



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

Hearing on “Reform in Armenia: Assessing Progress and Opportunities for U.S. Policy”

Tuesday, October 22, 2019

2:00 p.m.

Room 210, Cannon House Office Building

Opening Statement of Helsinki Commission Ranking Member Sen. Ben Cardin

Good afternoon. We are here today to discuss an exciting and important development in the former Soviet Union and the OSCE region as a whole: a political revolution that has opened the door to long-overdue reforms in the Republic of Armenia.

Last year, tens of thousands of Armenians went to the streets to put a stop to the creeping autocracy that was tightening its grip on the country. In Armenia, the same ruling party had prevailed in elections for more than two decades, bolstered by a vast network of political and economic corruption. As of April 2018, Armenia’s president had ruled for ten years and was poised to evade his presidential term limit by assuming greater powers as prime minister under constitutional amendments he had championed.

I stand in admiration of the Armenian people who declared in April of last year that ‘enough is enough.’ The change these citizens brought about through non-violence was almost impossible to imagine before they began their collective action. Over the course of just a few days in April 2018, peaceful protests and civil disobedience replaced the ruling party with an opposition-led government. By the end of the year, this newly-installed government held free and fair elections and was



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rewarded with a super-majority in the parliament and a resounding mandate to carry out its promises of sweeping political and economic reform.

The central demands of the revolution were to fight corruption, uphold democracy, and build economic opportunity. Each of these goals is noble but none of them are easy. I look forward to learning from our witnesses today where these reform plans currently stand and how the United States can assist in realizing the democratic aspirations of the Armenian people.

In addition to tackling corruption, strengthening the rule of law, building confidence in democratic institutions, advancing transitional justice, and growing the economy, I would urge the new Armenian government, in partnership with the United States, to regard the adoption of renewable energy technologies as a matter of strategic importance. As of today, Armenia's reliance on Russian and Iranian sources of energy leave it vulnerable to malign external influence that is hostile to democratic development in the country.

Last year, as Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I commissioned a minority staff report detailing the Kremlin's decades' long assault on democracy in Russia and Europe. The report describes how Russia responded to "color revolutions" in the former Soviet Union in the early 2000s by channeling efforts and resources toward organizations dedicated to promoting the Kremlin's agenda or agitating against democratic gains. On this point, the report's findings are sobering: "[m]ost of the Russian government's funding is focused on post-Soviet 'swing states' like Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia." The Kremlin is dedicated to obstructing democratic movements at every turn or scuttling them



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altogether. I hope our witnesses today will address the role of Russian influence and disinformation in Armenia and provide recommendations for how to address it.

Given the Turkish Government's ongoing military operation in northeastern Syria that threatens the peaceful coexistence of ethnic and religious minorities in that region, I want to reaffirm my longstanding support for official U.S. recognition of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire in 1915. I worry that our refusal as a nation to explicitly recognize this historical fact impedes our ability to learn history's lessons—lessons that are of relevance to the events we are witnessing today. I reiterate my call for the Trump Administration to urgently reverse its policy of disengagement from northeastern Syria, which puts counterterrorism objectives, regional stability, and civilian populations at risk.

In closing, I want to thank Chairman Alcee Hastings for keeping the Helsinki Commission focused on these developments in Armenia that bear important consequences for the future of fundamental freedoms and human rights in the OSCE region. I also want to extend my appreciation to my fellow commissioner Congressman Marc Veasey for chairing today's hearing—it is a pleasure to serve on the Helsinki Commission together where we can collaborate to uphold our shared values at home and abroad.