

Statement by Representative Ben Cardin

Helsinki Commission Hearing

February 8, 2006

Dirksen Senate Office Building, 226

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

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this important meeting the status of human rights, civil society, and democratic governance in Russia.

Lately, the news coming out of Russia has not been good. Now this may be because bad news sells more newspapers than good news. But when *Newsweek International* writes that “the Russian secret service is acting more and more like the old KGB,” we should start taking notice.

One gets the impression that the Kremlin is determined to control every aspect of political activity in Russia and make sure any opposition is derailed or co-opted. President Putin says the rights things about democracy and civil liberties, but his actions belie his words. He seems to have surrounded himself with advisors who don’t really believe in constitutional democracy but wish—at best—to make it a “managed democracy” and—at worst—are willing to see justice perverted in order to rid themselves of troublesome opponents.

I note a recent quote by a prominent Russian journalist who said that President Putin has surrounded himself with people who are trained to destroy their enemies and that if there aren’t any enemies to destroy, they create them. I am afraid that that is what will be the fruits of this new NGO law. I realize that there are articulate defenders of this new legislation, and I am sure that many of our colleagues in the Duma believe that this legislation is necessary to combat terrorism. But I would hate to see sincere and patriotic Russian citizens prosecuted for exercising the right guaranteed to them by the Helsinki Accords. It is very troubling to learn that the Russian intelligence service has tried to implicate Russian NGOs in alleged spying activity. No one doubts that spying takes place in Russia—we know it takes place in the United States—but the juxtaposition of the new law on NGOs and the television

broadcast about alleged links between British spies and NGOs seems a little bit too coincidental. It's as if someone at the FSB is working out of Yuri Andropov's old playbook.

I want to emphasize that I believe there is a great potential for the United States and Russia to work together for the betterment of our nations and the world. I know that we are working with the Russians in counter-terrorism, scientific cooperation, cooperative threat reduction, and other areas so vital to our national interest. I myself have worked productively with Russian colleagues in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. But in the long run it is extremely difficult, both philosophically and operationally, for the United States to work with a nation that does not accord its citizens basic civil liberties. I urge the Russian government to assure that its citizens enjoy those rights granted to them both by their own constitution and the Helsinki Accords.

Russia was "cut off" philosophically from the world by communism for seventy years. Now it must decide which path it will take – a democratic nation based on rule of law with a vibrant civil society or a corrupt bureaucratic state that distrusts its own citizens and seeks to eliminate political opposition. Internationally, Russia can be a great force for peace and progress, or the friend and arms supplier of rogue states and tyrants.

I urge Moscow to take the former course.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing and I'll have some questions afterward.