

“Human Rights in Russia: An Overview”
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Rep. Chris Smith

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and welcome to everybody joining us this morning.

Since Putin assumed power in Russia, human rights, civil liberties, and press freedom have been in retreat. Whether one calls the Putin-Medvedev era “managed democracy” or “illiberal democracy,” since 2000 the accent has never been on democracy.

We all know that the list of abuses over which first Putin and now Medvedev has presided is long.

There were numerous reports of governmental and societal human rights problems and abuses during the year. Direct and indirect government interference in local and regional elections restricted the ability of citizens to change their government through free and fair elections. During the year there were a number of high profile killings of human rights activists by unknown persons, apparently for reasons related to their professional activities. There were numerous, credible reports that law enforcement personnel engaged in physical abuse of subjects. Prison conditions were harsh and could be life threatening. Corruption in law enforcement remained a serious problem, and many observers, including some judges and law enforcement personnel, asserted that the executive branch influenced judicial decisions in some high-profile cases. Security services and local authorities often conducted searches without court warrants. Government actions

weakened freedom of expression and media independence, particularly of the major television networks. Eight journalists, many of whom reported critically on the government, were killed during the year; with one exception the government failed to identify, arrest, or prosecute any suspects. Beating and intimidation of journalists remained a problem. The government directed the editorial policies of government-owned media outlets, pressured major independent outlets to abstain from critical coverage, and harassed and intimidated journalists into practicing self—censorship. The government limited freedom of assembly, and police sometimes used violence to prevent groups from engaging in peaceful protest. In some regions the government limited freedom of association and restricted religious groups. There were instances of societal discrimination, harassment, and violence against religious minorities. Manifestations of anti-Semitism continued during the year, but the number of anti-Semitic attacks decreased. Corruption was widespread throughout the executive, legislative, and judicial branches at all levels, and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. The government restricted the activities of some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), making it difficult for them to continue operations. Violence against women and children, including domestic violence, remained a significant problem. Trafficking in persons also continued to be a significant problem. There was some governmental and widespread societal discrimination against ethnic minorities and dark-skinned immigrants or guest workers. During the year xenophobic, racial, and ethnic attacks and hate crimes, particularly by skinheads, nationalists,

and right-wing extremists, continued to be a significant problem. Instances of forced labor were reported.

Of many of these abuses it cannot be said that the government is struggling to bring them under control. It's much worse than that. Intimidation of the media, political opponents, and human rights activists by secret police and Mafia thugs, particularly the killing of investigative journalists—all these abuses are fundamental to the mode of governance by which the “United Russia” party maintains its control over Russia.

So Mr. Chairman, in the fight for human rights in Russia, if the government has all too often decided to be the very origin and source of the problem, we have to look to the Russian people, to encourage and sustain those brave men and women who are working for change. Millions of Russians want change in respect of human rights—I believe that most of the supporters of “United Russia” want an end to corruption and violence. Russian voters support United Russia not because of but despite its leaders involvement in corruption and the abuses that flow from it. I have heard this over and over when I meet with Russian human rights lawyers and activists, and from Russian church leaders—and I thank God for the revival of Orthodoxy in Russia, this is a great sign of hope for the future of Russia.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this hearing on human rights in Russia.