

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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Testimony on the situation in the North Caucasus region of Russia

By Fatima Tlisova

Good afternoon. I am deeply honored to speak here today and looking forward to a productive discussion. Please note that all the views and opinions I will express today are my own and do not reflect the views of the Voice of America or the United States government.

I worked in the North Caucasus as a reporter for the Associated Press. My affiliation with the American media outlet was a reason enough to be targeted by the FSB, the main descendant of the former KGB. I look at the topics of this hearing today and full heartedly testify I have experienced it all – I was detained, interrogated, kidnapped, abused and tortured. I was labeled as an American spy, with stories of my betrayal published in the government controlled newspapers. I have lived through the public isolation and constant surveillance. I have witnessed brutalities conducted by the Russian military and security forces, too often the victims of these acts were civilians including pregnant women and infants. The most disturbing part is that my story is not unique for my region, it is rather common.

In my opinion, the new Russian legislation already has been tested in the North Caucasus in real situations on real people and proved to be an effective tool to suppress any kind of dissent.

During the last two decades the North Caucasus remains the most violent region in Eurasia. Two wars in Chechnya have left behind a deeply damaged, traumatized civil society, and multiple unsolved issues. Now the violence is spreading throughout the region. On the daily basis we receive news about clashes between the Russian security forces and local Islamic rebels in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. The resistance has

transformed from ethnic separatist rebellion into a military Islamic movement with the jihadi elements.

The Kremlin continues to argue that the radicalization is a result of the impact of the efforts by the outside players. The head of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov appointed and favored by president, Vladimir Putin generally names the United States as the main force behind the destabilization in the region. The Kremlin also claims that the North Caucasus rebellion is a part of a global terrorist network that includes Al Qaida.

These two ideas – the West acting as a destabilizing power and Al Qaida as a radicalizing force – determine the Kremlin's long term strategy in the North Caucasus. This is based on two goals: isolate and suppress.

According to the observations by major International human rights groups the real cause of the deterioration of the situation in the North Caucasus is Kremlin's disproportional use of force and repressive policy, not the influence of the West and global jihadist network. The direct consequence of Kremlin's policy is the radicalization of local youth and spread of violence across the region.

The first pillar of the above mentioned policy - the isolation of the region is a vital condition for the realization of the second pillar – the suppression. The combination of these two ideas creates a thick roof under which the Kremlin is free to practice wide spread violations of human rights and freedoms, including the very basic right to life. The consequences of this policy affect the lives of local civilians on every level. Most of the people in the North Caucasus whom I've recently interviewed, say that they live in fear. They don't trust the authorities and are afraid to become victims of the Russian security forces even more than they are afraid of the rebels.

The Kremlin's isolation policy was successful. The region is extremely difficult to access for the foreign media as well as for the human rights groups due to the multiple registration and license requirements by the

Russian Ministry of Foreign affairs, by Ministry of Internal Affairs, by the Federal Security Service (FSB) etc...

Local media and individual reporters are often targeted and oppressed by the FSB to the point where self-censorship becomes the principal rule of survival. This is equally true about civil or political activists and independent lawyers.

Russian authorities often like to draw parallel between the US operation in Afghanistan and Kremlin's policies towards the North Caucasus. The comparative statistic data shows that this parallel is not really complimentary for the Russian side. For instance, let us look at the numbers of the US casualties during the active phase of the war in Afghanistan in 2009 and compare them with the numbers of Russia's casualties in the North Caucasus. In 2009 the Russian forces lost around 960 servicemen in the North Caucasus, the US casualties combined in Iraq and Afghanistan - 307 troops.

However there is a gigantic difference between these two situations. Firstly the territory of the North Caucasus is five times smaller compared to Iraq or Afghanistan. But the main difference is that Russian government calls its act in the North Caucasus a counterterrorism operation when it conducts full scale military operations on its own soil against its own citizens. By admitting this fact the Kremlin would reveal the plain truth – its policy in the North Caucasus is not only a failure but it also creates a threat to the stability and security in Eurasia.

This concludes my statement. I am happy to answer any of your questions.