



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: The Hon. Ben Nighthorse Campbell

Chairman - Helsinki Commission

Good morning and welcome to this hearing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Helsinki Commission. Before proceeding, I note for the record that this week marks the Commission's 25th anniversary of promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The bipartisan work of the Commission, in partnership with non-governmental organizations at home and abroad, has had an impact on the lives of tens of thousands of individuals denied their fundamental freedoms.

Today's hearing of the Helsinki Commission will examine the course of human rights in Russia after a year and a half of President Putin's presidency. I visited St. Petersburg, Russia in 1999, to participate in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. While there, I had an opportunity to meet with a diverse group of Russian NGOs at the U.S. Consulate. That meeting underscored in my mind the importance of civil society in Russia.

There is no doubt that human rights and the human rights movement in Russia have come a long way since the fall of the Soviet Union almost ten years ago. From an "unfree" Soviet Union, Russia has consistently been rated by Freedom House as "partially free." Our hope is that Russia will overcome the legacy of the past and achieve the freedom the Russian people deserve.

Indications of this downward trend in Russia's human rights record were noted by several experts at a Commission hearing held in May of last year, and regrettably the situation has not improved since.

One of the most disturbing events has been the forceful takeover by individuals connected with the Russian Government of the NTV television network, an independent network that had been critical of the Putin administration. The pattern of harassment against the few independent news outlets is quite clear.

The NTV case and the campaign against Mr. Gusinsky's are not isolated events. According to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, "Members of the independent press "are being harassed and persecuted far more than any time since the Soviet era." In an editorial entitled "Russia's Dying Free Press, the Washington Post wrote that "Mr. Putin's campaign already has spread a severe chill through the vibrant press that sprouted and flourished during the 1990s."

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Incidentally, with respect to law enforcement and the press in Russia, I don't intend to say that law enforcement in our own country is flawless, but one of the best safeguards against arbitrary acts by law enforcement agencies in this country is, indeed, the existence of a free media.

For the second year in a row, the United Nations Human Rights Commission adopted a European Union-sponsored resolution criticizing Russia's actions in Chechnya, specifically calling attention to "widespread violence against civilians and alleged violations of human rights and humanitarian law, in particular forced disappearances, extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, torture, [and] arbitrary detentions, ..."

The discovery of dozens of bodies in a mass grave near the main Russian military base in Chechnya is only the most egregious horror in a long line of horrors being visited upon non-combatants in that region. This does not excuse atrocities committed by Chechen forces, or detract from legitimate concerns about conditions in Chechnya after the first war. The gravity of the violations in Chechnya demand our attention in light of Russia's international obligations, including her OSCE commitments. During last year's hearing on Russia, we heard testimony about the increasing pressure from the security services against Russian scientists and environmental activists, who were being accused on flimsy charges of "espionage," "revealing state

secrets," etc. At least two American citizens have been caught up in this net. Two years ago, President Putin told a Russian newspaper that environmental groups were "in the employ of foreign intelligence agencies." It is now reported that Russia's Academy of Sciences has ordered its scientists to "report to state authorities on their contacts with foreign officials." Russia's Deputy Prime Minister for social policy has denied this report, and we will certainly monitor related developments. If it is true, it will certainly have -- at the very least -- a chilling effect on academic freedom and the intellectual exchanges.

While it is important to recognize the positive changes that Russia has experienced in the last decade, recent trends are disturbing and give rise for concern. Russia's own human rights commissioner has stated that "Russia's resurgent security forces are threatening to wreck democracy and basic freedoms."

I look forward to hearing from our Administration witness and our experts assembled this morning as we examine the human rights picture in Russia in anticipation of next week's summit meeting between President Bush and his Russian counterpart.