



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Igor Zevelev

Washington Bureau Chief of RIA Novosti - Russian News and Information Agency

Mr. Zevelev was not present at the hearing

Members of the Senate, House, and the Commission, I'd like to thank you for inviting me to speak about Russia today.

The views I am going to express are entirely my own and do not necessarily represent the position of the Russian Government, the Russian Embassy, or RIA Novosti.

As Russian parliamentary and presidential elections approach in 2007 - 2008, many analysts will call for Washington to make democratization a central component of its policy toward Russia.

Democratic institutions lie at the core of American identity, and U.S. foreign policy reasserts this fact by promoting these values in foreign lands. Such efforts may work if applied in the right place at the right time. Russia today may be a difficult place to promote democracy from outside. There are two major reasons for this. The first one is the nature of American-Russian relations these days. The second reason is domestic political climate and the attitudes of the Russian people.

Russia considers itself an independent center of power and would hate to be treated like a student. In my opinion, the main driving force of the changes in the nature of the Russian-American interaction is President Putin's desire to renegotiate Russia's relationship with the West. This aspiration reflects the attitudes of both the Russian elite and the general public and their dissatisfaction with Russia's role as a junior partner of the West in the 90s.

President Putin's speech in Munich on February 10 caught many by surprise, but it was not unexpected for those who followed the evolution of Russian foreign policy in 2006-2007 closely. This speech was a reflection of Russia's growing assertiveness on the international arena. The president's message to the US was very blunt: We are back as a global player and you need to talk to us as equals. President Putin's critique was not aimed at US policy towards Russia. Putin expressed the growing displeasure with the whole system of international relations that the US was trying to shape.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has set the agenda and the rules of the game in many interactions with Russia. But America has had much less leverage in affecting

Russia's preferences, desires and thoughts in those areas where the two countries' fundamental beliefs about the world differed.

Unlike Western Europe after World War II, or Central Europe after the Cold War, Russia questions the habitual American assertion that it was the United States who won these wars. American preponderance is not seen in Russia as a source of legitimate authority.

In this context, any attempt to encourage faster democratization will be seen as yet another instrument to dominate through helping pro- Western leaders come to power, or simply as a tool to weaken Russia. This is not only the view of the Russian elite, but is also a very popular attitude. With Russia striving to restore its status in the world arena, its confidence strengthened and its economy booming, criticism of Russia's democratic record will inevitably be seen as rhetoric designed to conceal American concerns about Russia's revival under President Putin.

It is unrealistic to think that Russian democracy, human rights and civil society will improve if the United States applies pressure. Russian perceptions have changed dramatically; for mainstream domestic Russian discourse, political stability and order have greater value than democracy. Democracy is often associated with the chaos, the collapse of the state and the material gains of the very few that occurred in the '90s.

Excessive U.S. pressure could cause the Russian public to shift toward seeing the universal values of democracy and human rights as merely instruments of foreign political influence. If that happens, the future of Russian democracy may indeed become bleak.

Having said all this, I would like to suggest a cautiously optimistic view on the future of democracy in Russia. The middle class is growing rapidly. It cherishes many freedoms that exist in Russia: freedom to earn money, to buy property, to travel. This is remarkable progress in comparison with Soviet times. Gradually, the middle class will demand a better and more independent judiciary to protect newly acquired property and freedoms. The Russian people will also insist on a real struggle against corruption. Combating corruption is impossible without a competitive political arena. Finally, there will be more demand for democratic institutions. All this has to grow from below.

In conclusion, let me address the question of what would be the best US policy towards Russia under the given circumstances. I think Russia would be encouraged to cooperate with advanced democracies through a consistent policy of keeping Russia "in." In the G8, in the Russia-NATO Council, in the OSCE, in the antiterrorism coalition, in the Six-party talks on North Korea, in the emerging coalition that tries to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, in the Middle East Quartet, eventually – in the WTO, and so on.

It would be counterproductive to view these institutions as merely instruments of hard pressure on Russia. Russia must become a real stakeholder in these institutions, as well as in all other global, political and economic arrangements. Russia can be a valuable partner of the United States in the areas of shared or overlapping interests. Mutually advantageous cooperation with

the United States and other democracies will create a favorable international environment for positive developments in Russia.

Thank you very much.