

Mr. Chairman and members and staff of the Helsinki Commission. It is my great pleasure, as always, to join Ludmilla Alexeeva in briefing the number one Washington venue for discussion of the status of human rights in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

Dr. Leonid Stonov, director of UCSJ's human rights bureaus in the FSU is with me to help answer questions and I ask that his prepared statement as well as my own be included in the record. Further, if it has not been done on an earlier occasion, I ask that our August 7-page report, "Anti-Semitism Mid-Year Status Report: Current Threats Facing Russian Jews," also be made a part of the record of these proceedings.

As the Commission knows, Mr. Chairman, this project for monitoring human rights across the regions of the Russian Federation began with a stimulation grant from the National Endowment for Democracy two years ago, and has been continuously funded by a USAID grant to the Moscow Helsinki Group, including a sub-grant to UCSJ. The UCSJ involvement has been two-fold. We were engaged as partners with MHG in the planning of the project, which involves human rights monitoring by local human rights NGOs, and in the training of monitors. We also took significant responsibility for the anti-Semitism monitoring portion of the effort. In presenting the second annual report of this effort it is important to note that this project has enabled MHG to establish, for the first time ever, an integrated, all-Russia human rights NGO movement, one that makes anti-Semitism an integral component of the Russian human rights agenda. The work of the local NGOs, as we report today, has made a profound improvement in the scope of UCSJ's ability to monitor anti-Semitism in the FSU, a subject that we take to be a bellwether of the status of human rights and civil society generally.

Full documentation of my brief remarks can be found in the MHG and UCSJ reports and in Dr. Stonov's paper.

Anti-Semitism, although a constant problem in Russia, tends to be cyclical in nature. Currently, Russia is coming off of what was arguably the worst such cycle since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Yeltsin government's inability to impose Constitutional order over Russia's 89 regions, reform the highly corrupt and brutal justice system, and arrest and prosecute violent anti-Semitic groups and individuals led to a climate of impunity which facilitated these dangerous threats to civil society, including Jewish safety. Outside of Moscow, anti-Semitism has become institutionalized in some regions, with alliances being forged between local authorities (many of whom are members of the openly anti-Semitic Communist Party), neo-Nazi and/or Cossack paramilitary groups, and anti-Semitic elements within the Russian Orthodox Church, the de facto state religion. For example, the mayors of two large Russian cities, Stavropol and Balakovo, openly support the RNU, while in the Saratov region, the RNU has been in effect legitimized by

being accepted onto public advisory councils to the mayor of Saratov and the Saratov Regional Parliament.

Under the Yeltsin administration, Russia's regions became increasingly independent of the central government. The rapid de-centralization of power in Russia over the past decade has resulted in a system of near feudal despotism, in which provincial officials routinely violate their citizens' human rights with near impunity. The situation in Krasnodar Kray is the most blatant example of the consequences of this dangerous neglect. Unfortunately, as our report documents, Krasnodar is not the only region where Jews are under threat.

It is difficult to get traction in identifying the serious threats to Jews, human rights and civil society generally at a time when President Putin is enjoying general popularity at home and thus an apparent lack of concern for Western opinion. While now stagnating, the Russian economy seemed to rally from the August 1998 crash in late 1999, due largely to the rise in world oil prices. Putin's commitment to re-centralize political power is popular with all but the affected governors. He is seen as cracking down on the widely hated oligarchs, although he has so far seemed to concentrate on independent media controlled by Jews. His authoritarian instincts are broadly seen as a tonic, not a threat, by a public demoralized by Yeltsin's failures in the name of reform and democracy. And the virtues - indeed necessity - of reforming a corrupt and law-averse society, making it hospitable to Jews, human rights, environmental safety and religious freedom, are neither high on the Russian public's agenda nor on that of many in the West, who primarily seek assurances that they can "do business" with Putin.

As we learned throughout the Soviet period, a repressive government can repress minorities and suppress anti-minority hate crimes at the same time. The present turn in the cycle may offer some hope for reprieve, but the storm clouds continue to be observable.

Under current Russian conditions, characterized by corruption and the near absence of rule of law, Putin's determination to "get tough" on regional bosses could lead to a new series of problems. President Putin has made strong rhetorical commitments to fight anti-Semitism, but it remains to be seen how much priority he will give to promoting democracy and protecting vulnerable minority groups as he works to bring order to Russia's lawless regions. How he goes about this task in Krasnodar and other problematic regions will be a major indication of what can be expected from Russia's new president.

An especially disturbing trend, which would have been unthinkable under Yeltsin, is Putin's flirtation with extremist forces. Much of his popularity stems from his tough stand on the issue of Chechnya, which he often describes using nationalistic, even racist language. In April, Putin awarded Krasnodar governor Nikolai Kondratenko with a medal for "service to the motherland." In August, he granted a meeting to the most influential anti-Semitic publisher in Russia--

Aleksandr Prokhanov, chief editor of the extremist newspaper Zavtra. On September 7, Kremlin official Aleksandr Ignatov, the General Director of the Information Analytical Agency of the Department of Affairs, which is part of the Presidential Administration, wrote an article in the widely read national newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta accusing a "Chasidic-paramasonic grouping" of controlling the process of globalization, which will lead to a World Government under its control.

It is especially ominous that Putin is increasingly converting pro-democracy activists into Soviet era dissidents. Two cases are illustrative. Alexander Nikitin simply wrote a report identifying the massive threat of nuclear contamination of the oceans, a report whose dissemination is expressly guaranteed by the Russian constitution. He was arrested and prosecuted for treason over a period of 4 ½ years. Several courts rejected the basis of the case and in December, he was acquitted. In April, a three-judge panel of the Supreme Court approved the acquittal. Meanwhile, Putin used the case to indict environmental NGOs as fronts for foreign intelligence agencies. The Prosecutor General refused to accept the Supreme Court's ruling and filed an unprecedented appeal to the full Supreme Court. Last week, the Court upheld Nikitin's acquittal. The only point of this case, as well as the sustained efforts to de-register environmental and human rights NGOs, is political - to intimidate environmental whistle blowers and other human rights activists.

The case of Vladimir Gusinsky is more nuanced, but of a similar bent. His arrest was heralded as a move against the oligarchs. But as the most independent media mogul and critic of the Putin regime, especially its war in Chechnya, the message was clearly meant to intimidate dissident journalists. Nor did the Jewish community of Russia miss the point that even its most powerful member was vulnerable. The prosecutor, in defending the arrest, explicitly made this connection by asserting that even a media executive and vice president of the World Jewish Congress is not above the law.

The Gusinsky case makes clear the connection between strictly Jewish and broader human rights threats posed by a government that will brook little activist dissent. The worst case scenario would be that Russia's Jews end up facing a combination of post-Soviet threats (the alliance between neo-Nazi and Cossack paramilitary groups, local authorities, many of whom are members of the Communist party, and elements within the Russian Orthodox Church) and a partial return of the dangers they faced in the Soviet Union (the dominance of the security apparatus, leading to suppression of the free press, environmental and human rights NGOs and other elements of civil society). As this report demonstrates, there are already signs that this nightmare combination of the worst elements of Russia's post-Soviet chaos and the USSR's iron fist authoritarianism are beginning to emerge. The next year will thus be a crucial time in determining the future of Russian Jewry, and, indeed, democracy.

In sum, one can be sympathetic to the Russians' inherited problems and acknowledge that

President Putin is developing, at least rhetorically, an accurate list of threats to his society that must be addressed. However, President Putin's reliance on the security apparatus and his evident contempt for many aspects of democracy, civil society, including environmental and human rights NGOs and a free press, may lead to new threats.

I urge the Congress and the Administration to accept the findings and warnings of the MHG and UCSJ reports as a wake up call for foreign policy and assistance strategists. An authoritarian Russia poses a threat to its own citizens and to its international neighbors and partners as much for the failure of the Yeltsin era to build democracy and a civil and environmentally safe society as for its role in the management of weapons of mass destruction or in international diplomacy - the issues that invariably receive primary attention. Clearly, Mr. Putin understands the problems - e.g., nuclear safety, corruption, total breakdown of rule of law to support commerce and investment as well as human rights. While Russia bears the brunt of responsibility for the past decade's failures, the economic and foreign policy interventions by the West have also been complicit.

What we have documented today is the challenge of a government and a citizenry that has limited experience, understanding or faith in the power of democratic institutions to improve Russia's economy, national security or quality of civil life. These are the issues that must become more dominant in U.S. foreign and assistance policy and programs. In this respect, both the Russian and American governments must take steps to better incorporate the expertise of the NGO community.