

Statement by Chairman Sam Brownback

Helsinki Commission Hearing

February 8, 2006

Dirksen Senate Office Building, 226

“Human Rights, Civil Society, and Democratic Governance in Russia”

The hearing will come to order.

I welcome everybody today to the hearing on Russia that's being held by the Helsinki Commission. This is the latest of several hearings on the subject of human rights, civil society, and democratic governance in Russia under the Putin administration.

As per the commission's mandate, we will examine today how Russia is complying with the core principles of the Helsinki Accords and subsequent OSCE documents.

This hearing is being held at a time when many are deeply concerned by the downward trajectory of civil liberties and democratic governance under the Putin presidency. We intend to examine today some of the more recent events that have exacerbated this situation.

There's no question that there are many countries in the world where the human rights situation is much worse. But unlike Russia, those countries are not longstanding members of the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the G-8.

Given Russia's desire to play a constructive role on the world stage, the Putin administration will have to decide whether it intends to play by the rules that Russia adopted as governing principles for its own government and its civic institutions. Russia will have to demonstrate beyond rhetoric that it is committed to democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law.

That will mean, of course, competitive challenges to the existing power structure. It will mean allowing and promoting an open and pluralistic power center. And it will mean listening to the wisdom and wishes of the Russian people, not the other way around.

These were the animating aspirations of the Russian people when they courageously gained their independence and became free from the communist leaders and their system. Instead, Russia today has simply become a stagnant autocracy, living on receipts from energy resources and cozying up to repressive, if not lethal, regimes from around the world.

In the last few weeks, we have seen a spy scandal in Moscow, in which the Russian security services alleged that certain Russian NGOs are linked to alleged British intelligence activities. This smacks of tactics from the communist Brezhnev era and is clearly an attempt to justify recent promulgation of legislation that would restrict Russian and foreign NGO activity.

NGO activity is at the heart of the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Accords, the right to know one's right and act upon them. The NGOs are the little battalions that empower the citizenry to participate actively in the political process on a day-to-day basis, keeping government open and responsive to its people.

Today we will hear from administration witnesses who will discuss the response by the United States to the challenges faced by NGOs and to the overall decline in human rights protection in Russia today.

We will also hear from a panel of experts who have been extensively engaged in these areas.

There is considerably more cooperation in the past between the United States and Russia in areas of mutual interest, such as security and economics, and the world today is safer and better for it. But the question remains: Is Russia ultimately a reliable partner?

It is an important question, and we hope to find some answers today, because the implications of President Putin's policies extend well beyond Russia's borders. How Russia acts and how the West responds send important signals to dictators in Belarus and in Uzbekistan, and even to Iran, where Russia and the West are intimately involved in trying to resolve tension over its nuclear ambitions.

Earlier today, I spoke by phone to one of those in Russia who was not silent back in the 1970s when she fought for freedom and certainly would not be silent today. In fact, I asked Ludmilla Alexeeva if it would be wise for me to mention at this hearing today that we talked. After all, it is her organization, the Moscow Helsinki Group, that is being accused by Russian authorities of spying.

In the kind of spirit that has characterized her lifelong commitment to human rights, she said to me, "What can the authorities do that they haven't done already?"

I look forward to the statement of our witnesses. I have some questions to follow. And I want to applaud those NGOs in Russia and particularly those in Moscow.

And as I spoke with her, I said: It's relatively easy for me in Washington to talk about the need for human rights than individuals would be able to freely express themselves in Russia. It's quite

another thing for somebody in Moscow and an NGO to do the same.

And I applaud her efforts. I applaud what she stands for. It reminds me of -- I was at the Coretta Scott King funeral yesterday. And it's one thing to talk about it now; it's another thing to walk on the bridge in Selma going to Montgomery, as they did and as she has done in Russia.

I look forward to the testimony.