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**“The Long Arm of Injustice: Did A UN Commission Founded
To Fight Corruption Help the Kremlin Destroy a Russian Family?”**

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

*Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), Co-Chairman
April 27, 2018*

The Russian government regularly pursues its vendettas beyond its borders, harassing and even murdering Russian emigres abroad – people who are on the Putin circle’s target list for various reasons. The poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in England is one of the most recent examples to reach the news.

The Kremlin’s sadistic pursuit of the entire Bitkov family is in its way just as shocking as its cruel murder of Litvinenko and the attempted murders of the Skripals. The Bitkovs are still alive today, but they have been hounded for over a decade, to the opposite end of the world, and beyond the limits of human endurance – merely for resisting Putin favorites who sought to take over their successful paper manufacturing company.

More shocking, the facts of the case strongly indicate – and we will hear testimony on this today – that the United Nation’s International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, or CICIG, became deeply involved in the Kremlin’s persecution of the Bitkov family. Indeed that CICIG acted as the Kremlin’s operational agent in brutalizing and tormenting the Bitkov family.

Congress has a special responsibility in this matter because the United States is one of the largest contributors to CICIG's budget. There has been little congressional oversight of CICIG – it's clearly time for that to change.

In the 1990s Igor and Irina Bitkov built the Northwest Timber Company, acquiring and modernizing old factories to increase paper production. As their company grew, the Bitkovs took loans from several Russian state banks to finance further modernization. Their business prospered – grew to a value of hundreds of millions of dollars – and the family was approached by a powerful bank executive who sought to buy a majority share in the company at a significantly below-market rate. Other officials asked Irina to become politically involved in the President Vladimir Putin's party.

When the Bitkovs refused things got very ugly. Their 16-year-old daughter, Anastasia, was kidnapped for several days, drugged, and repeatedly raped. Her parents ransomed her – paying the money to policemen, who said they were go-betweens to the kidnappers. Then the banks suddenly called in the loans, even though the Bitkovs had excellent credit. The family was threatened with imprisonment and death.

Fearing for their lives, the family fled Russia. They found what they thought was legal refuge in Guatemala with the help of a Guatemalan law firm. They acquired Guatemalan passports, bought a house, learned Spanish, and gave birth to their second child, Vladimir.

But the Kremlin caught up to them and VTB Bank, one of Russia's biggest state-controlled banks, often referred to as "Putin's Piggy Bank," filed a complaint against them in Guatemala, alleging use of false identification documents.

While we don't know exactly what transpired internally to CICIG and the Guatemalan state agencies that work with them, it appears to have been taken up by the Guatemalan state and CICIG. In any case, the Bitkov's suddenly found themselves catapulted into what has become for them a horror without end.

On January 15, 2015, Igor, Irina, Anastasia and Vladimir were awoken by an armed raid on their home – 70 or so armed policemen woke them up, took them away, and spent 20 hours tearing apart their home and their office.

It got much worse – the Bitkovs were put into cages for nine days. Their daughter – remember she had been kidnaped and repeatedly raped years earlier – was denied medication, now suffered a nervous breakdown. As the ordeal continued, she would later make multiple suicide attempts. Their infant son was torn away from them, not even permitted to stay with friends, and sent to an orphanage, where he sustained facial injuries, a chipped tooth, conjunctivitis, lost the ability to speak. When family friends recovered him they found that, when given food, little Vladimir immediately began hiding it under his shirt. I will not say more now about the Bitkovs harrowing ordeal – their lawyers will speak to that. Suffice it to say that Igor, Irina, and Anastasia have remained incarcerated since January 2015.

In January of this year, despite an earlier appeals court ruling that the Bitkovs' alleged offense was only administrative in nature and punishable with a fine, Igor was sentenced to 19 years in prison and Irina and Anastasia were sentenced to 14 years each. These sentences were far harsher than those given to Guatemalan officials who perpetrated the sale of passports – they are harsher than sentences given to rapists or murderers.

What was CICIG's role in all of this? What we know for a fact is this: CICIG and a special branch of the attorney general's office worked together on the investigation and arrest of the Bitkovs – CICIG personnel participated in the raid on the Bitkovs home. Then CICIG and VTB Bank initiated and aggressively pursued the legal case against them, consistently arguing at every level of the judicial process against the Bitkovs, including against their appeal to be tried as migrants guilty of an administrative offense rather than a criminal one. CICIG – via its representative Claudia Gonzalez Orellana – defended the role of the VTB Bank in the prosecution of the Bitkovs. Oddly, CICIG never prosecuted the law firm which provided the Bitkovs with the passports that destroyed their lives.

As we will hear from Bill Browder: “Inexplicably... In January 2015, a criminal case against the Bitovs was opened at the direction of CICIG. Immediately after, 70 armed police officers raided the Bitkov's home, arrested Irina, Igor, and Anastasia and detained them in cages behind the parking garage in the main court building of Guatemala City.”

CICIG was invited to participate in this event and brief us today, but declined. They have sent a note, requesting that it be made part of the record, as has VTB Bank. Without objection, that will be done.

During questions, I will quote from CICIG's note – asking our witnesses about CICIG's account.

Just yesterday afternoon, the Constitutional Court of Guatemala – the country's highest court – upheld an earlier decision by a lower court that had granted the Bitkovs' appeal to be considered migrants, and therefore, under international law, not able to be tried as criminals. It is not yet clear what this ruling will mean – it seems mean that the family could be released from prison – but also that they could be deported back to Russia. Time will tell.

I want to make an appeal to the Guatemalan government, to CICIG, to our government, and to the UN – this is a time to focus on restoring to this family as much as possible of what has been unjustly taken from them. Their safety must come first – we must assume that they remain targets for the Kremlin. They must not be returned to Russia. They have to be protected, and safe haven must be found for them.

And then there must be accountability for the grotesque wrong that has been done to them. There must be further inquiry, and we must get to the bottom of this.

It would be the worst irony if CICIG, which was created to battle for accountability for corruption, were now to seek only to avoid scrutiny and accountability. CICIG cannot credibly do battle against a culture of impunity if it demands impunity for itself.

This is the time for CICIG – and its commissioner Iván Velásquez – to throw open its doors, provide transparency, and give an honest accounting to the world of exactly what was CICIG's role in the cruelty that was wreaked on the Bitkovs. Unfortunately, up to now it has done nothing of the sort. I urge CICIG to change course now.