



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Christopher H. Smith

Co-Chairman - Helsinki Commission

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this important hearing today. This is the first opportunity, since the beginning of this new Administration, the Commission will have to examine current United States policy toward Russia.

Certainly we all understand that Russia has had a difficult political transformation over the past decade after seventy years of communism. No one expects Russia to be a carbon copy of the G-7 countries or other Western nations with their own historical experiences and long established democratic traditions and institutions.

I remember how encouraged many of us were in 1991, when the Soviet delegation at the OSCE Conference in Moscow – and I would note that the co-chairman of that delegation was our distinguished colleague in the Russian Duma, Sergei Kovalev – gave its consensus to the principle that human rights issues were not exclusively the purview of the nation in which the issue was raised. Now, ten years later, in a public statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation has stated that “the OSCE should not become a mechanism for ‘interference’ in the internal affairs of participating States of the OSCE....”

While I believe it is reasonable to expect that Russia – now a member of the United Nations, the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Council of Europe – will not turn its back on the progress that has been made in civil liberties and human rights up to now, this statement by the MFA is very disturbing. It reflects an attitude toward human rights and international cooperation that we thought had been relegated to the Cold War archives.

Mr. Chairman, I am especially concerned about the carnage that continues to take place in Chechnya. The death and destruction continues, taking Chechen and Russian lives and making a peaceful solution appear even less possible. The Helsinki Commission has held several hearings on this subject, and I am pleased to see that today we have a guest from Moscow who is very well versed in the events in that region of Russia.

I was very critical of the previous Administration and what I felt was a “green light” given to Moscow to conduct a brutal war against both combatants and non-combatants in Chechnya. I notice that the last State Department Country Reports issued by the previous Administration is quite critical of Russia’s conduct in Chechnya. Let me quote from one section:

On February 5 Russian riot police and contract soldiers ... executed at least 60 civilians [in the suburbs of Grozny.] The perpetrators raped some of the victims and extorted money, later setting many houses on fire to destroy evidence. According to Human Rights Watch, authorities suspended their investigation of the incident, and there were no indications that those responsible for similar incidents in late 1999 were apprehended or punished.

I think we all understand that guerrilla warfare can be savage, and there have been documented instances of atrocities committed by Chechen forces. However, Russia military actions in Chechnya suggest less of a military operation against an armed secessionist forces – or an “anti-terrorist operation,” as Moscow phrases it – than a war against an entire people who are its own citizens.

I look forward to hearing the current Administration’s thoughts on the subject of Chechnya.

I am especially delighted today to see again our friend Dr. Elena Bonner in this 80th year after the birth of the late Dr. Andrei Sakharov. The entire world owes a huge debt of gratitude to both Dr. Sakharov and Dr. Bonner for their selfless struggle in defense of human rights in the Soviet Union and Russia. And I know Mr. Goble will provide us with his characteristic expertise in analyzing the challenges facing the independent press in Russia under the Putin administration.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would just touch on one area of human rights where the picture in Russia is decidedly mixed, that of religious liberty. Although things are not nearly as bad as in some other countries of the world, there are continuing attempts by local officials to limit worship activities in some regions of Russia, and anti-Semitic acts and the propagation of “Zionist conspiracy theories” continue to contaminate parts of Russia, although President Putin has personally made high-profile efforts to improve relations with some representatives of the Jewish community in Russia.

Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing. I look forward to hearing from our witness, and will have some questions to follow.