Mr. Chairman, I thank you very much for this hearing.

I thank the members of the Committee who have been with

you in expressing yourselves so forcefully.

Each one of your messages, starting with your letter, Mr. Chairman,

with Senator Biden on the 31st of January was a shot across

the bow of the Putin Presidency and the Putin policies that have

just been articulated here so eloquently. So I join with everyone in

thanking you personally, thanking the Committee, thanking the

Senate.

The articulation of the centrality of freedom of the press, the articulation

of the violations in Russia of the freedom of press, and

what has been going on in Chechnya, are critical.

I believe that your letters, your resolutions have had impact. We

saw it for sure in your first letter in—in expressing a sense of urgency,

and it played a key role, I believe, in Moscow’s decision to

finally release Andrei Babitsky this past Friday and return him to

his wife and family and colleagues in Moscow.

Mr. Chairman, he is still not free, however. He is under a ruling

of the Ministry of Interior to stay in Moscow as the charges against

him are worked out through the Russian judicial system.

So this odyssey, this illogical, horrible, tragic odyssey in violation

of all that we stand for as global citizens, as well as American citizens,

is still going on.

The title of the film that you showed excerpts of, ‘‘The Dark Side

of the World,’’ is an understatement in terms of what is taking

place.

The Czech journalists who made this film showed it to us in

Prague just a couple of weeks ago, to all of our journalists who assemble

every morning at 11:00 o’clock for what is called the editorial

board meeting.

And all of us were just horrified. The fact that Andrei Babitsky

participated with those who made that film made it even more telling

and more stinging for all of us.

Just a little housekeeping—I have a much longer statement. If

you would, sir, I would appreciate it if it would be included in the

record.

Thank you.

Across the post-Communist world, media freedom is

under attack from governments who do not want a free press, the

very press that monitors what governments do and inform their

citizens about what governments do. And because media freedom

is the basis of all other freedoms, all freedoms that we cherish are

now at risk as well.

As you know, over the past six weeks, we have had a dramatic

demonstration of this in the Russian detention and mistreatment

of our correspondent, Andrei Babitsky.

As you know from the most recent news report, we are elated

that he is still alive; and as I have just indicated, he is still, however,

is not totally free. So the struggle continues.

Today, I would like to mention three things: First, to tell you

about the case and the lessons we have learned from it; to outline

some of the broader challenges we face across this region that we

broadcast to; and to tell you something about what we at Radio

Free Europe/Radio Liberty are doing to meet those challenges.

First, about Andrei Babitsky. He is an accomplished veteran correspondent.

Most of his coverage has been about violent conflict

and war.

He is only 36 years old. During the first Chechen war

from 1994 to 1996, and, again, since November 1999, Andrei was

on—on the scene providing accurate and even-handed reporting

about this endless, terrible conflict. He was criticized by both sides,

but only one, the Russians—the Russian side took action against

him.

The Russian Media Center in the North Caucasus on December

27th lambasted Andrei for his reporting about the large number of

Russian casualties and of the even larger number of civilian deaths

Russian forces had caused.

That Russian act of intimidation did not work, nor did the shortterm

arrest of other journalists or the harassment of Andrei himself.

He continued to report honestly and accurately, often at the

risk of putting himself in danger.

In early January, Mr. Chairman, his wife was then harassed. He

had come home to Moscow for the holiday break and had brought

film footage with him that he had taken in Chechyna, gone to the

local photo store in the neighborhood he lives in, and then he went

back to Chechnya to continue reporting.

His wife, Lyudmilla, went to pick up the film. When she was inside

the shop, the entrepreneur picked up the phone and called

whomever, probably Ministry of Interior people, and two authorities

of the Russian government came into the store, took the film,

intimidated Mrs. Babitsky, and that film has never been seen

again. Their apartment was then violated as well.

On the 16th of January, Andrei was detained in Chechnya and

put into a Russian filtration camp. And we have just heard the horrors

of several of those which are in Chechnya and the particular

institution Andrei was put into.

And in my prepared testimony that is now part of the record is

a chronology of all of what happened to Andrei Babitsky, and—and

it is quite graphic.

What have we learned from this case? First of all, media freedom

is far from guaranteed in Russia. In fact, what we are witnessing

is regression. And in a previous position, I have been before this

Committee heralding democracy in Russia. But that that was then,

Mr. Chairman. I am afraid to tell you now—I admit what I said

then, but I am telling you forthrightly now what I know from our

own journalists, that Russia is a country that knows not what its

future is and impulsively wants to return to its past.

There is intolerance. There is intolerance of an outspoken

and critical press. And no society that is worth itself can

do without such an outspoken and critical media.

Second, Russia officials under Putin far too easily slip back into

Soviet era patterns. We have—we have witnessed on the film, on

what Human Rights Watch has reported time after time, what our

correspondents—and we have had three in the Chechen war zone,

including Andrei Babitsky—all of them report totalitarian tactics,

harassment, threats, violation of the human being, the human

body, the human spirit.

We have seen the re-centralizing of authority in Moscow, and

that is not good for all of us.

Today, Andrei Babitsky held a press conference at Radio Liberty

in Moscow. This is the first time he has gone public since he returned

from a long stay in Chechnya and a shorter stay in Dagestan.

He opened by thanking his colleagues, the Russian press, so

many of whom have been so valiant, so outspoken and so courageous

and so much on the side of press freedom. He described in

detail his odyssey. I do not have all his words yet. He began his

press conference just as I got out of the taxicab to come inside this

building.

If we can get a copy of everything, of what he said and get it

translated into English, we will certainly share it with you and

your colleagues.

But he made a persuasive presentation that he was in the hands

throughout this torturous five and a half weeks of Russia’s security

services, which includes the FSB (or the former KGB), and the

Ministry of Interior, known as the MVD. And he was in the hands

of pro-Moscow Chechens.

He described his captivity in many ways. And he said, to make

his point at the end of his statement, that on February 23rd when

he was taken across borders, he knew he was in the hands of the

Russian government authorities, because at a time of great tension

and great security along the borders, he was driven right through.

So he was in the hands of people who knew what they were doing.

Third, about the Russian government, the Putin regime

has sent a signal that it is prepared to play fast and loose

with the truth. In the Babitsky case, we have only experienced duplicity,

tactics that have tried to be confusing to all of us, and to

keep us off the scent of where Andrei Babitsky was.

And—and the good news is, of course, we finally caught up with

him, and he has returned to Moscow.

Many in both Russia and the West are trying to portray this as

an exceptional case, as a bump on the way to a better future. We

believe, however, that we know something more factual about that.

The situation in Russia and Chechnya is distressing. Harassment

of journalists, playing favorites with newspapers, pressure on the

only independent television network, NTV, tightening control over

regional media, all of this with little or no regard to legal niceties.

But in other countries it is even worse. For instance, Belarus is

a disaster. Belarus is now in the hands of a dictator that wants to

be the president of a reunified Russia/Ukraine/Belarus. Ukraine

has been pressuring journalists, particularly during the presidential

election held in December.

The Caucasus show few bright spots. But the worst situation of

all is in Central Asia. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan impose censorship

daily in the Soviet style. They arrest and harass journalists.

The case of Nurberdy Nurmamedov this past week is an example.

He was assigned to jail for five years. Why? He talked to Radio

Liberty’s Turkmenistan correspondents in Prague over the telephone.

He was critical about the government in Ashkhabad,

Turkmenistan. So he and his son have now been thrown into the

clinker, and God only knows what is going to happen to them.

Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are slipping backwards. And

Kyrgyzstan, which was so—for—for many of us, our hope-- and I

think I am on record as testifying somewhere on Capitol Hill that

it was the oasis of democracy in the Central Asian desert. And now

we see Kyrgyzstan going retrograde as well.

One of the lessons about this general picture of the region to

which we broadcast to, Mr. Chairman, is privatization did not by

itself guarantee media freedoms.

The privately owned press is the object of government intimidation.

One of the owners of NTV, the independent—the only independent

television network station in Russia—is here this week.

Mr. Guzinsky intimidated by one of his stockholding partners,

Gasprom. Two weeks ago, the chairman of Gasprom said publicly

that what NTV was showing about the—the horrors of Chechnya,

the dark side of the world, was not in the interest of Russia.

Second, post-communist governments in this part of the world

control the electronic media on which most depend, far more than

the print media, on which these countries are typically evaluated

by Western observers.

If you control the television, if you control radio, you do not have

to worry about the newspapers in this part of the world. And,

third, all of these countries are going to need a lot of help from the

outside for a long time to come if they are going to reform their

basic institutions and become modern, open societies.

And I would include in my use of the word ‘‘help,’’ the pleas that

I have heard from all of you today, that is, ‘‘pressure.’’

That brings me to my final point, the continuing mission of Radio

Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Today, we broadcast to 24 countries in

26 languages. These countries are in Central and Eastern Europe,

the former Soviet Union, and Iran and Iraq. All of these areas, in

one form or another, are in political and economic trouble.

We broadcast daily. That amounts to 900 hours a week of language

programming in the vernacular—we do not broadcast in

English—to all of these countries.

Also, Mr. Chairman, we have more than 10 million visitors to our

websites every month. And publications such as our daily

‘‘Newsline,’’ which goes to every office on Capitol Hill, and I know

is used up here—is something that is worthy and keeps all of us

informed.

Overall, the events that we have been through over the last five

and half weeks with finding and hopefully freeing finally Andrei

Babitsky, demonstrate the relevance of our mission, the promotion

of democracy.

The telling of truth as we know it, so that people can make their

own decisions in their own way in their own societies. Like so

many of you, who are on the front lines of the battle for freedom,

we know we have to continue the fight, but we are not going to fall

into pessimism.

What is our reason for hope? The response of so many Russians,

the response, especially, of Russian journalists. And I believe you

have behind this, the horrible picture of Grozny, the blowup of a

publication that came out two weeks ago, ‘‘Obshchaya Gazeta.’’

This is a document of four pages that was distributed on the

streets of Moscow, 180,000 copies were distributed. Down the left

column, you see the sponsors, 32 of them, from the Russian press.

RFE/RL is one of those sponsors.

This was Russia’s journalists showing their solidarity with

Andrei Babitsky and their fear of the regression taking place in

Russian society about their press freedoms.

On this score, Mr. Chairman, I promise you and others of this

Committee that we at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, myself

personally, will do everything possible to see Andrei Babitsky

finally, finally freed, to make sure that this horror hopefully never

occurs again, and when it does, whether it is in Turkmenistan,

Uzbekistan, Belarus, or some other place, we are going to do everything

we can to get our person out and to uphold the value of freedom

of the press.

Thank you very much.

I wish I could produce him right now, but he went

from the press conference to the hospital, so he can have a thorough

medical examination—

—which I personally have ordered that—

I will do what I can to get him here as soon as possible.

From the beginning we tried to keep the U.S. embassy

in Moscow informed, as well as the embassy in Prague. Almost everyday

I was on the phone to our ambassador in Prague, John

Shattuck, who is very helpful keen on human rights issues. We

welcomed those times that the administration met Russian officials

and spoke out about the regression taking place in that society and

by the Putin administration.

There were times when I urged more, and I am not bashful, as

you know, and I have said that several ways and in several

phrases. But overall, the good news is, the man was found and is

nearly free. I do report to you, sir, that your letter of the 31st of

January, the two Senate resolutions that passed on the 24th of

February, had an impact in Moscow.

I am the only one on our Prague staff who has had experience

on Capitol Hill; and I tried to tell them that this is a co-equal

branch of government, and take every word seriously.

So those were shots in the arm, if you would like. I’ve

switched my medical words, because I had said earlier it was a

shot to the bow of Russia’s policymakers, but in our bureau in Moscow,

in our Prague headquarters, this was seen as real encouragement—

—and it counts. It counts.

Mr. Chairman, can I just add one more thing to that?

There is an assumption in this city that during the

first Chechen war and during this one, that somehow or another

Yeltsin, and now Putin, was what Lincoln was during our

particular civil conflict. This has nothing to do with South Carolina or

nothing to do with our Civil War. This is an uncivil war.

I just want to reinforce what these two have said today. We are

dealing with the most venal of behavior that we have seen in a

long, long time, and it has to be addressed in those terms, and

those terms only.

During the Babitsky saga, Elena Bonner, the famous

human rights activist and outspoken human rights leader, spoke

out, and she also nominated Babitsky for awards for his war correspondence journalism.

Certainly, the democrat, Mr. Yavlinsky has also spoken out, but

I think fewer and fewer people are listening to him, and that is

part of the problem. So yes, the mainstream is definitely in line,

highly approving Putin policies in Chechnya.

I have asked the same question, Senator, and everybody

tells me that he is just for show.

I think this is an endless war, as history shows. The

Russian–Chechen conflict has been going on for 400 years or so. It

took on great intensity with Peter the Great in the early part of

the 18th century. There was a general in 1818, Senator, who wrote

a letter to the czar and said he would not be at peace until every

Chechen was killed. That policy has basically continued up to the present.

I will try to address what you have just said. I like

the way you addressed the question, so it allows us to talk about

the future.

First of all, I do not think the United States policy should be

fitted for just one set of issues. They are complicated issues, such

as the future of the ABM Treaty.

I think we have to have a comprehensive policy toward Russia.

A comprehensive policy is not just political-military issues, but the

very issues we have been discussing here today. As Senator

Wellstone just said, we need to start with human rights.

These are issues that are critical to us. If we do not address basic

values, then who are we? That is what has been so important for

all of us at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

The issue is not just Babitsky the human being, and a colleague,

and a father, and a husband, but it is freedom of the press, and

the freedoms that go with the freedom of the press, and it’s the future

of a relationship of a nation that wants to, as I said earlier

Senator Biden, not to deal with the future, that wants to go back

to the past. I urge you to think of these things comprehensively.

One other thought. Tolstoy wrote a short story in 1842 about the

Chechen war at that time entitled ‘‘Haji Marat.’’ Today’s war and

cruelties are summarized there. There is an intensity in Moscow

for Chechens that is not seen towards Uzbeks, Tajiks, or Georgians.

There is something about the Russian-Chechen relationship

that is offbalance, that brings out the worst in human behavior.

There is an issue that we discussed internally at Radio

Free Europe/Radio Liberty about what does this mean for Russia’s

near abroad policy. Russia’s neighbors do have doubts about

Putin’s foreign policy thinking. It was graphically summarized by

one of our Central Asian service directors, when he said, ‘‘There is

a new man in power. We can saw it at the CIS gathering in early

January in Moscow that if Putin wears a striped tie today, then all

the other leaders of the near abroad countries will wear a striped tie.

There is caution and deep-seated fear about Russian power creating

a new sphere of influence over them.

So as I said, human rights is part of our policy approach, so are

missiles and arms sales, and how Russia behaves toward its neighbors.