Mr. Speaker, last March, I

had the opportunity to meet with human rights

groups, legal experts, media representatives,

and others concerning the situation on the

ground in Russia. I learned firsthand that Russia

is enduring a difficult transition to what

hopefully will become a modern, fully democratic

nation. While there have been many

positive developments in Russian society over

the past decade, particularly with regard to the

freedoms that average Russian citizens now

enjoy, there are disturbing signs that Russia

under President Vladimir Putin may be slipping

back to its old authoritarian ways.

My primary concern is with the rule of law.

Prior to coming to Congress, I served for eight

years as the Attorney General of Kentucky. I

understand that there are inherent principles in

any constitutional democracy, chief among

them the rule of law. Recent events have

called into question Russia’s unequivocal commitment

to a transparent judicial system, defendants’

rights, and the presumption of innocence

within the Russian legal system.

As we speak, there is a major trial taking

place in Moscow. It concerns the controversial

arrest and detention of prominent Russian

businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The case

of Mr. Khodorkovsky has raised concerns from

legal experts, human rights groups, and the

media that his trial may have more to do with

his opposition to President Putin’s policies

rather than the crimes for which he is accused.

The most disturbing element of Mr.

Khodorkovsky’s trial is that it may signify a reassertion

of state influence over Russia’s private

sector economy. Such a move by the

Russian government, I fear, would raise questions

about the state of property rights in Russia,

discourage foreign investment, and slow

progress towards Russia’s full integration into

the global economy.

Mr. Speaker, the U.S. must continue to deliver

the message that adherence to the rule

of law and support for political and economic

freedom is essential to developing successful

free-market economies and prosperity. As I

mentioned earlier, Russia is truly at a crossroads

in its history. I urge my colleagues to

work with me to convince Russia to choose

the path of transparency, adherence to the

rule of law, and a commitment to the security

of private investment.