



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)

Hearing on
“Democracy and Human Rights Abuses in Russia: No End in Sight”
Wednesday, April 26, 2017
124 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Opening Statement of Representative Michael C. Burgess, Commissioner

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The invasion of Crimea was the realization of Russia, particularly Vladimir Putin’s, dissatisfaction with the current European order and paranoia of a second collapse of the Russian regime. Putin wants NATO to fracture and international organizations, such as the Helsinki Commission, to weaken in order to create the necessity of a new order that is not predicated primarily on Western influence. To achieve these objectives, he has implemented an authoritarian regime that erodes democracy in Russia and regularly commits violations of non-intervention and human rights principles agreed to by Helsinki Commission participating states.

Russia has been engaging in overt and covert subversive action in the media, in cyberspace, and across international borders in order to further Putin’s aggressive international agenda. He is rebuilding Russia’s national identity through military action and a strategy of compiling and disseminating comprising information, or blackmail. This activity is hurting the basic freedoms and human rights of Russian citizens.

Putin’s political legitimacy is largely rooted in the performance of Russia’s economy. Increased military spending, western sanctions, and low energy prices coupled with corruption are hurting the Russian people, but they are also helping to fuel their frustration. Just recently, tens of thousands of people protested corruption among Russia’s elite, and the government reacted by arresting 800 people – brutally beating many of those.

But this isn’t the first, or likely the last, time that challenges have been met with violence and human rights violations. Last year, over 250 journalists were jailed, with some being beaten and killed, 141 independent organizations were designated as foreign agents without evidence, and at least eight prominent Russians have died or been poisoned under suspicious circumstances, including one of our witnesses today.

In addition, Russia’s example of aggressive suppression has led to the arrest, torture, and often killing of at least 100 gay men in Chechnya.

The most blatant demonstration of Russia's lack of respect for democracy and human rights is its 2014 annexation of the Crimean peninsula. Despite an official ceasefire, known as Minsk II, the conflict in eastern Ukraine has remained frozen without any prospect of resolution. This status quo serves Russian interests by limiting the possibility of further European integration, undermining rule of law, and preserving a point of leverage for potential negotiations with the West on other international issues.

When Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 was downed over separatist-held territory by a Russian missile, killing all passengers, Russia denied involvement and denounced the Dutch-led investigation as politically motivated; claiming Russia was the only country that provided credible information. Air operations were ceased in the Donbas region in September 2014, but the threat of this ongoing conflict has not dissipated. It has attracted foreign fighters, including Syrians, to an easily accessible and often untraceable arms market.

In addition, two days ago an American paramedic serving on the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine was killed when his vehicle struck an explosive in separatist-held territory. This death was entirely preventable. It is indefensible to allow Russia to perpetuate a frozen international conflict that has killed thousands of people from Ukraine, Russia, and the West.

Vladimir Putin is able to engage in international and domestic bouts of aggression and suppression under the guise of protecting traditional values and the Russian homeland, all at the expense of the prosperity and freedom of his own people. This must stop.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about their experiences and how we can work to promote democracy and end violations of human rights in Russia.