

“Human Rights and U.S. Russia Relations: Implications for the Future”

**Testimony by Carl Gershman, President
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Chairman Brownback, I'm grateful for this opportunity to testify before the Commission in the aftermath of the G8 Summit in St. Petersburg. As you know, I and others from the NED and its associated institutes were among the international participants in “The Other Russia” conference which was convened in Moscow by the All-Russia Civil Congress on July 11, four days before the opening of the G8. “The Other Russia” conference was organized with two goals in mind: First, to declare to the world that there was, in fact, a different, more pluralist and democratically committed Russia than the bureaucratic nomenclatura that would be on display later in the week in St. Petersburg; and second, to rally and bring together a broad coalition of NGOs and opposition political forces to fight, as the conveners said, for human rights and “for the democratic principle of organizing government and society,” and against “bigotry and xenophobia” and “a culture of bureaucratic theft.”

I'm pleased to report that the conference achieved its objectives and more. It received enormous attention in the international media, thereby enabling “the Other Russia” to have its message heard; and, more importantly, it provided a forum where Russians representing widely different points of view and areas of engagement were able to overcome a history internal strife and mutual reproach and unite around a common vision of “a new democratic state of Russia under the rule of law.” Significantly, a permanent council was established that will convene in September and that plans to meet regularly thereafter to exchange information and opinions.

Not surprisingly, the official Russia did not take kindly to this meeting. Police and unidentified assailants physically assaulted dozens of activists en route to the conference, forcibly removing them from trains and reportedly planting drugs and bullets on them. At the conference itself, police arbitrarily arrested four young activists, assaulting a German reporter for Focus magazine and confiscating his camera as he tried to film them being forced into a police van. A State Duma Deputy was also knocked unconscious on his way to deliver a speech at the closing day's events.

In addition, attempts were made to prevent official participation in the conference, with an aide to President Putin warning foreign diplomats that attendance at “The Other Russia” meeting would be treated by the Kremlin as an “unfriendly gesture.” I'm pleased to report, however, that Assistant Secretaries Dan Fried and Barry Lowenkron attended the gathering, along with other G7 representatives.

I'm also pleased to note that SEC Chairman Chris Cox, who is also a member of the NED Board, delivered an important video message to the conference in which he explained why “the

freedom to say, write, publish, broadcast, and think the truth as one understands it, without fear of persecution, is essential to a free capital market.” His implicit message to the Russian leaders was that they cannot hope to achieve sustained economic growth and full integration into the global economy if they continue to drive Russia backwards towards authoritarianism.

The holding of “The Other Russia” conference side-by-side with the G8 Summit graphically illustrates the hybrid, semi-authoritarian nature of the current Russian polity. As the conference agenda emphasized, there are two Russia’s in conflict with one another – a Russia of bureaucrats that is trying to hold onto power by closing off all independent avenues of political participation and expression; and a Russia of citizens that is pressing to reverse the return of authoritarianism and build a normal democracy.

As I pointed out in my own remarks to “The Other Russia” conference, a hybrid system is inherently unstable for the simple reason that Abraham Lincoln explained almost 150 years ago when he said that “a government cannot permanently endure half-slave and half-free...It will have to become all one thing or all the other.” Its capacity for effective governance is also severely constrained by absence of the normal channels of participation and communication that give the government feedback from society. As one Russian specialist said to me in his critique of “over-managed democracy,” it is a little like trying to drive a car without adequate visibility, something the Kremlin discovered in January of last year with the unrest over benefits reform. And as the Bulgarian Ivan Krastev explained in his own remarks to “The Other Russia” conference, such a system also feeds paranoia since leaders who don’t know what people think will assume that everyone is against them. Such paranoia was certainly on display in the way official Russia treated “The Other Russia” meeting.

The Russian leaders speak of establishing a “sovereign democracy,” by which they presumably mean a Russia that is not beholden to foreign powers. But as the Closing Statement of “The Other Russia” conference pointedly noted, quoting from the elegant words of Article 3 of the Russian constitution, “The multinational people of the Russian Federation shall be the vehicle of sovereignty and the only source of power in the Russian Federation.” The so-called sovereign democracy of official Russia is an increasingly hollow, Potemkin democracy that bears little resemblance to the real thing.

The United States should continue to deal with the two Russia’s, as it did earlier this month by participating in both “The Other Russia” conference and the G8 Summit. No one who supports democracy in Russia and desires the best for the Russian people should want a return to the enmity of the old days. But effective relations with official Russia will not be possible if we do not demonstrate strong support for The Other Russia, which is especially threatened today by the harsh new NGO law. The \$180,000 tax just levied on the International Protection Center, which helps Russians take cases to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, is an example of how the new law can be used punitively to silence independent NGOs.

The Russian government justifies this and other repressive measures by claiming that they are a necessary defense against foreign enemies, chiefly the United States. We should respond by showing our clear and unambiguous solidarity with those fighting for a free Russia under the rule of law. Supporting the aspirations of Russian democrats will not only refute the

argument that we are against Russia; it will also make clear to the Russian people that we have no illusions about the direction the current leadership is taking the country.

The Other Russia has taken an important step toward building a new, unified democratic movement. This is a significant development that we need to understand and support, one that holds promise for Russia and U.S.-Russians relations and for the cause of democracy in the world.