hallmarks of the Putin presidency was an often bellicose foreign policy that frequently put Russia in opposition to, not only, the United States, but to the EU and some of Russia's neighbors as well. I certainly hope President Medvedev pursues a less belligerent policy towards the rest of the world.

In this connection, I would specifically like to raise the issue of rising tension between Russia and Georgia. The situation there is so volatile that one veteran commentator recently called the situation a “possible flashpoint for a new war.” I have visited both Russia and Georgia and have friends and colleagues in both of these nations. It would be an immense tragedy for all involved if the current tension led to bloodshed.

Just yesterday, the House of Representatives passed a resolution, of which I am an original co-sponsor, condemning Russia's threatening moves toward Georgia. During the committee debate, some of my friends and colleagues from both sides of the aisle expressed their concern that we seem too eager to criticize Russia for various trespasses while giving our “friends” more benefit of the doubt.

I fully agree and have commented in the past on the tendency in this town to criticize Russia at the drop of a hat, more out of habit than based on serious analysis. However, in this case, I believe the facts merit our condemnation.

Although Russia claims to respect Georgia's territorial integrity, its actions demonstrate otherwise. Its "peacekeeping" forces are clearly a military prop for secessionist forces. Moscow's "strengthened relations" with Abkhazia and South Ossetia obviously infringe on Georgian sovereignty, and Moscow's policy of granting citizenship to residents of Abkhazia and then announcing its intention to "protect Russian citizens" by military force, if necessary, is truly troubling. Other neighbors of Russia can hardly wonder if they, too, are at risk of the same tactics if they displease Moscow. These policies undermine territorial integrity not only with respect to Georgia but also as a bulwark of global stability.

In closing, I would just like to note that today is V-E Day, marking the 63rd anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany and tomorrow, because of the time difference, our Russian allies will celebrate their Victory Day and will, again, mourn the enormous loss of life and human suffering that World War II brought to their soil. It is appropriate that we continue our solemn commemoration of this anniversary of our common victory and that we never forget the evils that the Nazi ideology of hate wrought throughout Europe and the world.