



# HELSINKI COMMISSION BRIEFING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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## Testimony :: The Honorable Gordon Smith

Commissioner - The Helsinki Commission

\* This statement was submitted for the record

I'm pleased to have the opportunity to share about religious freedom in Russia. Tolerance in the Russian Federation, the Soviet Union and Czarist Russia, particularly the plight of the Jewish community, has been on the forefront of our bilateral relationship. In fact, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has held hearings on religious freedom in Russia - and the plight of its Jewish community throughout this century and even in the 19th century.

Until 1917 the Russian Empire was home to the world's largest Jewish community. From the time of their entry into the Empire, Jews suffered from discriminatory laws, including severe limitations on where they could live, and periodic eruptions of violence, known in English by their Russian name, "pogroms." The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 offered false hope to many Jews that the injustices of the Tsarist period would end. In time, however, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union began a systematic campaign to eradicate all religion, including Judaism. Under Khrushchev, there was also a dramatic shift in Soviet foreign policy against Israel and toward the Arab countries.

Large-scale Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union revived in the 1960s, when the Jewish population numbered 2-3 million. Jewish emigration peaked in the late 1980s and 1990s. Today, the Jewish community in Russia numbers between 500,000-600,000, the third largest in the world. (Large numbers of Jews remain in other former Soviet states, especially Ukraine.)

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a revival of the Jewish community in Russia has occurred. Several synagogues have reopened, and over 100 Jewish organizations and groups operate in Moscow, including religious, cultural, research and education, and charitable institutions. Despite these improvements, the Jewish community was reminded of its precarious position in Russia through a series of recent anti-Semitic actions and statements.

The August 1998 devaluation of Russia's currency, the ruble, sank the exchange rate and caused many Russians to lose their savings. It also attached a tremendous price tag to imports, including food and other consumer goods. Amidst these difficult circumstances, there has developed an increased sense of insecurity among Russian Jews, who have in recent years confronted strident anti-Semitic rhetoric in the political arena on both the national and local levels and a number of highly public acts of anti-Semitic violence.

In addition to the age-old formula of scapegoating Jews for society's ills, the present difficult situation in Russia is compounded by another disturbing fact. A high percentage of the so-called oligarches, -the highly visible, and detested, business tycoons who are believed to have profited immensely from corrupt privatization deals-are Jews, as were a number of prominent government officials associated with the privatization process.

The Senate has spoken out yearly in letters to present and past Presidents of the Russian Federation. Last year, President Vladimir put in spoke out against anti-Semitism in response to a letter signed by 98 United States Senators on March 9, 2000. Putin, in a March 15th interview said "Russia's main constitutional principle stipulates the protection of citizens' rights and interests regardless of nationality or religious affiliation. Any expressions of anti-Semitism are seen as aggressive nationalism and are therefore unacceptable. There is no place for them in a civilized society."

But there remain problems with religious tolerance in Russia. As a freshman senator in 1997 I offered an amendment to the Foreign Operations Bill that predicated foreign aid to the Russian Federation on the implementation of a new law restricting religious freedom in Russia. That law, passed by the Russian Duma on July 4 1997, had the potential of severely restricting

freedom of religion in Russia. The bill was ironically titled "On Freedom of Conscience and On Religious Associations."

That bill was eventually signed into law - a law that required religious groups to register with the state and submit their religious doctrines and practices to scrutiny by a commission of experts with the power to deny religious status. Without this status, these groups would lose the rights to rent or own property, employ religious workers or conduct charitable and educational activities. Clearly that law in Russia and its implementation would have a grave impact on religious freedom in that country.

I'm happy to report that my 1997 amendment passed the Senate 95 to 4. In following years this amendment was included as part of the Foreign Operations Bill and was included again in the FY 2002 bill.

In my years in the Senate I have remained vigilant on the issue of religious freedom. The Foreign Relations Committee has held yearly hearings on religious freedom abroad - especially with regard to what is going on in the Russian Federation. I also host, with the Department of State, a series of yearly roundtable discussions on religious freedom. These roundtable discussions are attended by members of each religious community impacted by this new law in Russia and by various state department and NSC officials that are responsible for religious freedom abroad.

As the years went by and the registration period closed regarding religions, it was felt by all those interested in religious freedom in that country that this amendment was a positive influence on how the new Russian law was implemented. It let the Russian government know that Americans cared about freedom of religion in Russia - that the eyes of the world were upon the Russian government as it implemented the law on religions. Although the amendment has never been implemented - and each year aid has gone out to the Russian Federation - the amendment's influence and impact have been positive and undeniable according to those religions "on the ground" in Russia.

In general, many of the problems initially have worked themselves out under this new law. Many of the problems with denials of registration or persecution have occurred in the far reaches of the Russian Federation. The conventional wisdom regarding implementation of that law is that persecution occurs abroad - the farther away from Moscow and the centralized government, the greater the risk is for religious intolerance.

But even in Moscow there is a requirement of vigilance. And I am happy to report that this body has been vigilant on this issue - especially regarding the old problem of anti-Semitism in Russia. Some might say that we shouldn't single out Russia regarding this issue. I would agree - we should fight anti-Semitism in every nation including our own.

Because I believe that how a nation treats the sons and daughters of Israel is a bellwether for tolerance.

The Russian law, among other things, limits the activities of foreign missionaries and grants unregistered "religious groups" fewer rights than accredited Russian religious organizations such as the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. This law if poorly implemented, could also sharply restrict the activities of foreign missionaries in Russia.

One of my own constituents, Pastor Dan Pollard, is a missionary with a church in the Russian far east - in a town called Vanino. Pastor Pollard has been continually harassed by local officials, many who cite the 1997 law as an official reason for barring Pollard from ministering.

The Russian government must permit foreign missionaries to enter and reside in Russia and work with fellow believers. I strongly believe that foreign missionaries, like Pastor Pollard, should be allowed to enjoy the religious freedom guaranteed Russian citizens and legal residents by the Russian constitution, OSCE commitments, and other international agreements to which Russia is a signatory.

I want to thank the Chairman for holding this briefing and having the opportunity to discuss religious freedom in Russia. I believe that briefings such as this one shine the bright light of freedom on areas of human rights and tolerance that cannot be ignored by this country or by Russia.