



**Testimony before the
U.S. Commission on
Security and Cooperation in Europe**

**“Russia Today:
In Transition or Intransigent”**

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A Statement by

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Chairman Hastings and Members of the Commission:

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this hearing on Russia and the implications for U.S. policy. My name is Sarah Mendelson. I direct the Human Rights and Security Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, where I am also a senior fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program. It is an honor to be here.

My comments today focus on both the international and national contexts surrounding Russia's authoritarian drift. I address how the decline in the U.S. position in the world has enabled Russian policies, particularly on human rights issues. I then discuss trends inside Russia with attention to poorly functioning state institutions. I conclude with specific recommendations for U.S. foreign and assistance policies.

I. Decline of U.S. Influence: Increase in Russian Influence?

For over a decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian foreign policy barely existed and influence beyond its borders was minimal. The Putin era can be characterized in part by the reemergence of foreign policy and influence, mainly through energy resources. Today, I want to suggest, however, that there are additional important issues outside of Russia's borders about which Russia has influence, e.g. those relating to human rights.

Russia's political trajectory has long been a U.S. national security concern, but U.S. influence and ability to affect this trajectory have greatly declined over time. During the Cold War, the United States represented an alternative, bolstered by the rule of law and notions of hope and justice for those oppressed by the Soviet Union. By 2007, the vision of the United States as a countervailing weight associated with human rights has been greatly damaged.

Today, Republicans and Democrats alike recognize what so many beyond our borders have noticed: in recent years, the United States has experienced a steep decline in what Harvard Professor Joe Nye has termed "Soft Power"—the ability to persuade and inspire through non-military means. This decline has had a hugely negative effect on the ability of the United States to promote democracy and human rights.

In the Russian context, the beginning of the decline predates both Presidents Putin and Bush. It was a by-product of perceived hypocrisy over U.S. support for elements of faux democracy in Russia dating back to the mid 1990s. Whatever the source, the consequence has been to enable the authoritarian trend and isolate human rights defenders inside Russia.

Much damage has occurred however since 2001. Current and former senior U.S. government officials claim that because of U.S. counterterrorism policies adopted since 2001 and also abuses related to the war in Iraq, the United States has lost much leverage concerning the systematic and wide-spread abuses by Russian authorities in Chechnya. One senior American diplomat lamented, "Abu Ghraib has had an effect. And certainly the Russians love to say we told you so They talk a lot about how Iraq is exactly what 'we had in Chechnya.'"¹ That loss of leverage is important because what happened in and around Chechnya has been used as a pretext by the Russian government to control many of the institutions we associate with democracy, including critical, independent television, transparency in elections, accountability of law enforcement and the army.

¹ Sarah E. Mendelson "Anatomy of Ambivalence: The International Community and Human Rights Abuse in the North Caucasus," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 53, no. 6 (November/December 2006), pp. 8.

Over time, as U.S. soft power declined, the Putin administration has embraced a conception of the state that is both hyper-sovereign and threatened by democratic and human rights norms. Russia's hyper-sovereign mode drives Russian administration officials, and Putin himself, to regularly invoke anxiety among the population concerning the "dangers" of foreign influence, suggesting that Russia is becoming encircled by enemies. For the public and especially the elite, the United States has become a negative force, a view reflected clearly in Putin's February 2007 Munich speech as well as more recent pronouncements.²

The Russian government, in addition to others, has increasingly taken advantage of the leadership gap left by the decline in U.S. soft power. How this translates to Russia's engagement with the world and specifically with international organizations is considerable. This Commission is well aware of how the Russian government has attempted to change the rules and norms governing OSCE election observation. As symptomatic and perhaps more disturbing is a recent trend in the UN Security Council by the Russian Federation, along with China, to block international responses to evidence of gross human rights violations in Darfur and in Burma.³ At least one human rights organization claims the Russian and Chinese governments appear to have supplied Sudan with arms or dual use technologies that were diverted to Darfur despite the arms embargo in place since 2005.⁴

If U.S. soft power continues to decline, or if there is no change in the current configuration over the next decade, Russia (together with China) can essentially "set the table" on human rights issues in ways that favors hyper-sovereign interpretations of international legal frameworks and noncompliance by states concerning human rights. This trend bodes very badly not only for the international human rights machinery, in place in no small part to past U.S. leadership, but for peace and security in the international system.

II. Sources of Instability Inside Russia: Order or Fragility?

Human rights abuses inside Russia are not news. Since the summer of 1999, there has been credible evidence linking Vladimir Putin to the steady shrinking of civil society in Russia, the shutting down of independent media outlets, and general suppression of critical speech. A climate of fear among activists has grown under his leadership. I testified before this Commission almost seven years ago to the day, and sadly much of what I wrote then reads as if it were written for this hearing.⁵ At that time, however, President Putin was talking to the

² For several years, senior Russian government officials have called into question the motivations and integrity of Western assistance efforts, suggesting that such activity represents a "fifth column" in Russia. For recent comments, see Vladimir Putin's speech at the 43rd Annual Conference on Security Policy, February 10, 2007, and Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, April 26, 2007.

³ Colum Lynch, "Russia, China Veto Resolution on Burma: Security Council Action Blocks U.S. Human Rights Effort," *Washington Post*, 13 January 2007, available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/12/AR2007011201115.html>>; Edith M. Lederer, "U.S. Push For Sanctions Opposed," *Washington Post*, 18 April 2007, available at <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/18/AR2007041800368.html>>; Richard Waddington, "China, Russia Seek to Block U.N. Report on Darfur," *Reuters*, 16 March 2007, available at <<http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL168247920070316?pageNumber=1>>

⁴ Amnesty International, "Sudan, Arms Continuing to Fuel Serious Human Rights Violations in Darfur," AI Index, AFR 54/019/2007 (May 2007).

⁵ Later published as Sarah E. Mendelson, "The Putin Path: Civil Liberties and Human Rights in Retreat," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (September/October 2000), 3-12; see also Sarah E. Mendelson,

West with one voice while doing at home what he could to gain control over any critical voices. The West was slow to take notice. Today, he has stopped speaking in soothing tones to the West, and there is considerable alarm among friends and allies.

The situation inside Russia is more troubling today than several years ago because the public demand for something different—for more freedoms—appears quite muted. Aside from a few hundred people in Moscow and St. Petersburg demonstrating in recent weeks, there does not appear to be wide-spread public unhappiness with Putin's policies. The reasons are complex but important to understand because they often lead outsiders erroneously to think there is nothing to be done or that we should in fact do nothing.

In focus groups in various Russian cities, I have observed participants explain why state control of the media seems a better arrangement to them than what they perceived as oligarchic control over the media in the 1990s. Trust in political parties has been extremely low for several years so it is no surprise that the fact that parties have all but disappeared does not generate any sort of protest. Some NGOs, such as the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, are seen as very positive by majorities of respondents in CSIS surveys, and if the government were to move against that organization, there is the possibility of public response; this Russian organization provides much welcomed counseling concerning conscription to families with draft-age young men.

Putin is popular, but it is important to remember his popularity derives in part from the complete lack of critical reporting on television of any activities inside the Kremlin. There are no investigative reporters writing of corruption, poor intelligence gathering and botched counterterrorism operations. The few that do, such as Anna Politkovskaya, risk (or lose) their lives. Moreover, Putin continues to be seen as the anti-Yeltsin. He is not drunk at meetings with international leaders. He stands up to the West. The economy has done well, in contrast to the collapse of the ruble. In short, there is some semblance of order in contrast to what many experienced in the 1990s as chaos. This "order" I want to suggest is more fragile when one looks closely inside Russia.

Important public institutions in Russia are not functioning as they should. Russia is currently experiencing multiple health crises. We in the West tend to focus on HIV/AIDS, but in a survey that I co-authored of 1,200 Russian doctors, all of whom had treated HIV-infected patients, only 15 percent said HIV was the most important health crisis. Instead, they report non-communicable diseases such as alcoholism, cardiovascular ailments and cancer as the top health threats.⁶ Russia's demographic crisis is unlikely to be solved by the baby bonus the Putin administration has put in place. In focus groups I observed a few weeks ago with young women in St. Petersburg, this policy was met with smirks and laughter.

The story of the health crises could be repeated when speaking of the police and the army. In one survey we conducted, over 40% feared arbitrary arrest by the police.⁷ The recent disproportionate use of force by the special police, the OMON, against the demonstrations in

"Russians' Rights Imperiled: Has Anybody Noticed?" *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Spring 2002), 39-69.

⁶ Theodore P. Gerber and Sarah E. Mendelson, "A Survey of Russian Doctors on HIV/AIDS," January 2006; http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/060707_ruseura_mendelsondocrepjan06.pdf.

⁷ Theodore P. Gerber and Sarah E. Mendelson, "Public Experiences of Police Violence and Corruption in Contemporary Russia: A Case of Predatory Policing?" Forthcoming, *Law and Society Review*.

Moscow and others cities also speaks to fragility of public institutions and the fear that the authorities have of protest. Moreover, because the media have been gutted and the judiciary is not independent, the normal recourse for fighting and routing out corruption simply do not exist. In other words, the system has lost whatever internal fail-safe mechanisms it had.

I am especially concerned about the trends toward nationalism and xenophobia, where increasingly, foreigners are viewed as enemies, and Russia is viewed as encircled by enemies. Specific policies as of spring 2007 make it illegal for non-Russians, even those legally registered, to sell food in markets. Anti-American sentiment is part of this larger trend. A spring 2007 brochure from the Kremlin-friendly youth group “*Nashi*” is a frightening example. Addressed to the “*pokolenie Putina*” (Generation Putin), it is filled with the rhetoric of “betrayal,” “traitors,” discussion of Georgia as an “American colony,” “American invaders” into Russia, “fascists and traitors getting ready” to invade and break Russia up.⁸ While Kremlin authorities went back and forth about whether Putin’s May 9 (2007) speech actually contained comparisons of the United States to the Third Reich, this brochure and many other speeches suggest that at a minimum, the authorities are highly permissive of language that increases nationalism.

Finally, in addition to the fragility of important public institutions, and the increase in nationalism, the potential for instability inside the North Caucasus region of Russia deserves special mention. The conventional wisdom articulated by the Kremlin and other experts that the president of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, is the provider of order is deeply worrisome, not to mention misleading. There is credible evidence of on-going disappearances and torture. Chechnya experiences the rule of man, not the rule of law.⁹ Elsewhere in the North Caucasus, a 2006 CSIS survey of 1,200 males found three times the unemployment rates in this largely Islamic portion of Russia, while social services are poor to nonexistent. The men in the survey were neutral or indifferent to assistance from outside. Whoever gets there first—whether it is the Russian government, the West, or *salafi jihadists*—will shape what happens next. The answer bears on the future trajectory of the region.¹⁰

III. Recommendations for U.S. Policy: Russia and Beyond

The decline of U.S. soft power has enabled the authoritarian trend and left human rights defenders inside Russia isolated. Reversing the decline will take some time. Here are three specific recommendations for changes in U.S. policy:

- Reposition U.S. foreign policy, including counterterrorism policies, to be compliant with human rights laws and norms;
- Reorient U.S. assistance to target local needs;
- Recognize the role that history plays in current political developments.

⁸ A translation of the brochure was briefly posted to a website and accessed May 14, 2007 at <http://publicoffender.livejournal.com/775.html> after being posted to the Johnson’s Russia List. The official *Nashi* website is available at <http://www.nashi.su>.

⁹ Human Rights Watch, “Russia: Pre-Summit Crackdown Shows Why EU Must Speak Up Deteriorating Human Rights Protection in Russia Should Be a Focus of Summit” (Brussels, May 17, 2007).

¹⁰ Theodore P. Gerber and Sarah E. Mendelson, “Security Through Sociology: Lessons from the North Caucasus for the Global Counterinsurgency,” unpublished manuscript, March 2007.

Opt Back Into the International Legal Community

If we want to see the development of a human rights culture in Russia (or elsewhere for that matter), we must focus on getting our own house in order. Over the last several years, the transatlantic community has increasingly appeared not only ambivalent about human rights violations inside Russia but ambivalent about human rights in general. In the United States, policy makers have often traded compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law for allegedly greater security in their efforts to combat radical *ihadists*. This is a false and dangerous trade-off.

The United States has a particular historical, bipartisan legacy as a generator of international human rights and humanitarian laws. The current administration has done considerable damage to this substantial legacy. In the coming years, all branches of the United States government and members of civil society need to do what we can to reclaim our role as generators of human rights norms, not as abusers. We need to stop enabling authoritarians by opting out of long-standing international human rights and humanitarian laws and opt back in.

My expectations that an “opt in” strategy will be adopted during the remainder of the Bush administration are low. The next administration, however, whatever its party affiliation should make this a central part of its campaign and show serious movement on this issue within the first 100 days in office. Before we can reclaim credibility, we must show the world that we are re-embracing international human rights and humanitarian law, not only because it is the right thing to do but also because it makes us safer. Our credibility and ability to stand together with other democracies against authoritarian trends, including ones that threaten international peace and stability, depend on it. The world with the United States as a positive legal force is a safer one. The world where the United States is a norms violator puts us at a greater risk.

Get Smart on U.S. Assistance

U.S. foreign assistance is often driven by needs in Washington. With an almost obsessive preoccupation with outcomes—in part, because of Congressional hearings—assistance has sometimes unwittingly enabled civil society to be disconnected from local populations and instead focused on the donor. Indeed this is a criticism leveled by President Putin himself.

There is no intrinsic reason why this should be the effect of assistance. Foreign assistance can help stimulate and nurture demand for human rights and democracy when it is informed by public opinion and when resources are used to help local organizations target local needs. While no one has approached the U.S. public about developing assistance strategies that are based on listening and responding to local needs rather than to Washington’s needs, my guess is that Americans will support this shift to improve U.S. foreign policy.

In fact, the times demand radically different approaches to democracy and human rights work in Russia than have been used since the early 1990s. Smart assistance should be comprised of programs informed by public opinion addressing what the local population wants supported. It also can help local NGOs orient toward the public and away from a preoccupation with its own members or the government. Our work at CSIS suggests that despite the Kremlin campaign against foreign assistance, Russians are not hostile to initiatives concerning health, the environment, and human rights. We certainly know there are great needs in these realms.

Right now, Congress has a specific role to play in rejecting the Bush administration's drastic cuts to human rights funding for Russia. The amounts requested are utterly insufficient, and the strategies are inappropriate given the worsening human rights situation in Russia today. Freedom House has found that the Bush administration has requested a decrease worldwide for support of human rights by 9%. In FY 08, the administration is poised to spend less than \$1 million on human rights in Russia, or 1.62% of human rights funding globally.¹¹ The only message that sends to the Kremlin is that the United States does not in fact stand with Russian human rights defenders.

Don't Forget: Memory Affects Political Developments

In closing, the theme of today's hearing—whether Russia is in transition or intransigent—depends at least in part how Russia reconciles with its past, and how we outside of Russia help or hinder that process. Among the many mistakes characterizing democracy assistance in the 1990s was the assumption that the past could be quickly forgotten or overcome. Instead, the economic hardships of the 1990s coupled with Russia's unfinished reconciliation with its past—a history in which millions were deported, countries occupied, slave labor institutionalized, secret police mobilized, and tens of millions disappeared—have been fertile ground for Soviet and Stalinist nostalgia.

Misperceptions are not surprising given the lack of critical texts taught in Russian schools but the fact that there is no taboo surrounding the issue of Stalin, as we discovered surveying young Russians in 2005, reveals a tremendous gap between young people in Russia and elsewhere.¹² A majority of young Russians in the survey believed that Stalin had done more good than bad. About 20% would vote for him if he ran for president. His name often comes up in positive terms in our focus groups. As long as young Russians remain uneducated, mildly supportive, or even just ambivalent about a dictator who institutionalized terror, disappearances, slavery, and had millions killed, they are unlikely to protest disappearances in parts of Russia today or join young people in other countries in the struggle for justice and human rights.

Absent memory is not in any way unique to Russia. Democracy in the United States has become more robust only when we have addressed our abuses and crimes. In fact, how a country reconciles or not with its past—especially with episodes of gross human rights violations—seems to have a profound but often overlooked effect on political and social development. Strikingly, this focus is almost completely absent in U.S. government approaches to democracy assistance and human rights. The time to change that is now.

Thank you.

¹¹ Freedom House, "Supporting Freedom's Advocates? An Analysis of the Bush Administration FY 2008 Budget Request for Democracy and Human Rights," April 2007, www.freedomhouse.org.

¹² Sarah E. Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber, "Failing the Stalin Test: Russians and Their Dictator," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2006, pp. 2-8; Sarah E. Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber "Soviet Nostalgia: An Impediment to Russian Democratization," *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2005, pp. 83-96.