

THE WAR IN CHECHNYA AND RUSSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY



June 17, 2004

**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

WASHINGTON : 2005

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The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is a U.S. Government agency created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

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WASHINGTON, DC

The briefing was held at 2:46 p.m. in Room 2325, Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC, Elizabeth B. Pryor, Senior Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, moderating.

Panelists present: Hon. Christopher H. Smith, Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Elizabeth B. Pryor, Senior Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Valentina Melnikova, National Director, Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia; and Natalia Zhukova, Chairperson, Nizhny Novgorod Committee of Soldiers' Mothers.

Ms. PRYOR. Good afternoon.

I want to warmly welcome you to the briefing that we're having today on behalf of the Helsinki Commission on the war in Chechnya and Russian civil society.

My name is Elizabeth Pryor. I'm the Senior Advisor for the Helsinki Commission, and I'm here today on behalf of Representative Chris Smith, who is our Commission Chairman.

We expect him to be joining us a little bit later, but I am going to read this statement on behalf of him.

I understand that our translation is consecutive. Is that right? So what I'll do, if this works for you, is read it paragraph by paragraph and then have you go ahead and translate it for everyone.

All right, so let's go ahead and start.

Today we welcome two representatives of the largest and one of the most well known and active NGOs in Russia. Founded in 1989, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers is an umbrella organization embracing nearly 300 groups and thousands of members. The organization has gained wide recognition for publicizing and protesting human rights abuses in the Russian military such as hazing or abusive treatment.

Committee members also raise legal help for servicemen and their families, consult on legislation affecting the military and alternative service, and press for improved living conditions for military personnel.

The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers have opposed Moscow's conduct of the war in Chechnya. One of our guests is quoted as calling it "an exercise in bureaucrats fulfilling the quota of cannon fodder."

CSM has also accused the Russian Government of under-reporting the number of Russian military casualties in the conflict.

Without reservation, we recognize Russia's right to defend its territorial integrity, but certainly territorial integrity can be preserved without resorting to the brutal methods employed by some members of the Russian military and the pro-Moscow Chechnya militia.

At the same time, I recognize that some Chechen guerrilla fighters have committed human rights abuses and violations of humanitarian law. Those acts should and have been condemned.

Against this backdrop, recent verbal attacks on human rights organizations and their funding sources by President Putin and other Russian officials raise concerns about the future of Russian NGOs that the government may view as politically hostile.

Mr. Putin speaks favorably of rule of law in civil society, but he can also resort easily to language of Brezhnev-era Pravda editorials.

Our guests today will provide insights on their work and their perspectives on NGO activities and civil society in Russia today.

They are Valentina Melnikova, the national director of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, and Natalia Zhukova, the chairperson of the Nizhny Novgorod Committee.

We very much look forward to our guests' presentations. We'll open the floor to questions after they give their presentations.

When you do ask a question, I would ask that you give your name and affiliation so that we have that for the record.

And now I'd like to turn the floor over to Madame Zhukova, who I understand wishes to speak first.

Ms. ZHUKOVA [through translator]. Congressman Smith, Members of the Commission, ladies and gentleman, first of all allow me to thank you for the invitation to speak in this briefing in the U.S. Congress.

I joined the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers in 1995 after my son was taken prisoner in Chechnya and I had personally to go there to spring him.

During the first Chechen war, it was still possible the Chechens themselves notified the parents that their son had been taken prisoner and they agreed to release their sons to the mothers.

Today it is much more difficult because access to the zone of conflict has been cut off.

I'd like to inform you about the activities of the Nizhny Novgorod Committee, where I'm chairman. This is 1 of 300 committees of this kind.

Our committee includes 10 branches throughout the Nizhny Novgorod region. All in all, we have 25 to 30 people.

All of us are volunteers. None of us are paid. We have a reception room only in Nizhny Novgorod. These are two rooms staffed by three persons, who on a daily basis work with the population. Besides, we have seven volunteers who come after work in their free time.

In original branches, there is no office and reception. No activities are done in private homes.

Annually, we handle about 2,000 requests from people who ask either to help them either in connection with the conscription of their children or in connection with problems that their children live through in their military units.

A large part of our work is to inform the young people and their parents about their legal rights through talks, through issuing fliers, through meetings.

The problem is that most of the population have simply no idea of what's going on in their military—in the military units, above all, because television is censored.

Annually, we help about 700 soldiers who deserted from their units. Their parents live thousands of kilometers away on the other end of the huge country and they have nowhere else to go. Sometimes they come in large groups.

The reasons for desertion are beatings, harsh hazing on the part of officers and other soldiers, criminal environment in the unit, lack of medical assistance, cases of extortion of money, use of soldiers for slave labor when officers rent soldiers out. And there are even cases when officers forced the soldiers to beg.

Sometimes the military authorities come over and try to take the deserters by force and we never surrender them. And so, when such cases occur, physical confrontation with the military. Usually such situations are resolved through the services of the military appropriated office [sic].

What do we do? How do we help the deserters?

First of all, we record their complaints and take their cases for monitoring. Then we render mediating services in negotiations with the military authorities.

In many cases it ends up in honorable discharge or transfer of the soldier to a different unit.

In many cases, when there are obvious traces of crime, for example, traces of beatings, torture, handcuffs, we pass on the case to the military appropriated office [sic] and lend legal support to the soldier.

In some cases, we represent the soldier in court, the soldier or his family in court on the basis of power of attorney.

Whenever attorney services are needed, we cooperate with the Foundation For Civil Liberties, which pays for the services of soldiers' attorneys.

The court cases in which we participate in this or that forum run the gambit from beatings and the mutilation of soldiers to civil lawsuits from the parents of soldiers who died in Chechnya.

We also deal with the social protection of the veterans and Chechen invalids. The fact is that federal invalidity allowances are so low, less than \$50 a month, that they're way below subsistence level.

The situation of the veterans depends, in a large measure, on the position of local authorities. For example, our previous governor paid an extra allowance on top of federal allowances for the parents of the soldiers who died in Chechnya. Then a new government came to power and canceled these allowances.

Then we, in cooperation with veteran groups, staged a demonstration with the participation of several hundred parents of dead soldiers, and our demonstration made the national news. As a result, the canceled allowances were restored.

I want to stress once again that we don't receive a red cent from our clients, the soldiers and their parents. These people don't have any money. On the contrary, very often we try to raise funds for them.

The budget, the minimum budget of our organization Nizhny Novgorod is about 20,000 rubles per month, which is equivalent to about \$10,000 per year. This money is needed to pay for the rent, telephone, and transportation expenses.

Our central office in Nizhny Novgorod and three of our original branches have computers.

The military obviously don't like us, but I can't say that we suffer a direct persecution on their part. But after the onslaught announced by the Minister of Defense and after the State of the Nation address by President Putin, we believe that we have to expect financial pressure.

We are really feeling this financial pressure. For example, we are renting our office from a regional authority with a huge discount. However, today, now obviously after Putin's State of the Nation address, which is viewed by the local authorities as an order, the governor is planning to take away this discount. In other words, our rent will be increased by 10 times.

And finally, with regards to financing from abroad, from the speech by President Putin, myself and other human rights activists found out that we ostensibly take the orders from foreign funds, that we represent their interests.

In reality, we get no substantial financing from abroad.

We never had any U.S. Government grants. Over 10 years, we have received just two grants from private foundations in the total amount of \$8,000.

As for the Russian sources of financing, the local businessmen, first of all, get no tax breaks for charitable activities. Besides, the local businessman have been so intimidated by the onslaught on us by the Ministry of Defense and by President Putin that we cannot expect anything from them.

For 2 years we survived, thanks to the Berezovsky Foundation, which also helped pay the services of 250 attorneys for the soldiers. Unfortunately, this source has been exhausted.

I would like to say that the statements by President Putin that we serve the foreign interests are contrary to the fact. We serve the interests of millions of Russian soldiers and their parents, defending them from arbitrary rule and lawlessness of the authorities.

Thank you.

Ms. PRYOR. Thank you very much, Madam Zhukova. Thank you for being here, taking the time to be with us and giving us your observations.

We're now going to turn the floor over to Madam Melnikova, who is the national director of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers.

Madam, you have the floor.

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for the interest you take in the activities of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers.

I feel bitterness at the thought that this meeting is occurring in the American Congress rather than the Russian Parliament. Unfortunately, this reflects the situation occurring in Russia today.

The Russian civil society, which I have the honor of representing here today, as a result of the activities of the Putin administration has been left without the two major levers of affecting the authorities—without political opposition and without independent media.

Thanks to these activities of the administration, the dialogue between the authorities and society has been cut short. The dialog has turned into a monolog. We are hearing the voice of the authorities, but the authorities don't hear the voice of society.

The representative political structures, that is the Council of the Federation and the ... [inaudible] Duma ceased performing their legal functions of representative interests of the people and have turned actually into a branch of the executive.

This is particularly obvious in the military sphere which our organization deals with, the situation in the armed services and the war in Chechnya. Both are off limits to the media.

Russian man on the street does not know that—and does not hear—that in Chechnya there is a war going against the whole people; that 25,000 Russian soldiers, enlisted men and officers have died in Chechnya; that there is no stability there; and that Russian authorities are prepared to continue military action indefinitely.

The closed nature of the Chechen war, lack of information, direct deceit of the population by the authorities, all constitute the dramatic difference between the second Chechen war and the first one.

After President Putin took control over television, and gave it to understand to the journalists and politicians that they would raise these issues at their peril, and after he arranged with the Western partners that they would not object against the Chechen war, the war in Chechnya had ceased to exist as far as the Russian public is concerned.

Besides, the authorities entirely distort what's going on in Chechnya. We are told that what's going on in Chechnya is a counterterrorist operation, that we are fighting Arab mercenaries and Al Qaeda units.

We're also told that Chechens participate in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, that they prepare terrorist activities in Europe and so on.

All of this is part of the propaganda campaign in order to justify the war in which our children die, unfortunately with the active connivance of the leaders of Western countries, including the United States.

In reality, the Chechen problem has nothing to do with international terrorism or Islamic fundamentalism. There is no trace of stabilization in Chechnya and there are no attempts by the Russian authorities to strive for peaceful resolution of the problem.

Our organization demands that the Russian authorities stop lying to the Russian people and to the entire world, and secondly, enter into multilateral political negotiations without any preconditions involving non-governmental organizations and international structures. And we are calling upon the United States to support our position.

The Chechen situation reflects all the problems of human rights and civil society in Russia, from the rollback of democracy and curbs on their freedom of the press to the violations of human rights.

That the West supports the anti-democratic policies of the Russian authorities is simply absurd.

Just a year ago in Washington, they were saying that there is no point in supporting a Russian democracy, that Russia has all but completed the construction of democracy. Today, the terms of discussion have changed. Now they're saying in Washington that the Russian people don't need democracy, that the Russian people are not accustomed to democracy and are not prepared for democracy.

This is not true. Even if the Iraqi people mature for democracy to the extent that war is started to support an Iraqi democracy, Russians are not worse than the Iraqis.

Let's return to the activities of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers.

The situation of the soldiers in the armed forces affects millions of families.

Imagine that you are a Russian family in which a boy is growing up. You know that when he reaches 18, he will be stuffed into a uniform and sent to a barracks, not to learn how to defend his motherland from the enemies but in order to spend 2 years of his life in the decrepit, poorly managed, federally corrupted structure.

The life of your son in the Russian army and the Russian armed forces is in fact legal slavery. Once in the armed forces, your child will be beaten and humiliated. He will be cold and hungry. He will live in the barracks where the prison law of the jungle will reign supreme. He will be extorted for money and food. He will be forced to do slave labor for the families of the officers or rented out by the officers to work elsewhere. He might even be driven to the street to beg. And if he, God forbid, contracts a severe illness, say tuberculosis, he won't get any medical assistance.

As my colleague told you, this is the daily concern of our committees, where the boys come in the hundreds and their mothers come in the hundreds seeking protection against what the Russians call *bespredel*, which means unlimited arbitrary rule.

And if your son is sent to Chechnya, he may die over there, he may miss in action and nobody will be looking for him, or he will be crippled.

His officers will force him to participate in military operations against the peaceful population. In other words, they will force him to become a military criminal. And if he is lucky and he returns home alive, you won't be able to recognize him. He will be utterly depressed. At night he will go through nightmares. He won't be able to find a good job or enter into normal relations. He will be violence-prone. He will view himself as a loser, or he will try to commit suicide.

And if he returns as a crippled vet, you will have to perform the functions of physician and nurse and psychologist and social worker for a child. You will immediately understand that the government that returned your son in such a sorry condition couldn't care less about your tragedy.

As my colleague told you, the concern for those who went through Chechnya, the care of the veterans and their parents is part of the burden of the soldiers' mothers, and this is also part of our daily activities.

Annually, our committees and groups, affiliated groups all over Russia lend their assistance to more than 50,000 soldiers and their families, let alone hundreds of thousands of conscripts whom we consult on the conscription issues.

Our organization advocates and conducts a social campaign for military reform, for abolition of conscription and for the setting up in Russia of a professional armed forces.

This is the second political demand of the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia alongside with peace in Chechnya.

And finally, a third issue for our organization, this is the expansion of civilian control over the activities of the military.

In this connection, I would like to you know that what's going on in our armed forces, the legal slavery, chaos, corruption, and total lawlessness occurs not only in Chechnya, it occurs also in strategic forces, as well as in the forces that are responsible for guarding the weapons of mass destruction storage facilities.

We view as unfortunate the statement by Senator Kerry that he views the future of democracy in Russia as less important than the problem of nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The fact of the matter is that no agreements between the politicians, military and the intelligence services in the absence of democracy, in the absence of a well-developed civil

society, in the absence of civilian control will not provide for the solution of the issue that is of such great concern to Senator Kerry.

Absent democracy, there can be no safe Russia.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank you once again for the invitation sent.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Ms. PRYOR. Thank you very much, Madam Melnikova.

We're going to open the floor to questions now. I'll probably start with one first. But let me ask that if you want to ask a question, you need to go over to the podium and please, once again, let us know what your name and affiliation is, for our record.

You know, one of the things that I was struck by in the presentations was the lack of information that's available to the general public in Russia and the fact that Chechnya is hardly ever mentioned on Russian television, possibly except to demonize the resistance or broadcast a Russian military success.

What I'm wondering is whether you think the Russian people actually want to hear and see more about the Chechnyan situation and whether or not you think that if there was public pressure, popular pressure for greater media coverage that in fact that would become more forthcoming?

Ms. ZHUKOVA [through interpreter]. We have the experience of the first Chechen war, when the population was pretty well informed of what was going on. And the people spoke quite openly that the war was—that Russia didn't need that war. And we, the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers, had a lot easier time to work, to do what we're supposed to do thanks to the popular support.

Yes, I believe that the Russian people would like to know the truth about what's going on in Chechnya.

Ms. PRYOR. Do you think there's a way they can make that known? Is there some mechanism to reveal that popular pressure and put pressure on the government to not censor information?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Unfortunately today it's very difficult because the primary lever of pressuring the authorities ... [inaudible]. The political opposition is all but nonexistent. The December 2003 elections left only one body of authority in Russia, the Kremlin.

But if the United States and Europe insistently raise the issue of freedom, freedom of the press, I think they would be able to affect Putin in a meaningful way.

While we in Russia try our best to supply the journalists with information and to present information in such a way as to disarm the censors so that some of the information could flow through, but it's getting more and more difficult by the day.

Ms. PRYOR. Thank you very much.

I'm going to open it to the floor for general questioning now.

Who would like to start?

QUESTIONER. I have two questions for the ladies.

One, before President Putin brought in censorship to Russia, were you able to get on the national airwaves? For instance, did the Mothers' Committee ever participate in a national television program or radio program?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. We'll still take part in—we'll still appear on television, but never directly.

And Russian reality is such that the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers might be covered as part of, say, women's programming or programming for the youth and it's never live. Usually such programs are prepared in advance and very heavily edited.

Ms. ZHUKOVA [through interpreter]. Well, I remember one instance. I was invited to participate in a popular talk show by Tatiana Serokena. She only allowed me to say a few phrases from which she immediately deduced that I was not going to speak the way she wanted me to speak and so she shut me up, and after that only the military was speaking and I was not given the chance to rebut them.

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Journalists cannot totally ignore the hideous cases with which the kids and their mothers come to us, so they have to cover them. But they cover them in a very limited way.

The war in Chechnya is a prescribed subject. Whenever you mention it, it will be edited out.

QUESTIONER. My second question has to do with the last 6 weeks to 2 months since President Putin made his speech where he criticized non-governmental organizations. Do you know of other organizations feeling pressure? And can you describe the kinds of measures that have been taken by the national authorities? You've spoken of local authorities already viewing his speech as an order to crack down on you.

But have there been other elements of repression brought against you?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. President Putin was not the first one to attack NGOs. He was preceded by the Minister of Defense who accused us of trying to disrupt the army, and before that a Deputy Minister of Justice said openly that human rights organizations provoke mutinies in prisons.

The time since President Putin spoke has been too limited, too short in order to evaluate the aftermath, but we certainly hope that no non-government organizations in Russia would suffer.

But my optimism is tempered by reminiscences of how the billionaire Khodorkovsky was arrested just as a conscripted 18-year-old. They slapped handcuffs on him and put soldiers with machine guns around him.

And as Natalia noted, we are already experiencing increasing financial pressure. They are jacking up our rent. They are jacking up the telephone rates. And they institute taxes on the grants that we receive.

And I certainly hope that Western journalists would come to our aid if such aid would be needed.

Ms. PRYOR. Thank you very much.

Additional questions?

QUESTIONER. My question was focusing on what international media or human rights watch groups are able to report on these situations? Do the Russian people have access to these groups through Internet or other means?

And also, are there any sort of underground media—is there an underground media presence to sort of let the people know this information discreetly?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Yes, we do have access to international media and to international human rights organizations. We even supply them with information.

Over the last 2 years, Amnesty International published two reports, one dealing with how they dragoon young conscripts into the armed forces and the other dealing with the horrible living conditions of the young conscripts in the armed forces.

This is a semi-underground publication that we issue, not in Moscow, but in surrounding areas. It's called "The News of the Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers." And it is mailed around the country to human rights organizations and our committees.

We have been very fortunate to have received the grant that has expired recently, which was called School of Soldiers' Mothers. And part of the grant was to give money for the publication of a bulletin or a flyer.

So let me share a secret with you. These two issues of the paper were paid out from this grant.

But again, our advantage is that the problems that we're dealing with are a matter of great concern to millions of people. And therefore, local newspapers, small newspapers quite often publish information about our committees and advise the young people and their parents as to the addresses of our committees where they can go for help.

Ms. ZHUKOVA [through interpreter]. While our committee, for example, prepares small flyers or guidebooks for the conscripts, and we disseminate those flyers which advise the conscripts as to their legal rights.

Ms. PRYOR. Thank you.

I think I saw a hand way in the back here, Madam.

QUESTIONER. My question was you were saying something about the fact that you have obtained lawsuits against the government for compensation for the soldiers. Am I hearing this correctly?

Your soldiers, if someone is killed, wounded—you have had lawsuits that you have brought out in relation to them and have received compensation for them?

Ms. ZHUKOVA [through interpreter]. According to law in Russia, the families of soldiers killed in Chechnya are given a one-time allowance which is too puny to provide for a decent living.

In many cases, if the soldier is killed in Chechnya, the family gets nothing because the armed forces will present the killing, for example, of a person as suicide, in which case no allowance will be paid out.

In such cases, people go to court and start lawsuits and you have to prove that the person in question was killed in the war, and therefore his parents have the right to compensation, rather than committed suicide.

QUESTIONER. So what you are saying to me is that they can sue the government if someone was killed?

Ms. ZHUKOVA [through interpreter]. Yes.

QUESTIONER. I just want to say thank you because the similarities between what's going on in your government and the war and the similarities here with the war in Iraq and Afghanistan are unbelievably parallel and similar. The major difference that you just showed me right now, and that's the reason I asked this question, is at least you are able to go and see your government for your losses of soldiers being killed in the service and at least you get some compensation.

Here in the United States, there is no compensation for soldiers that have been lost and killed in the service and I think that this is something our government needs to look into. And I'm thankful that you brought that out.

And by the way, thank you very much for being here. It's appreciated. Thank you.

QUESTIONER. I am with the office of Congressman Granger in Texas.

You mentioned that you had had some funding—two questions, actually.

You mentioned that you had had some funding for your organization from Boris Berezovsky. And my first question is what—is he no longer able to provide that because all of his funds are frozen?

And also, are you able to get funding from other oligarchs who have moved abroad and still have access to their assets, who have been outspoken like Khodorkovsky, who've been outspoken against the Putin administration and who are against the war in Chechnya and Putin's policy in Chechnya?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Well, thank God the civil liberties foundation of Berezovsky is extant. It continues to operate. But unfortunately, no private foundation can perform the functions which legally belong to the Russian Government.

As for the help from other oligarchs, we already mentioned that Russian businessmen are afraid of helping out the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers because anything connected with the war in Chechnya is off limits.

QUESTIONER. Expatriates like Khodorkovsky, who've moved west—expatriates I was wondering about. Is that who I mean? I thought Khodorkovsky had also. There are so many.

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Well, the Russian ex-pats are no longer Russian businessmen; they would be foreign businessmen.

Yes, there are some charitable foundations run by other oligarchs like the Open Russia Foundation founded by Khodorkovsky of ... [inaudible] Foundation. But they strictly stay away from us. And when we appeal for help, they gave us to understand that they don't deal in political issues, that they confine themselves to individual charitable cases.

And let me explain why the oligarchs dread to touch us with a 10-foot pole.

The problem is that the legal framework on the basis of which Russian business operates is so complicated, is so obfuscated, that there is always a chance that the authorities can always charge any businessman with any crime and throw him in prison and they know it. That's why they don't try to antagonize the authorities.

QUESTIONER. Thank you.

And second, if you have a minute, how do you explain the Russian people's knowledge of the conflict in Chechnya versus their love for Vladimir Putin.

Do you think that they're completely unaware of the problem in Chechnya? Or do they have a general understanding of it and they just ignore that it's such a horrible human rights problem and just vote for him anyway?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Well, political rating is a very complex phenomenon in Russia.

Very often, the so-called push-polling technique is used. In other words, the questions are formulated in such a way as to pre-suppose the answer.

In December 2000, when the war was at the peak in Chechnya and soldiers were dying by the hundreds, the pollsters asked people, Do you support war in Chechnya? Well, people in the street and on the phone said, "Sure, sure. Yes, we support it."

So once I talked to a group of journalists, I said why don't they ask the same question in a different form. For example, "Are you prepared to send your son, your brother to die in the war in Chechnya?"

So somebody did ... [inaudible] up the courage to ask such a question and Putin's rating immediately plummeted.

Please remember that Russian polling science is still a Soviet polling science and highly ideologized; well, possibly as it is in the United States, if it is.

Mr. SMITH. My name is Chris Smith. I'm Chairman of the Helsinki Commission, and I want to apologize for being late. We had a series of votes on the House floor that made it very difficult to get here on time. So I do apologize. I was hoping to introduce you, but let me say how grateful we are that you are here. Your message has been heard loud and clear in the past and now making this presentation certainly will amplify that among a different audience—a U.S. audience.

I noticed, Ms. Melnikova, that you made the statement that someone in Washington said that Russians don't necessarily need democracy. I would hope that you might amplify on that as to who said it.

I want to assure you that our greatest hope is that Russia fully matriculate into a full-fledged democracy where the respect for rule of law and human rights is sacred and sacrosanct.

I've been in Congress now for 24 years and my first human rights trip was to Moscow and Leningrad in 1982 on behalf of Russian Jews—Soviet Jewry. I have gone back many times after that, and the hope was always human rights and democracy.

There are many Democrats and Republicans—I'm a Republican—who feel that way. It's not stability at the expense of democracy. Some people may think that somewhere, but certainly not on Capitol Hill.

But who said it, do you have that?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. So Congress has put it on advisement and starts investigating, right?

Unfortunately, we don't have direct access to the American media, so we have to go by what the Russian media reports about what's going on in America. And what we heard was the Democratic candidate, Senator Kerry. That was the gist of what he said, as reported by the Russian press.

We also see the activities of international foundations and international structures that have all but completely phased out all support for democracy and civil society in Russia.

And recently, all the grant applications—well, the foundations and international organizations encourage applications in support of local administrations on any issue but democracy.

Mr. SMITH. Let me just ask a couple of other questions, then go back to the audience.

For the first time, as you know, this year potential conscripts can do alternative service. You might want to comment on how well or poorly you think that is working.

We have what we call an OSCE Parliamentary Assembly meeting in Scotland in the beginning of July. There are about 320 members of parliament from the 55 countries that make up the OSCE PA.

Russia will be sending its delegation, led by the Duma Speaker. That has been traditional. We will meet with him, I can assure you. Probably, we'll start off with a bilateral meeting—we're on one side of the table; they're on the other.

Please inform us what you think we should convey to him with regards to your concerns.

One quick aside, years ago I remember watching a very disturbing documentary clip of conscripts being beaten by their higher grade military colleagues. It was awful ũ they were punched in the stomach, punched in the face, knocked over. It was part of an initiation rite, of some perverted sort.

Has that stopped? We have raised that issue as, I'm sure, others have raised it. The mothers have raised it. What is the status of that mistreatment of conscripts?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. The law on the alternative civil service passed 2 years ago is inadequate.

First of all, it's punitive because the term of service is 4 years. And second, it's not social; it does not serve civil society. It serves primarily military units and military industries.

Unfortunately, the military lobby at that time prevailed in the Duma and we don't have much optimism that the law would be improved now.

Another objection to this law on the alternative civil service is under the law, the people applying for this kind of service have to be geographically moved from the east to the west, from the south to the north.

But unfortunately, the enterprises, the factories where they work, don't have living accommodations and therefore the military stepped forward and said that we can help as long as we form units out of those people, and so basically accommodate them in barracks.

One citizen has already filed a lawsuit with the constitutional court of Russia, arguing that the alternative civil service is punitive considering that it's twice as long as normal military service. So we're going to support him and we'll see what comes out of it.

Second question as regards to your forthcoming meeting with Mr. Gryzlov, the Duma speaker—6 years ago, somebody submitted in the state Duma a bill on civilian control of the armed forces. So it would be great if you could remind Mr. Gryzlov about the existence of this bill and ask him about this prospect.

And the second point that we could recommend you raise in your consultations with Mr. Gryzlov is the possibility of another amnesty for the force deserters. There are about 40,000 soldiers that had to leave their units and live underground.

Such an amnesty was passed 6 years ago, but since then, a lot more people had to desert their service, and therefore, it would be highly desirable if they could be amnestied.

As regards to the question about whether hazing has been gotten rid of, this is a copy of the Chelyabinsk newspaper with a very telling photograph.

I'd like also to present you with these color photographs of the boys that came to our Moscow reception room.

The problem is that the Russian officers do not treat their soldiers as human beings and this is the disturbing point. Therefore, everything goes on as before.

Mr. SMITH. I have one final question and it's in regard to Chechnya.

We, as a Commission, have tried since the first Chechen war to raise the issue in an effort to stop it. We felt that it was wrong. We actually had Elena Bonner and several other notables, come and testify, who gave riveting testimony that the West and the United States in particular wittingly or unwittingly may have given the green light for the Russians to go into Chechnya.

I'll never forget: President Clinton was in Moscow in April 1996 when he was asked about Chechnya. The President was asked his opinion and he said pretty much it was an internal affair. He compared Chechnya to the United States Civil War between the North and the South.

Many in Europe—and we believe—most in Russia took that to mean that there was going to be no diplomatic or other penalty imposed by the Western democracies with the United States at the lead because this was just an internal affair.

Over the years, we've had eight hearings—approximately eight hearings. We've had Sergei Kovalev and many others testify. My question is, do you feel that the Western countries, and the United States in particular, have been strong enough in their comments to Putin and before him to the Heads of State in Russia to say that this is absolutely unacceptable? That under the pretext of mitigating terrorism by Chechens, this scorched earth policy and all of the other issues—obviously, many Russian soldiers dying a very brutal death and the refugee situation that has transpired—are unnecessary; is there another approach that could have been followed?

What is your view about the response of the United States and the Western powers?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Well, we believe that unfortunately there is not enough pressure exerted on Mr. Putin. Unfortunately, the world closes its eyes not only to the plight of the Russian soldiers in Chechnya, but also to the plight of the Chechen people.

Ten years of war have infuriated both the Russian military and the Chechens to such an extent that we don't see any possibility of peaceful resolution of this thing.

But I think Russia's partners simply have to exert pressure upon Putin to make him make at least some tentative steps toward peace, maybe offer some intermediate negotiations, maybe seek some mediation efforts on the part of governments or maybe non-governmental organizations. At least something has to be done. And I think this kind of pressure is absolutely mandatory.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Human Rights Commission of Europe are exerting some pressure, but it seems that they could double their efforts. It seems they could exert more effective pressure.

I'd like to remind you of some gruesome facts: that in 10 years of war, 100,000 Chechens died; that a lot of them had to leave their country; that Chechens find it extremely hard to live in Russia; that their children cannot live and study normally in Russia.

So their plight is enormous and no projects to monitor the xenophobia in Russia will be able to help those people unless the war is ended.

QUESTIONER. I want to thank both of you for coming today and for your brave work in Russia.

And my question is as follows: How realistic do you see an implementation of a professional army in Russia by 2007, as Putin has promised, or any time soon thereafter? Does he seriously intend to implement it? Does he even offer anything else?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Unfortunately, the journalists have distorted the intentions of President Putin. He has no intention of ever building a professional army.

Moreover, in the Duma, there is a bill to outlaw all deferrals for the students, for all those with minor children, and so on, to put an end to all deferrals.

Ms. ZHUKOVA [through interpreter]. Well, it sounds like a total war-time mobilization.

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. On the other hand, we know full well that a professional army is badly needed by Russia and Russia can cope with this issue. Russia has enough money and enough realistic projects to that end.

The 12 years of democracy in Russia have left their traces in the form of two military reform projects: one advanced by the Yabloko Party; the other is the Union of Right Forces.

Moreover, a year ago, President Putin signed a federal program for staffing the armed forces on a professional basis, but it has been left on the table. Nothing is being done to implement it.

And so, our Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers has another project now: to work out a draft military reform proposal for the next president of Russia in 2008.

Mr. SMITH. I unfortunately have a meeting with the EPA that began at 4 o'clock, so I must leave. Before we go to our next question, I want to thank you so much for your courage and for speaking out so boldly and so effectively.

We will follow up on your recommendations.

I would also say, the OSCE does have a security meeting in Vienna virtually every week and it has a code of conduct with regard to the treatment or lack of good treatment for soldiers. That might be an additional venue for all of us to pursue with respect to the officers mistreating their lower-ranked servicemen. We should follow up on that.

And, we will show these pictures to our friends.

QUESTIONER. In a recent briefing on human rights in Russia here, it was mentioned by one of the panelists that rising popular nationalism has made it difficult to try military officials fairly using a jury system. In particular, a case was mentioned where Russian soldiers were accepted by the jury to have killed innocent Chechens and tried to cover it up yet were not found guilty of any actual crime.

Do you believe this reflects popular sentiment or is it a byproduct of government propaganda compounded by problems with the judicial system?

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Do you mean—your question is connected with the Spetsnaz case, the Ulman case?

QUESTIONER. I believe that's the correct case.

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Because in reality, such cases, such court cases are few and far between—the cases where Russian military would be taken to court for the various extrajudicial killings and other military crimes.

Well, then obviously the acquittal of those people on the Ulman case is a miscarriage of justice, no question about it.

Unfortunately, the fact of the existence of nationalism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism in Russia—everybody knows that. And this is a sad fact, but it's a fact of life.

The problem is not so much the acquittal of the people charged with the war crimes in Chechnya; the problem, basically, is that most of those crimes are not even investigated, do not even reach the level of the trial.

QUESTIONER. Thank you very much.

QUESTIONER. This is a question for either one of our guests.

Is it your position that every one of the branches of the Russian military are pretty much equal in terms of the difficulty of the situation there for conscripts? And if there is one branch that may be better than the other, I wonder if it's possible for someone to volunteer how to get into that? And I say that as a veteran myself who joined the Navy to avoid—or I should say, to reduce my chances of going to Vietnam and it worked.

Ms. MELNIKOVA [through interpreter]. Obviously, the people who have to fight in Chechnya have it worse than anybody else. But as far as hazing is concerned, as far as beatings and humiliations, the problem is severe everywhere, from the strategic forces to the construction battalions, including even the presidential regiment.

Ms. PRYOR. We'd like to thank everybody for coming today, obviously, particularly our two presenters, Madam Melnikova, Madam Zhukova. We have very much appreciated their insights and especially their time that they gave us today, also very grateful for the excellent interpretation which aided all of us.

So thank everybody for coming. Thank all of you who had good questions to ask.

And I now close this briefing.
[Whereupon the briefing ended at 4:18 p.m.]

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