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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Commissioners,

Freedom House appreciates this opportunity to testify about the deteriorating democracy and human rights situation in Russia today, its implications for the future – and the American response. We gather today not only in the immediate aftermath of the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg, but in the opening days of the campaign that will culminate with critical parliamentary elections next year in the Russian Federation. Having spent a week in Moscow last month, I can offer some personal observations as well as convey to you the findings from recent reports published by Freedom House about Russia.

Freedom House sent a multinational delegation, led by our executive director, Jennifer Windsor, and including some of our research team that focuses on Russia. We went to Moscow just prior to the G-8 summit quite deliberately to engage personally with a broad range of Russians – including the community of democratic activists and politicians who mainly now find themselves outside of government, journalists and human rights groups, scholars and NGOs, as well as with those in the Kremlin and others sympathetic to Vladimir Putin's administration.

While there, we released our most recent report on Russia, from our survey called *Nations in Transit*, at a well attended press conference on June 14, and so these findings were conveyed to at least some Russians through the dwindling array of still independent newspapers and radio stations in Moscow. That report documents the continuing erosion of freedom in Russia during the past year, and I have brought copies today for your reference. The report, by one of America's most eminent Russia-watchers, Robert W. Orttung of American University, focuses on several specific developments that have been prominent in the last year – the resurgence of corruption in the growing state-owned economy; the development of the NGO law that would further curtail civic activity, and obstruct international efforts to assist civil society; the adoption of election laws that will make it even more difficult for opposition parties to win seats in the *Duma* and virtually impossible for independent monitors to observe the electoral process. But the larger, even more important story to be told is found in the accumulated series of reports on Russia that track the steady, continuing restriction of political space in Russia. In the annual assessments contained in *Nations in Transit*, one notes that the scores for Russia's democratic performance have been declining in *every year since 1997*.

Freedom House is often vilified in official media outlets in Russia (and some neighboring countries) for our reporting on developments there, and our release of this most recent report was no exception. The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a formal statement denouncing us and challenging our motives and our methods. Though the statement cavils about several things, including a concern that “isolated facts are ferreted out and become ‘dominating tendencies’,” the ministry's writers seem most concerned that Americans care at all about the state of Russia's democracy. Of our report, they say:

All this should not be taken so seriously but for one important circumstance. In the new strategy for US national security, Russian-American interstate relations are made directly contingent upon how Washington appraises our “behavior” in the field of democracy and human rights.

We wish this were true! While of course we appreciate that the U.S. Government needs to be engaged with the Government of Russia on many fronts, we believe it is of the utmost importance that the U.S. government engage Russia's democrats, to listen to them, and to think of responsible ways we all, in and out of government, can help them.

We at Freedom House do not believe that Russia should be shunned or isolated by the international community – to the contrary, we believe that broad engagement is called for by Western governments and civil society alike. And our friends in Russia confirm this. We do think it odd that this particular international gathering even included Russia, let alone was hosted by Moscow.

The rush of world leaders to St. Petersburg is clearly seen by Russians, both those who support President Putin and his critics alike, as a sign that the West does not really have major concerns about political trends in Russia these days.

What are these trends? The deterioration of democracy in Russia – or, perhaps more accurately, the dissolution of that country's democratic potential – has been a serious, deliberate long-term project. So this is not just something that has happened only on President Bush's watch – nor even just since Vladimir Putin became president of Russia. The recent, much publicized effort to hamstring the civic sector in Russia, through a combination of legal shackles and a vituperative media campaign questioning the patriotism of Russian NGOs, comes on the heels of previous successful efforts:

- to eviscerate political parties and render hollow the electoral process, a practice that started during the Presidential elections in 1996 under President Yeltsin, when all means were acceptable to fend off a resurgence of the then-increasingly popular communists;
- to concentrate power in the hands of the Kremlin by altering the constitution to allow the president to appoint governors of the regions who had previously been popularly elected;

- to cow the business community through strong-arm tactics by the Putin Administration, abetted by the courts, that have led to the re-nationalization of major corporate assets that had been privatized in the 1990s;
- to intimidate business leaders to desist from supporting political parties and candidates they might prefer, through selective prosecution epitomized by the incarceration of Mikhail Khordokovsky, previously the principal financial backer of several rival parties to Vladimir Putin's United Russia, now languishing in a remote Siberian prison;
- to control the national media, explicitly in the case of all television and most radio (which have now come back under government control), and indirectly in the case of print media, which are one-by-one being bought out by interests sympathetic to the Kremlin, after independent-minded publication find their advertisers being discouraged by the Putin Administration until they become financially untenable as businesses.

Russia is not yet a totalitarian state, and may not fully become one again, but it is well down the road to a consolidated dictatorship – one with nuclear weapons, fast-accumulating wealth due to its oil and gas reserves, increasingly assertive and self-confident on the world stage, and, importantly, one governed by a community convinced that the United States wishes Russia to fail as a state. This paranoia about what our motives are comes through in private conversations and public statements alike, and needs to be acknowledged in any serious conversation about Russia.

Notwithstanding what I perceive to be a broad consensus among Americans, in and out of the government, that we want to see a Russia that is strong and stable, secure and prosperous, democratic internally and constructive in its international policies, many leading Russians seem to think we want the country to be weak and poor, as well as pliable. They point to the enthusiasm the West showed for Boris Yeltsin's governments in the 1990s, when – many Russians now believe – Russia collapsed, lost its Great Power status, and fell into disarray at home and abroad. While we thought we were embracing an admittedly chaotic situation that would get through its convulsions and onto a path

toward stable democracy, many Russians came to believe that we actually sought the chaos, insecurity and impoverishment that was so widespread in that period.

This period is thus closely connected with broad American support. Furthermore, Russians believe that the current more critical view of their government is based on the increasing economic strength of Russia under President Putin. They say claim that as soon as Russia was able to pull itself up by the bootstraps, and started asserting an independent policy, it was branded “undemocratic”.

This view is reinforced in the minds of some Russians by what they perceive as a selective policy of democracy promotion by the United States. The dismay among Russian democrats at the gap between the Bush Administration’s soaring calls for democracy worldwide and the, well, let’s call it a measured response to the steady erosion of freedom in Russia was quite evident during our visit. Some Russian democrats take heart in the bold speech delivered by Vice President Cheney in Vilnius in early May – but they wonder why it wasn’t delivered in Russia, or by President Bush himself, and why it was so conspicuously undermined by the President’s warm welcome of Azerbaijan’s President Aliyev to the White House in May and the Vice President’s subsequent visit to Kazakhstan and his embrace there of a leader who governs a country that Russians know full well is less free even than is Russia.

Let us return to the issue of where Russia was in the 1990s. The fact that Russia’s creeping authoritarianism has been discussed for so long should not cause us to overlook the long arc of its downward trajectory. It has been widely reported, for instance, that our annual survey of political rights and civil liberties, *Freedom in the World*, last year recorded that Russia had dropped back into the ranks of the “Not Free” countries, after thirteen years of being counted in the ranks of the “Partly Free.” This has been just as widely misinterpreted as meaning that something especially dramatic and draconian happened in 2004. While 2004 did see the deterioration of the electoral process, as Putin’s favored United Russia Party secured more than two-thirds of the seats in the *Duma*, it was in fact, the steady accumulation of downward steps that finally caused Russia to cross the line to Not Free that year.

It is important to note that Freedom House has never declared that Russia at any time in the 1990s was a consolidated democracy or a Free country. We did, in the early 1990s, determine that Russia had become an “electoral democracy,” based on the competitive and open parliamentary and presidential elections of 1991 (the last year of the Soviet Union) and the increasingly transparent political debates of 1992 and 1993, when Boris Yeltsin struggled very publicly with a legislature dominated by holdovers from Soviet era elections. While some assessments of post-Soviet Russian political developments admittedly may have been too rosy – by ourselves and many other hopeful observers – our ratings of Russia peaked in our *Freedom in the World* report for the year 1991, when Russia was given a score of 3 for political rights and 3 for civil liberties, thus earning the distinction of being at the high end of the “Partly Free” band of countries in our flagship survey. By the following year, the civil liberties score had declined to 4, beginning a trend that has continued, in fits and starts, ever since.

I mention this because it is a point of contention among Russian supporters of President Putin, who – we discovered very directly – complain that like many others in the U.S. and the West, Freedom House had overstated the degree of democratic achievement in the 1990s, and so we are exaggerating the degree of decline at present. Because Russia matters so much to us and to the stability of the international order – as is evident when one considers the crises relating to North Korea, Iran and the sudden crisis between Israel and Lebanon – it is all the more important that we be clear and accurate in all our analyses. Equally important is that we not let our interest in urgent resolution of crises on other fronts, such as with North Korea and the Middle East, allow us to take our eyes off the ball concerning democracy and human rights in Russia. Moscow would be a more reliable ally and useful friend on these fronts if it were more democratic.

So what shall we do? I would offer as a basis for discussion today, several thoughts.

1. **It matters to Russia’s democrats that we in the outside world continue to call ‘em as we see ‘em.** Reports such as ours and those produced by other

independent organizations, and by the U.S. government in its annual human rights reports and other public statements, and by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom are welcomed by Russian democrats, as are clear statements by government officials and Members of Congress. So we must continue to be straightforward and public in our analysis and commentary.

2. **It matters to Russia’s democrats that the major governments, and most conspicuously the United States, maintain credibility in the democracy discourse.** I have noted the concern expressed by some Russian democrats about the context of what was otherwise a welcome address by Vice President Cheney in Vilnius in May. It is also important to realize that Russian democrats, and the Kremlin alike, are watching what we do elsewhere. Every misstep and mistake in Iraq is well-publicized throughout Russia as an illustration to the Russian public of what we “really mean” by democratization – armed intervention and callous or brutal treatment of civilians. Every inconsistency on our dealings with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan is well reported and with a smirk. When we do try to raise the issue of democracy in Russia, as President Bush did ever-so-gently during the G-8 summit, President Putin was able to quip “I can tell you honestly that we certainly would not want to have the same kind of democracy that they have in Iraq.¹” And every time a Ukrainian or a Georgian official takes issue with Russian policy, it confirms that the “real reason” for our support for the democratic reform movements in those countries was about installing anti-Russian governments. If our democracy promotion policy is seen in the world as a weapon to be used mainly against unfriendly governments, rather than a goal pursued more broadly and consistently, then we will have lost credibility and alienated those in places such as Russia who are our natural allies. If Russians become convinced that our goal is not a truly democratic Russia, but instead a weak, impoverished or divided Russia, then our promotion of democracy will come across as punitive and insincere. It is not clear that our message – about our motives, our methods and our goals – is getting through to very many Russians.

¹ http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2006/07/15/1636_type82914type82915_108744.shtml

3. **It is important that we not permit Russia to be isolated from the international community.** This is exactly what the Kremlin is seeking to do with its new punitive legislation regarding NGOs. Now that the G8 summit is over and world attention has turned to the crisis in the Middle East, the Russian government's crackdown on NGOs has accelerated.

- The NGO "Center for Assistance in International Defense," headed by one of Mikhail Khodorkovsky's lawyers, has been presented with a bill for back taxes that could force it to shut down. According to the NGO "Memorial", several smaller NGOs in Russia's regions are overwhelmed by paperwork from the tax service under the NGO law and are considering closing their doors.
- Another example of the Kremlin's efforts to isolate and stifle civil society was its attempt to discourage diplomatic participation in the NGO conference, "The Other Russia," ahead of the G8 summit. It should also be brought to everyone's attention that many democrats and human rights activists were prevented from participating in this conference. As mentioned by those here today who participated in the Other Russia conference, some supporters were forcibly taken from trains on their way to Moscow, others were beaten or detained after falsely being accused of carrying drugs.
- The National Democratic Institute (NDI) has been accused by Russian official media of supporting a bid by opposition politician Mikhail Kasyanov for the 2008 presidential campaign when in fact NDI has only had informal meetings with him to discuss the general political situation in Russia, as it does with all political actors in Russia and other countries. This type of targeting and pressure by the Russian government appears to be intended to discourage international nongovernmental organizations from having dialogue with the political opposition and vice versa.

Russia's autocrats want to isolate Russian democrats, civic activists and human rights defenders from their natural support networks in the international community. This means, first, that Russia needs to be a major topic of discussion

with our European and other allies, so that a consistent and principled engagement with Russia is a high priority for the West generally. This could also help defuse the notion that our interest in democratization is an American post-Cold War effort to debilitate a rising Russia. Second, government sponsored and government-funded efforts to engage with Russia need to be enhanced, not diminished. While *The New York Times* reported recently that the oil company BP has invested “hundreds of millions of dollars” in the development of one natural gas field in Russia, the current U.S. investment in democracy promotion programs is reported to be about \$38 million annually – and is slated to decline to about one third of that next year. If we are not seen to be seriously interested in helping those who want to work with Americans and Westerners, than the tough talk of the occasional speech by senior officials will be discounted accordingly. Private foundations and other kinds of exchanges also need to be ramped up, to the degree consonant with Russia’s importance on the world stage.

4. **International broadcasting needs to be expanded not contracted.** Perhaps most urgently, Congress needs to re-examine the budget proposal from the Broadcasting Board of Governors for FY 2007 which proposes elimination of Voice of America’s Russian-language radio and significant funding reductions for RFE/RL as well which will be forced to cut daily programming. There are Russians who want to listen to American radio. Let’s not cut them off.

5. **Congress should engage with Russians.** Mr. Chairman, you – personally and institutionally – should engage more with Russia. More Members of Congress and staff of bodies like this Commission should go to Russia more often and visit with a broad range of Russians, in and out of government. Interestingly, and unlike some other countries, Russians actually want to engage with American counterparts. They usually do not seek our approval, but they do want our respect, and they are interact with Americans to determine how to win it. We all need to be involved in conveying our motives and our hopes for Russia, and in learning how they perceive us and the democratic values we are espousing.

6. **We need to take a serious interest in the prosecution of Russia's wars in the North Caucasus and the humanitarian situation in Chechnya.** A Reuters report earlier this week said that the Russian Ministry of the Interior sent a letter to NGOs working in Chechnya to require them to report on the movements of their staff members, to obtain permission from the FSB weeks in advance for trips into Chechnya, and to report on their trips when they return from Chechnya. The process could hold up much needed humanitarian aid and services to people in Chechnya. Last Monday, an UN convoy turned back from a trip to Chechnya when check point guards told the convoy that it "didn't have the right paperwork." These are foreboding signals for Chechens who view the traveling back and forth of NGOs and the UN as their lifeline to the outside world. The Russian authorities are trying to further isolate Chechnya from international observers.

We need a serious, broad-gauged policy toward Russia that integrates our concerns about the long-term consolidation of authoritarianism with an appreciation of how a more democratic Russia would be more helpful on other fronts, and that articulates a positive future for a stronger Russia, better integrated into the international community. We need more American – and western – engagement with Russia, not less. Rather than wait for an argument down the road about "who lost Russia's democracy?" we must elevate our attention to this matter now to the uppermost ranks of policy questions, and not leave the subject aside now that the G-8 summit is behind us.

Thank you for your attention. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.