

Statement of the Honorable Alcee L. Hastings, Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
briefing on
“The Duma Elections, Politics and Putin: Where is Russia Going?”

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, members of the press, it is a pleasure to welcome you to today’s briefing on the recent parliamentary elections in the Russian Federation.

I would like to extend a special thanks to the members of our distinguished panel for finding the time to draw on their expertise as we assess these elections and what they tell us about where Russia is and where it is heading.

Last Sunday, Russia held elections to the national legislature, the State Duma. Unfortunately, based on credible reports from numerous sources, including the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, there can be little doubt that Russian authorities used the full range of so-called “administrative resources,” intimidation, confiscation of campaign literature, and at times even physical abuse to overwhelm the already weak and divided opposition. According to the Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE and the Council of Europe, the elections were “not fair” and “failed to meet many OSCE and Council of Europe standards.”

As a result, President Vladimir Putin’s “United Russia” party will now share the Duma with a small coterie of Communists, radical nationalists who have loyally supported the president in the past, and a so-called opposition party that supports President Putin.

Now, suffice it to say that our own electoral practices have not always been free of irregularities, technological or human. Nevertheless, we try to learn from our mistakes and correct them. That is why, for instance, in 2002, Congress passed, and the President signed into law the Help America Vote Act to help states overcome some voting problems in federal elections that had become evident over the years.

With regard to Russia, I want to emphasize that my comments about the overall conduct of the Duma elections should not be construed as criticism of the many Russian election officials who carried out their tasks conscientiously, in some cases under dubious circumstances. For instance, the observer mission from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly noted the “excellent co-operation” that it received from the electoral authorities. I would also add that this has been my personal experience as an election observer in Russia.

Moreover, there is no doubt that many Russian citizens voted freely and enthusiastically for the Putin-dominated United Russia party. Indeed, many Russians associate President Putin with Russia's economic progress, political stability, and renewed role abroad. Against this backdrop, it is a bit mystifying why the authorities go to the lengths they do to further emasculate the already weakened opposition. The same also appears to be the trend when it comes to NGOs as well.

While we'll probably never see a "perfect election," genuine democracies – as opposed to the illiberal ones -- do not intentionally make mockeries of their electoral processes. The Russian people deserve elections that meet Russia's various international commitments such as the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent documents.

As the dust settles on the Duma elections and the presidential elections looming in March, we may get a better idea of President Putin's future role in Russia's future political constellation, and to what extent he intends to influence, if not dominate, his country's policies.

This leads to other important questions. Like Machiavelli's "Prince," is the future good for the Russian people really inextricably linked to what is good for Putin? What do the elections and the results reveal about Russia today – both the political leadership and the average Russian citizen? Do the recent Duma elections in Russia really matter, given that the legislature has so little power? What do these elections portend for Russia's future? What may be their effect on U.S. – Russia relations? What questions should we be asking about Russia today that we are not? In other words, "where is Russia going?"

Our guests today are uniquely qualified to answer these questions and many others that will undoubtedly arise after their presentations. If you have not done so yet, I hope you will avail yourselves of the opportunity to pick up a copy of their biographies on the corridor table.

After their presentations, I will open with some questions and then our audience will have the opportunity to ask questions.