



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Christopher H. Smith

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Ranking Minority Member - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, and welcome to everybody.

The week before last I went to Georgia and spent four days on the ground. Along the way I joined Senators Lieberman and Graham and met with President Saakashvili, Prime Minister Gurgendze, with members of President Saakashvili's political party, ENM, and visited an IDP camp near Tbilisi. Separately, I met with Nino Burjanadze, the former Speaker of the Georgian Parliament and an old friend of both of us, Mr. Chairman. I also met with Patriarch Ilia II of the Georgian Orthodox Church, as well as representatives of international aid and human rights organizations.

And of course all of us, Congressional and administration visitors, carried a strong message of support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, for Georgia to be granted NATO membership as soon as possible, and for an aid package that Congress and the administration will craft to help the Georgian people through a time of great suffering and deprivation.

Russia's war against Georgia is a war of intimidation, meant to frighten the Georgian people into giving up their tremendous progress they have made in creating a democratic state built on respect for human rights. The Russian government is also trying to frighten Azeris, Ukrainians, Moldovans, Belarussians, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians into resubmitting to some form of Russian vassalage.

I was especially impressed by Ambassador Hakala, the head of the OSCE Mission to Georgia, and the Mission's Senior Military Representative Stephen Young.

But I don't think Putin and Medvedev have frightened as many people as they had hoped. I think they've woken up a lot of people, who are now ready to work together to defend their sovereignty. They will be looking to us for leadership.

Mr. Chairman, we have seen over and over again that regimes that are expansionist, aggressive, and start wars are regimes that abuse the fundamental human rights of their own people. The connection between unjust war and human rights abuses is close, and I believe the poor human rights record of the Putin-Medvedev government is at the root of the problem. The countries around Russia will not be truly secure until the Russian government respects the rights of its own citizens. We will have to keep this in mind as we reconsider our relationship with Russia.

Mr. Chairman, while in Georgia I organized the evacuation of two of my constituents—a 3-year-old and a 7-year-old girl—who were visiting their grandparents in a village near South Ossetia when the Russian army invaded that region. I'm happy to report that those two wonderful kids are now at home in New Jersey, and I am continuing to work with the State Department and the ICRC for the evacuation of a number of other young people.