

Distinguished members of the commission, thank you for the interest you take in the activities of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers.

First let me say that I feel bitterness at the thought that this meeting is occurring in the American parliament rather than the Russian parliament. Unfortunately, this reflects the situation occurring in Russia today.

The Russian civil society, which I have the honor of representing here today, as a result of the activities of the Putin administration has been left without the two major levers for influencing the authorities – without political opposition and without independent media.

Thanks to these activities of the administration, the dialogue between the authorities and society has been cut short. The dialogue has turned into a monologue. We are hearing the voice of the authorities, but the authorities don't hear the voice of society.

The political structures, that is the Council of the Federation and the Duma ceased performing their functions of representing the interests of the people and have turned into a branch of the executive.

This is particularly obvious in the military sphere which our organization deals with – the situation in the armed services and the war in Chechnya. Both are off limits to the media.

The Russian man on the street does not know that -- and does not hear -- that in Chechnya there is a war going on against an entire people; that 25,000 Russian soldiers, enlisted men and officers have died in Chechnya; that there is no stability there; and that Russian authorities are prepared to continue military action indefinitely.

The closed nature of the Chechen war, lack of information, direct deceit of the population by the authorities, all constitute the dramatic difference between the second Chechen war and the first one.

After President Putin took control over television, and made it clear to the journalists and politicians that they would raise these issues at their peril, and after he arranged with Western partners that they would not object against the Chechen war, the war in Chechnya ceased to exist as far as the Russian public is concerned.

The authorities entirely distort what's going on in Chechnya. We are told that what's going on in Chechnya is a counterterrorist operation, that we are fighting Arab mercenaries and al Qaida units.

We're also told that Chechens participate in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, that they prepare terrorist activities in Europe and so on.

All of this is part of the propaganda campaign in order to justify the war in which our children die, unfortunately with the active connivance of the leaders of Western countries, including the United States.

In reality, the Chechen problem has nothing to do with international terrorism or Islamic fundamentalism. There is no trace of stabilization in Chechnya and there are no attempts by the Russian authorities to achieve peaceful resolution of the problem.

Our organization demands that first of all the Russian authorities stop lying to the Russian people and to the entire world, and secondly, enter into multilateral political negotiations without any preconditions involving nongovernmental organizations and international structures. And, we are calling upon the United States to support our position.

The Chechen situation reflects all the problems of human rights and civil society in Russia, from the rollback of democracy and curbs on their freedom of the press to the violations of human rights.

That the West supports the anti-democratic policies of the Russian authorities is simply absurd.

Just a year ago in Washington, they were saying that there is no point in supporting a Russian democracy, that Russia has all but completed the construction of democracy. Today, the terms of discussion have changed. Now they're saying in Washington that the Russian people don't need democracy, that the Russian people are not accustomed to democracy and are not prepared for democracy.

This is not true. If the Iraqi people are mature enough for democracy to the extent that a war is started to support them, Russians are no worse.

Let's return to the activities of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. The situation of the soldiers in the armed forces impinges on millions of families.

Imagine that you are a Russian family in which a boy is growing up. You know that when he reaches 18, he will be stuffed into a uniform and sent to a barracks, not to learn how to defend his motherland from the enemies but in order to spend two years of his life in the decrepit, poorly managed, federally-corrupted structure.

The life of your son in the Russian army and the Russian armed forces is in fact legal slavery. Once in the armed forces, your child will be beaten and humiliated. He will be cold and hungry. He will live in the barracks where the prison law of the jungle will reign supreme. He will be extorted for money and food. He will be forced to do slave labor for the families of the officers or rented out by the officers to work elsewhere. He might even be driven to the street to beg. And if he, God forbid, contracts a severe illness, say tuberculosis, he won't get any medical assistance.

This is the daily concern of our committees, where the boys come in the hundreds and their mothers come in the hundreds seeking protection against what the Russians call "bespredel," which means unlimited arbitrary rule.

And if your son is sent to Chechnya, he may die over there, he may be missing in action and nobody will look for him, or he will be crippled.

He will be forced to participate in punishment operations against the peaceful population. In other words, they will force him to become a military criminal. And if he returns home alive, you won't be able to recognize him. He will be utterly depressed. At night he will go through nightmares. He won't be able to find a good job or enter into normal relations. He will be violence-prone. He will view himself as a loser, or he will try to commit suicide.

And if he returns as a disabled vet, you will have to perform the functions of physician and nurse and psychologist and social worker for your child. You will immediately understand that the government that returned your son in such a sorry condition couldn't care less about your tragedy.

As Natalya told you, the concern for those who went through Chechnya, the care of the veterans and their parents is part of the burden of the soldiers' mothers, and this is also part of our daily activities.

Annually, our committees and affiliated groups all over Russia lend their assistance to more than 50,000 soldiers and their families, let alone hundreds of thousands whom we consult on the conscription issues.

Our organization advocates and is conducting a campaign for military reform, for abolition of conscription and for the setting up in Russia of a professional armed forces.

This is the second political demand of the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, alongside with peace in Chechnya.

And finally, a third issue on our organization's agenda is the expansion of civilian control over the activities of the military.

In this connection, I would like to point out that what's going on in our armed forces, that is legal slavery, chaos, corruption and total lawlessness occurs not only in Chechnya, it occurs also in Strategic Forces, as well as in the forces that are guarding the weapons of mass destruction storage facilities.

We view as unfortunate the statement by Senator Kerry that he views the future of democracy in Russia as less important than the problem of nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The fact of the matter is that no agreements between the politicians, military and the intelligence services in the absence of democracy, in the absence of a well-developed civil society, in the absence of civilian control will not provide for the solution of the issue that is of such great concern to Senator Kerry.

Absent democracy, there can be no safe Russia.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank you once again for the invitation sent. Thank you.