



# HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

## Testimony :: Hon. Joseph R. Pitts

Commissioner - Helsinki Commission

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this timely hearing on Troubling Trends: Human Rights in Russia. As you and others know, the continued reports coming out of Russia raise great concerns about the continued protection of fundamental human rights for the Russian people. I look forward to hearing from the distinguished witnesses here today regarding their insight into the current trends in Russia and possible positive action to encourage the protection of the basic freedoms of the Russian people.

Various reports suggest that President Putin is attempting to return to previous eras and centralize power in Moscow. This move would most likely pave the way for, not end, more corruption and less freedom for the Russian people. The international concerns over current abuses of religious freedom, the media, and human rights in Chechnya would most likely increase under Putin's "new" power structure.

Recently, I met with a group of Pentecostal Christians who shared stories of the persecution they currently are experiencing in Russia, including what they believe is the religiously motivated murder of a few of their members. And, their churches have been liquated in the Far East of Russia. Muslims in Vologda are facing extreme opposition to the building of their mosque, including reported financial harassment by local officials. Protestants in Vyborg have been blocked by officials from using and restoring a building they purchased in 1998. Officials in Kabardino-Balkaria refuse to register Jehovah's Witness communities despite the Ministry of Justice ruling that the groups should be registered. Religious literature is confiscated from religious groups, congregants are barred from renting or using particular buildings, and other general harassment occurs. Unfortunately, from the reports my office has received, the current trends do not bode well for religious freedom.

Similarly, the trends for freedom in the media do not bode well. Examples abound of media personnel, whether owners, editors or journalists feeling the ire of Russian officials due to print or broadcast media. Many know the case of Vladimir Gusinsky, but other harassment continues against journalists, harassment that can even lead to death. The government's control of the press, led by President Putin, reflects another manifestation of the desire to turn back the tide of democratic reform.

And, in Chechnya, the Russian government tries to cover up the brutal human rights abuses, including rape, mass slaughter, random shooting of civilians and other horrific conduct by the military.

Mr. Chairman, we must continue to shine the spotlight of truth on the human rights violations in Russia. The Russian people deserve to live in freedom and peace, to prosper on the foundation of the great history and heritage they have. By holdings hearings such as this one, we shine the light for the Russian people, so that they too may enjoy true freedom.

