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Chairman Hastings and Members of the Commission:

Thank you for this opportunity to talk to you about the work conditions for journalists in Russia's North Caucasus.

More than ten years I worked as a correspondent for different newspapers and agencies in the North Caucasus – the land between the Black and Caspian Seas in southern Russia. This region was the arena of war a hundred years ago. It still remains an arena of war.

Russia's statements about the fight against global terrorism in the North Caucasus have nothing to do with the truth. It is a war against nations that tried to become independent. Russia has been using in this region military policies that are very close to genocide. I can describe those policies as massive and regular violations of human rights, even the basic right to life.

This is the truth that the Russian government tries to hide. And the best way to hide information is by destroying the freedom of speech and the independent press. Most famous Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya was murdered only for one reason—for her job in the North Caucasus, for telling the truth.

I don't need to tell you the statistics on freedom of speech in Russia – these numbers are very familiar to all who interested in the situation. My personal story is also well-known.

But there are dozens of stories beyond the statistics—stories that remain unknown. I want to tell you only one of those stories, about a friend of mine who still lives and works in Russia. For this reason I can't call him by name.

When he started to work as a correspondent for one of Russia's central newspapers he never used his legal name – he uses only pseudonyms. He started to write articles that were very different from the ones appearing in the official press. His stories were full of details. They were mirrors of what was really happening in his region. He wrote about kidnapped young people, about murdered or tortured civilians who were called terrorists after their death.

Then, only after a few weeks, he suddenly disappeared. I tried to call him – his cell phone was switched off. No one in his family had any idea where he could be. On the second day, the news of his abduction came. Someone saw the man being kidnapped near an Internet café by masked militants. For Caucasians this means only one thing – his relatives should start to collect cash to pay for the return of the dead body.

I was on my way to his town when he called me. His voice was changed; at first I couldn't understand who was calling from his cell phone. He said: "Do not come please, I will be soon in your city."

A few hours later, in the evening, we met in a café in Nalchik. He was very angry and sad. He used the paper napkins on the table to write down for me what had happened. (He could not speak about it.)

Five or six masked men kidnapped him. He had with him a cell phone, flash card and tape-recorder, when they took him. They took all this stuff from him, and then pushed him inside a car. He was brought to a neighboring town. After arriving there, they left him in a small room and all his guards disappeared. The door was locked. There was only one table and two chairs in this room. He heard men's voices screaming like wild animals. He realized they were being tortured.

Then two men came in, wearing civilian clothes. They did not hide their faces. And they showed him IDs – both of them were FSB officers. They asked him how he became a journalist. Their tone was smug, superior.

“There are dozens of journalists in your region, but only a few of them were here like you. Do you understand why? - They asked him. They put all his articles, signed by different pseudonyms, in front of him on the table. Then the questions changed. They asked him: Is he a spy? What Western secret services was he connected to? “You can't write articles like you wrote if you are only a journalist, you must have someone strong behind you,” they told him.

He tried to explain: he wrote only the truth. They were laughing: who needs your truth, you must write what you must, nothing more!

This lesson lasted until midnight. Then they left him alone for the night. The next morning he received instructions. Every time he wrote something for the central newspaper he must first send it to them for checking; once a week he must come to meet the officer who will work with him. “We know where you all the time; we are watching you, we are hearing you,” – they told him when they gave him back his cell phone. They made him sign an agreement to keep silent. At last they told him: “If you break our agreement – you will be disappeared forever.”

Two weeks after our meeting he received access to a closed security zone on the border of Russia and Azerbaijan. He started writing articles about the “very good” relationship between the Russian security services and local civilians.

I am not afraid to make things worse for this journalist because of this testimony because I know dozens of stories like his. They will not realize which one of the dozens is my hero. They are not unusual—these official methods I described. But the most useful methods are much more simple.

A year ago I had an interview with an officer from the FSB. He spoke incognito. I asked him about methods they use to keep under control the local press. I was interested – have they really met with every journalist? “We are not interested in every journalist”: he told me. – “We have our people in every press bureau. We know what they write about before it becomes public. If something is wrong we need to just call the editor, that's all. You must truly believe – if you

disagree with us you must change your profession or we are strong enough to make you much more flexible.”

I can name those methods used against the journalists to make them “flexible.” You can be beaten, kidnapped, tortured, arrested. Things can be done not only to you but to your family, too. Even your seventy-year-old father can be beaten, so terribly that he loses an eye – this is what happened to the father of one journalist who freelances for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Or your sixteen-year-old, innocent son can be arrested. Your house and your parents’ house can be searched any time they want to. Your name can appear on the pages of very “flexible” newspapers with unseemly commentaries. You can be erased from the list of journalists who have access to official information or who are allowed to attend official press conferences. You can be banned from working for foreign news agencies, because the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will never give you the accreditation; and without accreditation your work is illegal. If you didn’t become “flexible” after all, you can suddenly die, or be publicly executed—as it happened to Anna Politkovskaya. These are my observations after ten years of work as a journalist in the North Caucasus region of Russia.