



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Christopher H. Smith

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Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Good morning, and welcome to our witnesses and to everyone joining us this morning.

Sadly, online censorship, surveillance, and the intimidation of online speech is not restricted to countries where it's commonly reported, like China and Iran. It is increasingly common in member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe – broadly speaking, in Europe and the former Soviet Union.

With this hearing, we seek to draw the world's attention to the arrest of bloggers, to the blocking of Web sites, the surveillance and intimidation of peaceful political activists, to aggressive denial of service attacks, and to violent intimidation by some OSCE member states. For example, Belarus is blocking social networking sites as Twitter and Facebook and temporarily shutting down opposition Internet sites. Turkey is set to require a mandatory, nationwide Internet filtering system on August 22 – unprecedented in scope in the OSCE region and compounding the already aggressive blocking of around 14,000 Web sites and broad restrictions on content. Kazakhstan, which already blocks a number of popular blogs and media sites, is also in the process of creating a national Internet, having recently decided that all .kz domain names will have to operate on physical servers within its borders.

No less disturbing is the violent intimidation of dissent in Russia. Though Russia does not aggressively censor terms or significantly block access to information on the Internet, it has its own crude but effective methods for controlling the Internet: mafia thugs in league with the government beat people and instill fear in Russian bloggers and journalists. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, "Online journalists in Russia and throughout the region – whose work appears on the Russian-language Internet known as the Runet – have faced physical intimidation, attacks, and threats for far longer than has been widely noted in either Moscow or the West."

In a report issued by the Open Net Initiative, the authors (one of whom is here with us today), concluded that Internet controls in the Commonwealth of Independent States have evolved "several generations ahead" of those used in other regions of the world. Runet controls are not only mirroring past oppression, the authors said, they're foreshadowing the future of Internet control worldwide. The prospect of the Internet environment deteriorating to that level is frightening, and surely is a call to action.

At the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, President Ford stated that history will judge the signatories, "not by the promises we make, but by the promises we keep." This is as true now as it was then. All 56 OSCE states have agreed to respect their citizens' human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression. But some do not do so – and are not only not improving but even backsliding. I look forward to a conversation on what we can do to turn this around.