

**Statement by Nelson C. Ledsky, Regional Director for Eurasia,
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**Before the Committee on Foreign Relations
U.S. Senate**

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On behalf of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), I would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to discuss the current political situation in Russia. I would especially like to recognize and thank Senators Lugar and Biden for their leadership and support for promoting democracy worldwide.

NDI has followed democratic development and civil society in Russia since the early 1990s. The Institute has maintained a field office in Moscow since 1992, from which it has provided assistance to a broad spectrum of political parties that exist in Russia. NDI had sought to help these parties strengthen their structures and assist them in advocating for their priorities at both the federal and local level. NDI has provided training and consulted with thousands of individuals on long term party organization. Our objective has not been to promote a particular ideology or electoral outcome, but to support development of a genuine multiparty system that allows for divergent viewpoints.

The same objective holds true for our activities with civil society groups. Here we have sought to assist the organizational development of nonpartisan groups that can monitor the conduct of elections and promote popular political participation at the national and local levels. We have been able to assist these groups over the past decade, and since 1999 have supported the efforts of a cross-regional association of civic groups

called The Voice Association for the Defense of Voters' Rights (VOICE). VOICE, or *Golos* in Russian, has become Russia's leading nonpartisan election monitoring organization. It has 23 affiliates with programs covering two-thirds of the country's population.

The political environment in Russia has grown progressively more difficult over the past two years, particularly since the December 2003 parliamentary elections and the March 2004 presidential election. Both contests failed to meet Russia's commitment as an OSCE member. The VOICE Association identified widespread vote tabulation irregularities and uncovered numerous accounts of voter coercion. VOICE noted that: municipal workers were ordered to vote, sometimes for one particular candidate; members of the military were told to report the time they voted; students were threatened with losing housing if they did not vote; and voter lists were being manipulated to ensure a high turnout. VOICE documented an unexplainable decrease in the voter rolls of two million individuals between December 7, 2003 and March 14, 2004. All possible avenues, from media, to security services, to electoral commissions, appear to have been used to ensure a large margin of victory for the incumbent president, and a large voter turnout figure.

As a consequence of these elections, United Russia and other pro-government parties now hold a two-thirds majority in the State Duma, while two of the reform-oriented parties, Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces (SPS), have lost all their representation in the legislature. With little access to the media, constant attacks by the national news

channels, and their financial support significantly affected by the government's investigation of their primary supporters, these parties are now clearly disadvantaged in the Russian political environment.

As 2004 drew to a close, the Russian administration successfully eliminated elections for regional governors, consolidated its control over the judiciary by putting high court appointments under Kremlin control, increased the legal hurdles faced by non-Kremlin-aligned political parties attempting to take part in upcoming elections, and limited the rights of citizens to hold mass demonstrations.

Through various pieces of legislation, the Russian government has also made it increasingly more difficult for international NGOs to provide support to their Russian partners. Since last year, NDI has faced ongoing investigations by both regional and national Russian authorities.

Russia is also presently taking forceful initiatives to undercut the contributions of the OSCE to help promote democratic processes in Russia and in other countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), by charging that there is an overemphasis on the so called "human dimension" of the OSCE, which concentrates on human rights and democracy, and by accusing unjustly the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of politically biased assessments of elections in Russia and the CIS. Russia's criticisms and threats to pull back from the OSCE and its institutions

jeopardize international election monitoring, as well as the role of international assistance organizations and the activities of domestic democratic reformers.

The democratic gains that characterized Russian politics in the 1990s have largely been overturned, and there are no guarantees that current trends will be reversed any time soon. The parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 2007 and 2008 could provide opportunities for greater political engagement by civic and political groups. It is equally possible, however, that the 2007 and 2008 elections will be scripted to ensure a continuity or even amplification of current tendencies. The challenge for parties and civic organizations, therefore, is to rebuild and reconnect at local, regional and national levels and to take advantage of any political openings.

There are clearly pockets of independence in Russia. Last December, The Civic Congress, a meeting of 1,500 political and civic activists publicly asserted their determination to promote peaceful political reform. It sought to foster cooperation among political parties, civic groups and members of the media and business communities as a counterweight to anti-democratic trends. The Congress was remarkable in the Russian context because it brought together diverse groups that had not previously associated with one another. Also, it appeared to be a rejection of the resignation and complacency that have gripped many democratic reformers over the past several years. The Congress released a declaration on proposed joint actions and established leadership bodies to oversee its follow-on activities.

In addition, organizations like The VOICE Association have grown steadily in size and coverage, providing a counterweight to those who may seek to manipulate the electoral process. The Association is hoping to expand its local branches from 23 to 40 in time to observe upcoming local elections as well as the 2007 and 2008 national elections. VOICE's growing presence year-round would give them a unique perspective, and their ability to remain involved in the electoral process between elections provides small but potentially significant opportunities to engage citizens in the political process and help deter electoral misconduct.

International engagement in the furtherance of Russian democracy remains critically important. Russian democrats depend upon assistance and require the continued attention of world opinion makers. The international community should concentrate its support on those seeking to build democratic institutions and processes in Russia and should counter initiatives that make it more difficult for organizations like NDI, the OSCE and others to provide assistance. NDI remains optimistic about the prospects over the long run for Russian democracy and intends to remain committed to this cause.