

Helsinki Commission Leaders Urge President Bush to Raise Russian Rights Concerns; Putin Visit Opportunity to Press for Progress

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To: National and International Desks

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WASHINGTON, June 1 /U.S. Newswire/ -- The United States Helsinki Commission today released the text of a letter signed by Commission leaders addressed to President George W. Bush in conjunction with Russian President Vladimir Putin's U.S. visit to attend the G8 Summit, set to open a week from today, in Sea Island, Georgia.

As noted at a May 20th Helsinki Commission hearing, President Putin is increasingly relying on the security-intelligence apparatus to run Russia, with ominous consequences for human rights, civil liberties and democratic progress. The leaders cited specific concerns over the targeting of a number of Russian academics and environmentalists; a ban on religious activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian capital; and egregious violations of international humanitarian law in Chechnya.

Begin text.

May 28, 2004

The President

The White House

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write urging you to raise human rights concerns in the Russian Federation when you meet with President Putin at the Sea Island G-8 Summit. As noted at a recent Helsinki Commission hearing, Mr. Putin is increasingly relying on the security-intelligence apparatus to run Russia, with ominous consequences for human rights, civil liberties and democratic progress.

One of the telling results has been what human rights activists are calling "spy mania," whereby a number of academics and environmentalists have been accused of collaborating with Western intelligence agencies on the basis of questionable evidence and procedures. A case in point involves Igor Sutyagin, a researcher from the U.S. and Canada Institute, recently sentenced by a Moscow court to 15 years in hard labor for "espionage." His "crime" was to pass scientific analyses based upon open source material to associates

abroad. While his is not an isolated case, Sutyagin has received the harshest sentence to date. We urge you to raise this case as well as the broader trend.

In another troubling trend, a recent Moscow municipal court ruling effectively bans the religious activities of the local community of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian capital. This case should set off alarm bells for members of other religious minorities in Moscow and beyond. There has also been heightened rhetoric by Russian officials with frequent references to so-called "traditional religions," which raises serious concerns over the status of individuals belonging to "minority" religious communities in Russia (many of whom have existed in Russia for over a century).

Government pressure on electronic media outlets, denunciations by government officials of human rights and pro-democracy NGOs, and manipulations of elections give further rise for concern. President Putin is well positioned to reverse these troubling trends away from protection of human rights, civil liberties and democratic progress and toward governance based upon the misguided notion of so-called "managed democracy."

Finally, we reiterate longstanding concerns regarding developments in Chechnya where the most egregious violations of international humanitarian law anywhere in the OSCE region are occurring. President Putin's efforts to manipulate political developments in Chechnya have failed to move the region toward normalization, as evidenced by the recent assassination of his handpicked leader for the region. Besides alleviating the grave humanitarian situation in Chechnya, President Putin should move to allow the Chechen people to have a voice and choice in their future, while preserving the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.

Mr. President, we urge you to set aside a portion of your time with President Putin to discuss these particularly disturbing developments in the Russian Federation.

Sincerely,

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH, M.C.

Chairman

BEN NIGHTHORSE CAMPBELL, U.S.S.

Co-Chairman

BENJAMIN L. CARDIN, M.C.

Ranking Member

cc: Dr. Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor

End Text.


The United States Helsinki Commission, an independent federal agency, by law monitors and encourages progress in implementing provisions of the Helsinki Accords. The Commission, created in 1976, is composed of nine Senators, nine Representatives and one official each from the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce.

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