

Rep. Chris Smith
Opening Statement
CSCE Hearing “Freedom of Media in the OSCE Region”
August 2, 2007

We can all be very happy that since 1990 the OSCE region has made remarkable progress in freedom of the media. All of the Eastern European countries which have now joined the EU enjoy remarkable media freedom. Great progress continues to be made in the Balkans.

But this does not mean we can rest satisfied. It is shocking how many OSCE countries do not enjoy media freedom—all of them countries of the former Soviet Union. The only former Soviet Republics where media freedom has been largely achieved are the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

In all of the other former Soviet republics, the restrictions on media freedom are severe. In some of them, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the state’s grip on the media is as choking as in Soviet times. Other former Soviet republics, such as Russia itself, claim to have media freedom, but what freedom exists is restricted by cleverly-crafted legislation and government pressures—which are sometimes brutal.

Congress must continue to raise its voice on the lack of media freedom in Russia, where one of the chief tactics used to control the media in Russia has been the murder of journalists. These murders continue to go on, because they are almost never solved.

I emphasize Russia because the failure to punish those responsible for these murders in Russia weighs heavily on the entire OSCE region. Sadly, the techniques of official control exercised in Russia are often taken as a model by officials in other former Soviet countries.

And, in respect of media freedom, what a terrible model Russia is. Russia holds the second worst position in the world in the number of journalists killed in the last ten years, according to the International News Safety Institute. Reporters Without Borders counts *21 murdered journalists* since March of 2000. This is a conservative number; it does include the murders of Paul Klebnikov, Anna Politkovskaya, but not the death under extremely suspicious circumstances of Ivan Safronov. Many observers think government officials have ordered most of these murders, or at least connived at them, because these journalists investigated government corruption or human rights abuses in Russia. There is good reason to think that people in very high places are protecting the murderers. We know this: very few of these murder cases have been resolved.

Bearing in mind the effect of these unsolved murders on officials in the other former Soviet republics, I recently authored a Congressional resolution, H. Con. Res. 151, calling upon President Putin to seek competent, outside law enforcement assistance in the investigation of these unsolved murders. In May this resolution was approved by the House.

Mr. Chairman, In early July I visited Russia, in order to meet with Russian legislators who want to adopt anti-trafficking laws similar to our own. I saw for myself how the Russian economy is booming, and I am happy for the Russian people that they can finally enjoy economic growth and prosperity.

While I was in Moscow, I met Father Gleb Yakunin, a member of the Moscow Helsinki Group who in 1976 created the Christian Committee for the Defense of the Rights of Believers, and served 7 years in prison and labor camps for it. In Russia great figures like Father Gleb and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn have kept the national conscience alive under the Communist dictatorship.

Now the Russian nation is being robbed by a corrupt officialdom, and the journalists who are working to inform and awaken the public to the crimes are being killed. Let our country stand with them as in the past it stood with Father Gleb and Solzhenitsyn.

That would be one of the greatest services we could do for the Russian people, and the people of the other former Soviet republics.