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**Democracy on the Retreat in Russia
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Mr. Chairman, first of all, thank you for the opportunity to testify here before you today. I would like to request that my statement be submitted to the record. This hearing is in itself testimony to the crucial importance of the issue of deepening authoritarian tendencies in the Russian Federation.

The Russian Federation today is a country in which the rights of citizens to participate in government through free and fair elections, independent media, and civic activism are being severely curtailed. As my esteemed colleagues here have noted, the list of democratic rollbacks implemented by the Putin Administration is as long as it is egregious: the complete control over national media outlets by the state; ongoing attempts to control the course and results of elections by changing the electoral system; the arbitrary arrest and prosecution of business leaders and the triumph of state-run monopolies over rule of law; and the absence of checks and balances within the decision-making process. Mr. Putin has periodically introduced terms in which to couch these alarming trends – “dictatorship of the law,” and “managed democracy.” My friends and colleagues in Russia, however, are now using a new term: bureaucratic dictatorship.

The watershed event of Russia’s creeping authoritarianism was the election of December 2003, when Russian pro-democratic parties failed to garner sufficient support to remain a faction in the Russian national parliament. The fourth invocation of the Russian State Duma, with 360 of 450 seats occupied by Unified Russia, is therefore now dominated by a single, pro-government party. With no national parliamentary presence and no real access to mass media, pro-democratic parties have fallen into a crisis of identity at the national level, marked by a lack of leadership, organization, and consistent ideology.

If the pro-democratic forces are absorbed in a crisis of identity, the Russian public is engulfed in a crisis of faith in the political party system. A nation-wide poll conducted by the Levada Center late last month indicated that nearly 50 percent of the population feel that political parties play either absolutely no role, or just a very minor one, in the life of Russia. Only 7.2 percent feel that the political parties play a major role. In contrast, nearly 50 percent of those polled believed that the FSB, the KGB successor, plays either an important or very important role. I think you will agree that these statistics are extremely troubling.

The Kremlin, meanwhile, has moved to further undermine the crippled national opposition movement. With only a shadow of an opposition, the Duma has devolved into little more than a rubber stamp for initiatives put forward by the Kremlin to strengthen its almost absolute grip on power. With the help of a blindly loyal State Duma, the Kremlin

has eliminated single mandate districts, increased the threshold required to enter parliament from 5 percent to 7 percent, and outlawed the formation of electoral blocs in future national parliamentary elections. This “divide and conquer” approach is intended to force democratic parties to campaign against each other for pro-reform votes. By splitting the vote in this way, the Kremlin all but guarantees that the democratic opposition will once again be shut out of parliament. In order to survive, these parties have no choice but to merge into a single organization, a task which is fraught with political, legal, and bureaucratic challenges.

In order to stifle grassroots democratic movements, the Kremlin has moved to prohibit the creation of regional political parties and the emergence of new parties by artificially inflating registration requirements, raising obligatory party membership, and applying direct pressure on party members. Just last Monday, (January 31) Russia’s Ministry of Justice, violating the spirit, if not the letter, of the law, again delayed the registration of a new democratic party – Novye Pravye, or the New Right,¹ saying that it needs more time to review their case.

Despite the foregoing, Mr. Chairman, the political pendulum is not swinging in only one direction. Russia’s first year of a return to a single party state has also proved to be a year of unequivocal setbacks for the Putin Administration. The economy is faltering, Russia’s strong-arm tactics in its “near abroad” have failed, and Putin’s “vertical of power” has proved unable to protect Russian citizens from heinous acts of terrorism. Recent public opinion data shows falling approval numbers for the Prime Minister, his Government, and even President Putin himself.

We are now witnessing as Russians take to the streets throughout the country to protest what they feel to be the Kremlin’s failure to fulfill basic social responsibilities to the public. On February 6, 2,000 people in Petrozavodsk took part in a protest to demonstrate against Kremlin-initiated reform of pension benefits. On the same day, a number of youth groups, including Youth SPS, Youth Yabloko, and "Iduschie bez Putina" ("Walking Without Putin"), organized a protest in Moscow against the presidential appointment of governors and the strengthened "vertical of power."

On January 29, thousands in St. Petersburg marched against Kremlin policies, including pensioners, World War II veterans, and students. The protest was organized by the "St. Petersburg Civic Resistance" movement, which consists of opposition parties, movements, and NGOs, including Yabloko, KPRF, Social Democrats, League of Women Voters, Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, St. Petersburg Democratic Assembly, and Walking Without Putin.

¹ Novye Pravye submitted registration papers on November 22, 2004. According to the law on political parties (June 21, 2001), their registration must be decided on within one month. The party believes that the law gives the government one month to review the case and come up with either a positive or a negative answer. However, a loophole in the law allows the government to drag its heels on the process indefinitely. Point 4 of Article 15 states that the government has one month to make a decision "upon verification of correspondence of documents, necessary for registration..., to the requirements of the federal law." The government can claim that it is still "verifying documents" and win the case in court on a technicality.

On January 29, Yabloko organized a protest in more than 30 cities and regions throughout Russia to protest against benefits legislation and the actions of Unified Russia, who voted for benefit monetization legislation, housing reform, auto insurance reform, the abolition of gubernatorial elections, and changes to the military draft law.

Families of the Beslan school hostage victims have blocked a central highway in the region in an attempt to voice their frustration with the Administration's response to the horrific tragedy that took place there last September 1.

The response of the Putin Administration to these protests has been remarkable only in its complete failure to adequately address the concerns being aired by citizens. The Beslan families have been rebuked by a key Kremlin aide for their attempts to demand accountability from regional leadership. The Kremlin has also attempted to wholly discredit the massive protest movement against pension reforms by labeling organizers as provocateurs and radical opportunists. Organizers were targeted for arrest, especially young people. However, some participants have alleged that elderly pensioners were arrested, and even beaten. Not until after the voice of the people became overwhelming did the government respond, if only to point fingers and promise half-hearted revision of the reforms.

Mr. Chairman, these actions by the Russian people are heartening to me, as it proves what I have believed all along – that apathy is not, in fact, endemic in the Russian population, and that the Russian public does believe that the government must be accountable to its people. Russia remains fertile ground for democracy. I make this assertion based not only on dramatic images of street protests and public demonstrations, but on more subtle, ongoing developments.

The truth is that while Putin rushes to eliminate democratic voices at the national level, democracy shows signs of re-invigoration at the regional level. During regional legislative elections over the last year, regional opposition parties have doubled and even tripled the support the national party received in 2003. Many have accomplished this with little support from national leadership, or indeed, international assistance.

In fact, regional opposition parties have been able to accomplish what the national leadership could not last year; namely, form coalitions with other like-minded parties and candidates to present a unified opposition choice on the ballot. A united bloc of Yabloko and SPS received 8 percent in elections for the Arkhangelsk Oblast regional legislature. During elections in Kurgan, SPS received 10.4 percent. In the Republic of Ingushetiya (which borders Chechnya), Yabloko reached 10.8 percent. And most recently in Taimyr, Yabloko cooperated with the Party of Life to take 22 percent of the vote.

At the same time, civil activists and political leaders at the regional level are coming together to counteract what they rightfully see as the skewed monopoly pro-government forces have on public discourse. Hundreds of thousands of human rights and political party activists continue their work in the regions regardless of pressure applied on them by the FSB and the Kremlin. IRI has worked with a number of these activists and the

organizations they represent. Using innovative means to reach out to the public, they communicate their messages through forums, press releases, internet sites, newsletters, rallies, and even leaflet campaigns. They are fighting to make sure that dissenting voices, no matter how small, are heard.

On December 12, Russia's Constitution Day, more than 1,200 representatives of Russian civic groups, political parties, and media from all over the country came to Moscow to take part in the "All-Russia Civic Forum." These advocates of democracy came to say "no" to Kremlin policies and to develop a democratic agenda for their country. The Civil Resistance movement in St. Petersburg brought together opposition parties, movements, and civic groups to stand up for media freedoms, picketing local television stations to protest censorship on TV, and allow the voice of democratic Russia to be heard.

Mr. Chairman, the Russian Federation today is a country at a critical crossroads. Despite the results of the 2003 elections, despite the crisis of Russia's democratic opposition, despite the Russian public's lack of faith in political party processes, and despite the Putin Administration's concerted efforts to achieve an absolute grip on power, Russian democracy is not a lost cause. Russian citizens have been bombarded with Mr. Putin's attempts to discredit democratic ideals and movements through any means available, including the government and the media. And yet, the Levada poll I cited earlier also indicates that 10 percent of Russians are still willing to vote for a democratic party – enough to enter the State Duma even if the Kremlin's attempt to raise the threshold succeeds.

I firmly believe that the real strength and indeed, the future of pro-democracy forces lies in the regions and among Russia's younger generations, who must not, and will not, tolerate a return to dictatorship.

The United States, and the international community as a whole, must provide whatever support we can to these defenders of Russian democracy. Without them, Russia's future is bleak.

I believe that we must act now to help Russians re-establish their faith in a democratic system. We must work to assist democratic political parties to regain legitimacy in the eyes of their constituents by focusing on their development at the grassroots level. Targeting promising activists, civil organizations, and political movements at the local level, we can provide training and support to help them more effectively represent the needs of their communities. In addition, we can assist these activists in crafting messages and platforms that demonstrate to their constituents that someone is paying attention to their interests.

We must support Russia's democratic community in their efforts to unite behind common goals and ideals. Only by building real, effective coalitions with like-minded partners can the democratic movement provide a viable alternative to proponents of the Kremlin status quo, or supporters of nationalist radicals. This process has already begun, to a certain extent, as evidenced by electoral gains made by democratic coalitions in the

regions I mentioned earlier. Although Russia's democratic opposition parties may not have a clear national party head, national leadership can benefit from the momentum growing at the regional level and learn from the successful examples of their colleagues in the regions. Initiatives like Committee 2008, a group of pro-democracy advocates and leaders who are working together to find common ground for a diverse group of political parties, civil society organizations, and individual activists, are an important step towards this goal.

We must also encourage young people to re-engage in representative government as civil society activists, candidates, or party members. The talent and idealism of Russia's youth cannot be allowed to waste away to apathy and disenfranchisement. Initiatives as simple as community service projects can help to underscore the ways in which participatory democracy can address the concerns of Russia's young people much more effectively than radical nationalism, or rote acceptance of pro-government ideology.

Finally, we must engage Russia's leadership in such a way that it recognizes the dangerous line it is walking. President Putin must come to understand that his authoritarian policies are bad for Russia, and are leading to a systemic crisis in every sector - economic development, foreign policy, and civil society. Only by opening up Russia to a range of opinions and healthy debate will Russia truly thrive. The current climate of oppression will lead only to stagnation.

We in the United States applauded in the early 1990's as the Russian people threw off the yoke of oppression, and watched with hope as they began to create a society dedicated to the ideals of democracy, a free and open economy, and adherence to the rule of law. And we in the United States have watched with profound sadness as these hard-fought achievements and sacrifices have been cast aside by an increasingly authoritarian regime. This is not a government that the Russian people deserve. This is not a government that the Russian people should tolerate. I say this because I firmly believe that our friends, the Russian people, are capable of creating a democracy that offers them the stability, the prosperity, and the freedom they so richly deserve.

Thank you.