

Religious Freedom, Anti-Semitism, and Rule of Law in Europe and Eurasia

Chairman Chris Smith (NJ-04) – Opening Statement Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe February 11, 2016

Good afternoon and welcome to everyone joining us today, especially Ambassador Michael Link, Director of the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. Today we'll discuss several human rights crises in Europe and Eurasia. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, many people expected that freedom, democracy, and peace, would spread throughout Europe and Eurasia. And yet now, the religious freedom of Christians, and people of other faiths, is being regularly violated. Russia invaded its neighbor Ukraine, illegally annexed Crimea, and is fueling and funding violent proxies in the eastern Donbas region of that country. Deadly anti-Semitism is again stalking European Jewish communities. The worst refugee and migrants' crisis in Europe since World War II has engulfed the continent. Autocrats are using the law, and acting outside the law, to crush democratic opposition to their despotism.

Violent anti-Semitic attacks increased 100 to 400 percent in some European countries between 2013 and 2014. Anti-Semitism, and the evil goal of killing Jewish people, is hardwired into ISIS and those it inspires. Perhaps no other group in Europe is more at risk from ISIS attacks than the European Jewish community. That is why I authored House Resolution 354 as a blueprint for vital actions that are needed to prevent another Paris, Brussels, or Copenhagen. The House of Representatives passed it unanimously and I intend to hold a hearing over the coming weeks to explore what is necessary to ensure these actions are taken.

In Crimea, the occupying authorities have targeted and retaliated against the Crimean Tatar people for opposing the annexation and the rule that has followed. Crimean Tatars have been arrested, detained, interrogated, and sometimes charged with extremism, illegal assembly, or belonging to an unregistered religious group. Religious minorities, including the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, have likewise been repressed. Crimeans who opposed or oppose the Russian takeover of Crimea, or have been unwilling to seek a Russian passport, has been at risk of a crackdown. Restrictions have proliferated, including even on the teaching of the Ukrainian language or access to Ukrainian culture.

Repression is also rife in Azerbaijan. The Commission recently held a hearing on the terrible plight of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, particularly the imprisonment of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Khadija Ismayilova. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Azerbaijan leads all of the countries in Eurasia in jailing journalists. In 2015, the government imprisoned many well-known activists, including Anar Mammadli, the courageous head of EMDS, the leading election monitoring organization in Azerbaijan. He spoke the truth about the fraudulent 2013 presidential election and is still paying the price. I met with Anar's father— a very gentle man – just a few months after Anar was arrested and saw how Anar's family is suffering from this injustice.

More than 40 years ago, all the countries of Europe, the United States, and Canada, formed the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, to prevent and respond to these kinds of crises. Today we will hear about how the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the successor to the Conference, is responding to these challenges. Our witness is Ambassador Michael

Georg Link, Director of the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – ODIHR for short.

Director Link has held this position since July of 2014 and has been an excellent, effective director. Previously, he was Minister of State for Europe in the German government, focusing on the OSCE, EU, Council of Europe and NATO. From 2005 to 2013, Director Link was a Member of Parliament in the German parliament, and for most of that time, he was an active member of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, a key part of the OSCE. He is a former chairman of the supervisory board of the Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF), the board of the German Foundation for Peace Research and a past council member of the Foundation for German-Polish Cooperation. Director Link continues to be active in international NGOs, including the German Council on Foreign Relations, the German Association for Eastern European Studies, the Southeast Europe Association, and the German Atlantic Association.

Director Link, thank you for being here today. We look forward to your testimony.