

**Opening Remarks of Representative Christopher Smith, Chairman  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

**Briefing on “The War in Chechnya and Russian Civil Society”  
June 17, 2004**

Good afternoon, I am pleased to welcome you to this briefing on “The War in Chechnya and Russian Civil Society.”

Today we welcome two representatives of the largest-- and one of the most well-known and active -- NGOs in Russia. Founded in 1989, the “Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers” (CSM) is an umbrella organization embracing nearly 300 groups and thousands of members. The organization has gained wide recognition for publicizing and protesting human rights abuses in the Russian military, such as hazing or abusive treatment. Committee members also arrange legal help for servicemen and their families, consult on legislation affecting military and alternative service, and press for improved living conditions for military personnel.

The Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers have opposed Moscow’s conduct of the war in Chechnya. One of our guests is quoted as calling it an exercise in “bureaucrats fulfilling their quota of cannon fodder.” CSM has also accused the Russian Government of underreporting the number of Russian military casualties in the conflict.

Without reservation, we recognize Russia’s right to defend its territorial integrity, but certainly territorial integrity can be preserved without resorting to the brutal methods employed by some members of the Russian military and the pro-Moscow Chechen militia. At the same time, I recognize that some Chechen guerrilla fighters have committed human rights abuses and violations of humanitarian law. Those acts should and have been condemned.

Against this backdrop, recent verbal attacks on human rights organizations and their funding sources by President Putin and other Russian officials raise concerns about the future of Russian NGOs that the government may view as politically hostile. Mr. Putin speaks favorably of rule of law and civil society, but he can also resort easily to the language of a Brezhnev-era *Pravda* editorial.

Our guests today will provide insights on their work and their perspectives on NGO activities and civil society in Russia today. They are:

Valentina Melnikova, National Director of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia, and Natalia Zhukova, Chairperson, of the Nizhny Novgorod Committee.

We look forward to our guests’ presentations and I will open the floor to questions afterward.