



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Alcee L. Hastings

Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, invited guests, and members of the press and diplomatic corps. I would like to welcome you all to today's hearing on Russia. I would particularly like to welcome and thank the members of our distinguished panel for finding the time to share their expertise with us this morning.

But before we begin I would just like to note that earlier today near the Siberian city of Novokuznetsk 35 miners were killed and others injured in a methane explosion in the Yubileinaya coal mine. According to the most recent news reports that I saw before coming over here, there are still three miners missing. Unfortunately, America is no stranger to such accidents and our hearts and prayers go out to all those affected by this tragedy. We will continue to hope against hope that those three miners may yet be found alive.

This is the first hearing that the Commission on Security and Cooperation on Europe is holding in the 110th Congress and I feel that it is quite appropriate that Russia is the topic of discussion. As we all know, Russia is an increasingly important and influential member of the international community, playing a key, albeit not always constructive, role in organizations such as the United Nations, the Group of Eight, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. And in the not too distant future I expect this list to include the World Trade Organization. It is good that Russia is so involved in these international organizations and has so much potential to make positive contributions to global stability and prosperity.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it appeared that Russia was making a sea-change transition, however uneven and tumultuous, to representative governance and a society rooted in the rule of law. However, since the tragic shelling of the Russian White House in the fall of 1993 and particularly over the last seven years, the Kremlin has moved to recentralize the authority and power that it had seen slip away in the wake of glasnost and perestroika. The result has been a significant limitation on the civil liberties that many of us associate with a legitimately open society. Despite Mr. Putin's lip service in support of democratic institutions and civil society, we now see a political agenda centrally planned in Moscow.

Now I fully understand that human rights not only include the ability to hold anti-government demonstrations or write op-eds critical of government policy. But human rights also have some relation to basic social justice concerns such as having heat in the winter, getting paid on time, and having access to healthcare. In these areas, much progress has been made in Russia over

the past decade or so and particularly under President Putin's leadership – I commend him for working to improve the standard of living of the average Russian citizen. But these basic needs are also met in some of the world's more repressive régimes and it is my hope that a great nation like Russia can do better.

A growing economy and the improved living conditions that have resulted as well as a newfound influence on the world stage help to explain the popularity of the current Russian president. His sober, intelligent, and macho image has also been well received by the populace. I am also aware of a vocal and growing minority that is deeply concerned at the direction their country may be going. I am thinking of the many people and organizations included in the "Other Russia" coalition as well as other opposition groups.

Reports of the heavy-handedness and brutality that these individuals have faced while attempting to exercise their rights to free assembly and free speech are alarming. These basic human freedoms are enshrined in many of the international agreements that Russia is, at least on paper, committed to.

It is perplexing that the popular and powerful Russian government feels threatened by a few thousand people demonstrating in favor of an alternative viewpoint. Perhaps the authorities do not feel threatened, but are simply used to dealing with protestors in a forceful manner. We politicians here in Washington are accustomed to such public displays of dissent as our city is often the venue of marches and gatherings that sometimes number in the hundreds of thousands – this is normal and desirable and has been the catalyst for so much positive change in our society.

Concerning some elements of the Russian opposition to the Putin Administration, I must note that common dislike for the Russian president may not be the strongest glue for a lasting alliance. In this case, the cliché phrase "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," does not hold true. I know of many distinguished NGOs and human rights activists that have chosen to participate in the "Other Russia" movement, but the past rhetoric and actions of some of the leaders involved give me pause.

As we look to the future of U.S.-Russian relations, being best friends does not have to be the measure of successful cooperation. There is a lot that we can accomplish despite hard feelings in some quarters. And we need to focus our efforts more on bolstering Russia's nascent democratic institutions rather than on the rapidly changing faces of the Russian elite – in other words, principles before personalities.

If we are to improve relations, we must find new ways to have more frequent interaction at all levels and with all branches of government. Additionally, I recognize that a substantive and sustainable bi-lateral dialogue must also happen at the level of civil society. This is why I am such a proponent of public diplomacy and exchange programs such as our own Library of Congress' Open World program and many other fine initiatives. These initiatives not only promote understanding, but they also enable us to identify future leaders at all levels of society.

The central question before us today is what kind of leadership will Russia provide at home and abroad and what can and should the United States be doing to help Russia complete its transition to democracy, especially in the post-Putin era. I look forward to learning more on this from our expert panel. I would like to add that, in the interest of a balanced hearing, I extended an invitation to Russian Ambassador Yuri Ushakov and am sorry that he was not able to take part in this important dialogue.