



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Christopher H. Smith

Ranking Minority Member - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good morning to everybody.

I am alarmed by many things going on in Russia today but I want to raise one issue right now: the unsolved murders of dozens of independent Russian journalists over the past decade. I have authored a Congressional resolution, H. Con. Res. 151, calling upon President Putin to seek competent, outside law enforcement assistance in the investigation of these unsolved murders. Only yesterday this resolution, with over 30 cosponsors, was approved by the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Congress needs to raise its voice on this issue. Russia holds the second worst position in the world in the number of journalists killed in the last ten years, according to the International News Safety Institute. Reporters Without Borders counts 21 murdered journalists since March of 2000. This is a conservative number; it does include the murders of Paul Klebnikov, Anna Politkovskaya, but not the death under extremely suspicious circumstances of Ivan Safronov. Many observers think government officials have ordered most of these murders, or at least connived at them, because these journalists investigated government corruption or human rights abuses in Russia. There is good reason to think that people in very high places are protecting the murderers. We know this: very few of these murder cases have been resolved.

Journalists fulfill an essential role in every society, and none more than those who uncover the theft of a country's assets by its elected officials, or human rights outrages committed in its name. Journalists who do this at risk to their lives fully deserve to be called heroes.

Make no mistake about it, these journalists knew they were risking their lives. We owe it to them to raise our voice, and to do so over and over again, to bring the killers to justice. Mr. Putin, sadly, does not seem to be making a serious effort to do so.

I am afraid Russia today may be slipping backward. The Russian economy is booming, but Russian democracy seems to be falling below the level of many developing countries.

Only when journalists can work without fear of intimidation and death will we be able to say that we have a truly democratic Russian government. That will also be a government which doesn't sell arms to the Sudanese government to commit genocide in Darfur, which doesn't look the other way when local officials harass minority religions and ethnic minorities, which doesn't embrace military brutality in Chechnya, maintain an occupying army in Moldova, and

threaten Poland and the Czech Republic for cooperating with the United States in their military defense, or foment unrest in Kosovo.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great conscience of Russia, said in his Nobel Prize speech in 1970 that, "Any man who has once proclaimed violence as his method is inevitably forced to take the lie as his principle." My resolution addresses the violence of the murder of independent journalists, and the lie in the claim that their murders have been seriously investigated.

Solzhenitsyn said of Communist Russia, "In our country the lie has become not just a moral category but a pillar of the State." We have to ask ourselves, and to ask Mr. Putin, will this terrible statement also be true of post-communist Russia?