

“HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN RUSSIA”
STATEMENT BY CHAIRMAN
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HELSINKI COMMISSION BRIEFING
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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, members of the press, and welcome to today’s briefing on human rights defenders in Russia. I would particularly like to welcome and thank the members of our distinguished panel for finding the time to share their experiences with us this morning.

It is a special privilege to have Ms. Karinna Moskalenko here with us today. I know that her insights on the day-to-day challenges that human rights defenders face in Russia will be invaluable. I personally would like to commend her efforts and resilience.

Our other two panelists, Neil Hicks and Maureen Greenwood-Basken are experienced human rights advocates who represent organizations that have made major contributions to the defense of human rights in Russia.

If you have not done so yet, I hope you will avail yourselves of the opportunity to pick up a copy of our guests’ biographies on the corridor table.

We invited representatives of the Russian government to participate in today’s panel, but unfortunately, they declined the invitation.

As Russia rebuilds its economy and takes a more aggressive stance on the international stage, there is concern among human rights defenders and civil society advocates, that these trends have been accompanied by a significant retreat from human rights and civil liberties. Today we will hear about the efforts by Russian NGOs, human rights activists and legal experts to halt this retreat, and the difficulties they face.

I would note that at the annual meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly this past summer in Kyiv, the participating parliamentarians, myself included, were pleased to pass a comprehensive resolution on strengthening OSCE engagement with human rights defenders and national human rights institutions.

As Chairman of the Helsinki Commission, I take that pledge seriously, whether it be by examining the situation at Guantanamo Bay or by assisting individuals and organizations beyond our borders to secure the rights to which they are entitled by virtue of their own human dignity and reinforced by the institutions of international law.

Let me, however, reiterate what I have stated in the past: The Russian Federation is far from being the most repressive country in the world today. That should be clear to any objective observer.

Moreover, human rights also have some relation to basic social justice concerns such as having heat in the winter, getting paid on time, and being safe in one's home. In terms of economic opportunity and material abundance, much progress has been made in Russia under President Putin's leadership – I commend him for working to improve the standard of living of the average Russian citizen. But basic needs are also met in some of the world's more repressive régimes. It is my hope that the leadership of the Russian Federation will come to understand that for a nation to enjoy long-term economic prosperity and political stability, social and economic rights must be accompanied by a conscientious defense of political and civil rights.

Repressive regimes do not make good neighbors or trading partners; They do not seek to improve the welfare of their citizens or the safety of our planet. Not only for the intrinsic value of protecting and promoting human rights, but for the well-being of my own fellow citizens, I wish to see Russia a rule of law state committed to human rights and democratic governance.

And now I look forward, as I know you do, to hearing Ms. Moskalkenko share her thoughts with us. We will follow with Mr. Hicks and Ms. Greenwood-Basken, and then move on to questions.