

February 1, 2006: Russia: USCIRF Roundtable at Carnegie Endowment Assesses U.S. Policy on Russian Human Rights

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Audio (Windows Media Player 9.0+)

Written Transcript

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WASHINGTON - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today hosted a public roundtable discussion at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace entitled "Assessing U.S. Human Rights Policy Towards Russia." The roundtable reviewed how the U.S. government should be responding to the rollback in human rights, including religious freedom, in Russia and increasing Russian nationalism. The event was also held to prepare for upcoming Commission delegations to Russia.

Since its inception, the Commission has monitored and reported on the status of freedom of religion or belief in the Russian Federation. Russia has been of consistent concern to the Commission not so much because of the severity of the country's religious freedom violations, but rather due to its fragile human rights situation, including that of religious freedom. Of primary concern are the trends which have emerged in the past few years which raise serious questions about Russia's commitment to democratic reform and the protection of religious freedom. This is also critical because Russia continues to be a model, especially for other former Soviet states and other nations struggling to establish democratic systems after a history of despotism.

Current curtailments in media freedom and in the role of political parties, as well as legal restrictions on freedom of assembly, popular referenda and the end to popular election of regional governors, all reveal that progress towards democracy is being halted, if not reversed. Most, if not all, of the

concerns about freedom of religion or belief raised by the Commission appear to be directly related to the growing influence of authoritarian, and perhaps even chauvinistic, strains in the Russian government. The country's progress, based on the rule of law, the protection of human rights, and democratic freedoms, is now in peril.

Commentators at the roundtable were:

Mark Medish, Partner, Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer and Feld; former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director on the National Security Council for Russian, Ukrainian and Eurasian Affairs; and member of the Council on Foreign Relations Task Force on U.S.-Russian Relations.

Michael McFaul, Peter and Helen Bing Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, associate professor of political science at Stanford University and director of the Center on Democracy, Development, the Rule of Law; Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; and member of the Council on Foreign Relations Task Force on U.S.-Russian relations.

Catherine Fitzpatrick, U.N. representative for Physicians for Human Rights and independent human rights analyst.

Nikolas K. Gvosdev, Senior Fellow in Strategic Studies at The Nixon Center and Editor of The National Interest.

Witness testimony and a transcript of the hearing will be made available on the Commission's web site at www.uscirf.gov after the event.