



Washington, February 17, 2005

President George W. Bush  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

Your upcoming summit with President Vladimir Putin of Russia is an important opportunity to reinforce your stated commitment to promoting democratic freedoms and human rights around the world. We recognize that Russia is an important state whose cooperation is needed in areas such as combating terrorism, stopping nuclear proliferation, effective UN action to meet threats to security and joint efforts to avert genocide. However, we believe that Russia's contributions in all these areas will be strengthened if you make a direct effort to raise the issue of the serious erosion of democratic freedoms in Russia.

In the last four years, President Putin has led his country significantly away from the democratic gains that Russia made in the 1990s. With almost all checks and balances to presidential power now dismantled, the freedom of the Russian people is at risk. At the start of your second term, we urge you to adopt a new U.S. policy toward Russia, which places at the centerpiece the issue of the future of democracy in Russia. As part of that policy, we urge you and the United States to publicly challenge President Putin's authoritarian course. And we urge you to make human rights, democratic practices, and the rule of law essential elements of the dialogue with Moscow and a precondition for the deepening of bilateral ties.

Encroachments on civic freedoms not only violate international human rights standards, they also damage President Putin's stated goal of modernizing Russia. The government's increasingly authoritarian course has undermined the very pillars on which a post-Soviet Russian society was supposed to be built: rule of law, accountability, a pluralistic media, and vigorous debate of policy issues. The widely reported loss of investor confidence and the recent spate of policy errors by Putin's administration are just two of the consequences of this rollback in civic freedoms.

As Russia endeavors to build a free and democratic society, the following areas require the greatest and most immediate attention:

**Civic Organizations**-*The Russian government has tried to stifle civic activism at a time when citizens are the very force that can rebuild and revitalize the society.* In his 2004 State of the Nation address, President Putin lashed out at non-governmental organizations, an attack widely understood as being directed at human rights groups, saying that they served dubious pay masters and carried out tasks that did not serve the interests of Russian society. Since that speech, the atmosphere in which NGO's operate has deteriorated significantly. The Russian government is

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debating increasingly restrictive legislation. NGOs working on Chechnya-related issues have faced ever more serious and frequent harassment.

**Pressure on Media**-*Russia has oppressed free media and deprived itself of objective and timely information about what is happening in the country, as well as a major check on power and source of accountability.* The Russian state is the main enemy of media freedom, according to Russian media experts. There is very little independent reporting as most media outlets are controlled by big businesses with ties to the Kremlin or regional politicians. The Russian state fully controls the country's national television networks, the key source of information for a majority of the population. The relative pluralism in print media (represented by outlets such as the newspapers Kommersant, Izvestia and Novaya Gazeta and a few local newspapers) is also under fire.

**Political Freedoms and Electoral Process**-*In the past four years the Russian government has marginalized its political opposition and attacked perceived opponents outside the electoral process selectively using criminal prosecutions.* International observers declared the 2003 parliamentary elections “seriously distorted” by the advantages of incumbency enjoyed by the Putin-endorsed United Russia party, finding that voter access to information and equal conditions for candidates and parties to convey their message were “severely compromised.” United Russia’s sweeping victory left the genuine opposition parties either much reduced or eliminated from parliament. In addition, in the aftermath of the horrific Beslan slaughter of children, their parents and teachers, President Putin proposed reforms that have further concentrated power in the Kremlin and eliminated political pluralism by making governors an appointed rather than elected office. A new law on referenda makes grassroots initiatives virtually impossible.

**Chechnya Conflict**-*The parties to the conflict are in a vicious circle of ever more horrific rights abuses, predominantly against civilians.* The internal armed conflict in Chechnya, now in its sixth year, shows no sign of abating. To the contrary, the conflict is also spreading to other areas of the Northern Caucasus. The Russian government points to the Chechnya operation as its contribution in the global campaign against terrorism. But it is undermining that fight by failing to end massive human rights violations against the civilian population. Pro-Moscow Chechen forces and Russia’s armed forces continue to commit grave breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law – including forced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial executions – with almost complete impunity in a climate of lawlessness and chaos. Extremist Chechen armed groups have also committed unspeakable acts of terror in Chechnya and other parts of Russia, and assassinated numerous civilians they deem to be “collaborating” with the federal government.

To bring stability to the Northern Caucasus, the Russian government needs to build trust among Chechen civilians. But abuses by its own forces and Chechen forces under its nominal command and its failure to establish a meaningful accountability process for such atrocities alienate the very people Moscow needs to reach and persuade that there can never be an excuse for acts of terrorism, no matter the political goals and grievances.

**Russia’s Diplomatic Influence**-*Russia is exerting a destabilizing influence in its ‘near abroad’ (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Turkmenistan) and pursued policies that undermine progress towards democracy and respect for human rights in those countries.* We urge you to encourage Russia

to launch a program of cooperative engagement with its neighboring states that strikes a more benign balance between Russian strategic and economic interests on the one hand, and the strategic interests of these states and the promotion of fundamental rights and freedoms on the other. We note that Russia initially put its support behind the falsified results of Ukraine's November 21st presidential vote, and only belatedly adopted a neutral public position toward the December 26 rerun of that vote.

Russia's indulgent position towards two neighboring states that are internationally condemned as pariahs – Belarus and Turkmenistan – should not go unchallenged. Belarus languishes in the grip of a president who has manipulated recent ballots to promote his potentially unlimited tenure in office while simultaneously eradicating parliamentary opposition, and has also removed challengers to his authority through politically-motivated prosecutions and state violence. Freedom of expression and association continue to be eroded. Yet Russia continues to support the Belarusian regime politically and to sustain it economically.

In Turkmenistan, the regime of president-for-life Saparmurad Niyazov is one of the most repressive in the world. The regime crushes independent thought, and controls virtually all aspects of civil life. It actively isolates the country from the outside world: state policies and practices on education, on overseas travel and contacts, and on access to information, are propelling Turkmenistan's entire society inexorably into conditions of insularity and ignorance. If left unchecked, Turkmenistan promises to become the kind of unstable failed state that could endanger the entire region. Yet Russia appears passive towards this repressive state close to its borders. It is silent even when Turkmenistan's repressive policies result in specific harm to Turkmenistan's ethnic Russian community and other national minorities.

**Recommendations** In your meeting with President Putin, we urge you to ask Mr. Putin to take specific steps that would demonstrate Russia's commitment to human rights and the rule of law, and to make clear that Russia's response over the next few months should be a key element in determining whether the the U.S.-Russia relationship deepens or is derailed. These steps should include:

- Restoring political pluralism, in part by making a public commitment to abide by the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Agreement.
- Easing regulations on funding NGO's and ending the harassment of Western-funded democracy and rights NGOs.
- Allowing the creation of at least one independent television channel open to the views of opposition forces and civic groups.
- Permitting visits to Chechnya by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture and the UN Special Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances.
- Recognizing that international criticism of the Belarusian regime is based on genuine concerns about the abusive nature of that regime and the prospects for long-term democratic development of Belarus, and that Russian influence can promote genuine political pluralism, enjoyment of fundamental rights, and the rule of law in Belarus.

Joining others in the international community in robust criticism of the regime in Turkmenistan, and pressing Turkmenistan to reverse repressive policies and practices that are isolating the country and harming Turkmen society.

We urge that you publicly challenge President Putin on all these issues during the forthcoming U.S.-Russia summit in Bratislava. This would be an important step towards the goal of a US policy that promotes a democratic and free society in Russia, and increases the chances for a durable bilateral relationship between our countries.

Sincerely,

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