Mr. President, over

the past several years, we have witnessed

a disturbing erosion in Russia’s

democracy. Checks and balances, essential

to the functioning of any democracy,

have been undermined in

Russia through the elimination of the

independent media, the weakening of

the judiciary, and the decline of a political

opposition and citizen participation.

In his inauguration speech, President

Bush spoke about the

and stated that it is the policy

of the United States

But, the President has been unable to

capitalize on his friendship with President

Putin to prevent a backsliding in

Russia’s democracy. While President

Putin speaks about his commitment to

move down the path of democracy, his

actions demonstrate otherwise.

From 2000 until the present day,

President Putin has tightened his grip

on Russia, increasing the authoritarian

nature of the Russian state. While

many Russian experts understand that

President Putin inherited a state mired

in corruption and political violence,

and dominated by powerful, unaccountable

oligarchs, they have called Putin’s

approach to establishing security

‘‘flawed and unfair.’’ A Washington

Post article in March 2004 described

how fear was creeping back into Russia,

reminiscent of the Soviet Union. A

week before the Russian Presidential

election in 2004, the article states:

Scholars, journalists, reformist politicians,

human rights activists and even business

moguls describe an atmosphere of anxiety

that has left them wary of crossing the

Kremlin.

The imprisonment of Mikhail

Khodorkovsky, Russia’s richest man

and an oil tycoon, the disappearances

of critics of Putin, as well as the flawed

parliamentary elections in 2003, have

been disturbing signs for those who

care about democracy in Russia.

The U.S. State Department in its

Country Report on Human Rights

Practices for 2003 raise concerns over

human rights abuses committed by the

Government of Russia in Chechnya, as

well as by Chechen rebels, the failure

of the 2003 parliamentary elections to

meet international standards, the impunity

of law enforcement officials responsible

for abuses, poor prison conditions,

and a weakening of freedom of

expression and the independence and

freedom of some media. In the global

survey, ‘‘Freedom in the World,’’ published

by Freedom House in December

2004, Russia was downgraded to ‘‘Not

Free,’’ the only country to register a

negative category change in 2004.

On all fronts, Russia’s democracy appears

to be weakening. In January 2002,

the last significant independent Moscow

TV station was shut down, many

believe due to government pressure.

Furthermore, radio and print media

have increasingly been restricted. It

was widely reported that during the

parliamentary elections of 2003, television

coverage was heavily biased toward

the propresidency party, largely

ignoring or criticizing Putin’s opponents.

In May 2004, the nongovernmental

organization, the Committee to

Protect Journalists, CPJ, named Russia

one of the 10 worst places to be a

journalist. CPJ states:

A shift from blatant pressures to more subtle

and covert tactics, such as politicized

lawsuits and hostile corporate takeovers by

businessmen with close ties to Putin, has allowed

the Kremlin to stifle criticism of the

president and reports on government corruption

and human rights abuses committed by

Russian forces in Chechnya.

Furthermore, they note that journalists

in Russia’s provinces are murdered

with impunity.

As President Putin moves from

‘‘managed democracy’’ to soft

authoritarianism, Freedom House,

Human Rights Watch, and others argue

that Putin appears to be cracking down

on civil society, a vital element of any

thriving democracy. In May 2004, Putin

used his state-of-the-nation speech to

attack nongovernmental organizations,

NGOs, accusing them of ‘‘receiving financing

from influential foreign foundations

and serving dubious groups and

commercial interests.’’ The very real

need to stop terrorist financing

through charities or other organizations

does not justify targeting legitimate

civic groups and NGOs. Following

Putin’s state-of-the-nation speech,

masked intruders ransacked the office

of a major human rights organization

in Tatarstan that provides legal support

for victims of torture. In addition,

the state-owned Center TV criticized

NGOs, accusing them of being tied to

anti-Russian interests. And, in June

2004, Russia’s Foreign Minister met

with several NGOs and urged them to

rebut criticisms of the Council of Europe

regarding Russia’s human rights

policies.

Russia’s judicial system is also believed

to be far from independent, failing

to serve as a counterweight to

other branches of government. Human

Rights Watch has expressed concern

that the government under President

Putin has conducted ‘‘selective criminal

prosecutions against perceived opponents

. . . and scientists working

with foreigners on sensitive topics.’’

President Putin has proposed establishing

executive control over the nomination

of members of a key supreme

court body that supervises the hiring

and dismissal of judges. Furthermore,

despite progress in implementing trial

by jury, the Putin government appears

to have manipulated jury selection in

several high-profile cases or otherwise

tried to influence jury deliberations.

Chechnya continues to be an area of

particular concern. While Russia has

the right to combat terrorist threats

on its territory, Russian and proxy

forces regularly violate basic human

rights of Chechen civilians. Disappearances,

extrajudicial executions, rape,

and torture of detainees all continue

with disturbing frequency and with absolute

impunity. Russian forces regularly

conduct sweeps and cleansing operations,

resulting in death, injury and

abductions in what many call a . disproportionate

use of force. These

human rights abuses must end and

those responsible should be held accountable.

Since President Putin’s reelection in

March 2004, he has taken more steps to

exert control over the state. In September

2004, following the tragic

deaths of 330 people in Beslan, half of

whom were children, President Putin

undertook a set of political reforms

that concentrated power in Moscow

and decreased the power of Russia’s regions.

He proposed that regional governors

no longer be popularly elected

but instead be appointed by the President

and ratified by regional legislatures.

Legislation to this effect was introduced

in October 2004 and signed

into law by President Putin on December

12, 2004. Putin also decided that all

Duma deputies be elected on the basis

of national party lists, based on the

proportion of votes each party gets nationwide.

As Human Rights Watch

states in its recent World Report 2005:

The proposals would give the president de

facto power to appoint governors, even more

sway over the parliament, or State Duma,

and increase the executive’s influence over

the judiciary.

While it is clear that President Putin

must act to confront a legitimate

threat to security, a marginalization of

different regions outside of Moscow

may create an even greater political

backlash.

President Putin faces a challenging

political environment in Russia. However,

human rights and political freedoms

must not be ignored in an attempt

to establish security; their neglect

will only lead to greater political

turmoil. The United States must stand

by its commitment to democracy in its

relations with Russia. If Russia wants

to be a member of the community of

democracies, it must demonstrate a

meaningful commitment to democratic

principles.