



## HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

# Testimony :: Hon. Sam Brownback

Ranking Member - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Mr. Chairman,

I want to commend you for organizing this hearing on Russia. As someone who has been following events in that country for many years, I am very disturbed by the general trend of political development there.

Over the last seven years, we have witnessed the emergence of a super-presidency in Russia, which has overwhelmed the legislature and judiciary. In successfully recentralizing power, President Vladimir Putin has turned the Duma, which once seemed on the road to becoming a legislature that could demand accountability from the executive, into a virtual rubber stamp.

As a legislator, I find this especially troubling. I believe deeply in the obligation of Congress to act as an independent branch of government and oversee the executive. But I do not see anything like that in Russia today and I fear I will not in the foreseeable future.

At the same time, opposition movements and civil society have been cowed. The Kremlin has made every effort to keep criticism or even dissenting views off the airwaves and now one-half of all reportage about Russia on the nation's largest independent radio news network must be "positive." Moreover, Putin's political opponents cannot be mentioned on the air and the United States is to be portrayed as an enemy. Meanwhile, demonstrations are swiftly, sometimes brutally, dispersed.

Russian officials often get irritated when they hear the terms "managed democracy" or "sham democracy." But I see in Russia a system in which the public is essentially called on to ratify decisions already taken by the Kremlin, and where people are increasingly afraid to speak out or exercise their rights to freedom of assembly and association.

Even issues that could easily be resolved have been turned into problems. For example, the Russian authorities have refused to return to Chabad the library and archive of Rabbi Shneerson, despite the obvious primacy of the claim by his heirs in America and repeated requests by the executive and judicial branches of the U.S. Government. I sometimes think that spitefulness has become an operating principle of Russian policy.

In the international arena, Russia's behavior has been no less troubling. For years, Moscow has sought to intimidate much smaller neighbors, such as Georgia or Estonia. But I am particularly

struck by Moscow's treatment of Belarus – no favorite of the United States and run by a man who is practically an international pariah. Yet even this faithful subject has been bullied by Russia into giving up control of key energy infrastructure to Gazprom. Not for nothing have European states grown increasingly dubious about Russia as a reliable supplier of oil and gas. The deal reached last weekend among Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which essentially guaranteed long-term Russian control of Central Asian gas reserves, has struck a serious blow to our joint hopes for alternative pipeline routes – and provided additional reasons to worry about the political implications of energy dependence.

So I watch events in Russia with growing concern. I do not think we are in a Cold War and I do not think one is inevitable. But it is clear to me that in many critical areas, our interests are diverging or already divergent. Perhaps our expert witnesses can suggest ways to smooth over these rifts.