



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

Hearing on “LIFE UNDER OCCUPATION: The State of Human Rights in Crimea”

Tuesday, January 28, 2020

10:00 a.m.

Room 210, Cannon House Office Building

Opening Statement of Helsinki Commission Ranking Member Sen. Ben Cardin

When we look at the ongoing crisis in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, it is easy to wonder how much the United States can really do in the face of Russia’s reckless aggression. I can assure you, however, the United States response to the invasion and ensuing occupation of Crimea has been clear and unified in its support for Ukraine’s sovereignty. The U.S. is holding accountable those who carried out and perpetuate this egregious and illegal occupation.

First, the legislative and executive branches have issued strong and consistent condemnations of Russia’s actions.

My bill, the Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017, which was included in the CAATSA law, states the United States policy “to never recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Government of the Russian Federation.” In similar fashion, in July 2018, Secretary Pompeo issued the Crimea Declaration, stating that just as the United States refused to recognize the Soviet Union’s annexation of the Baltic States, so too would we refuse to recognize Crimea as a part of Russia.

But our stance consists of more than just words. CAATSA authorized hard-hitting sanctions on human rights abusers in Russia-occupied territories and on entities operating in occupied Crimea. It also prohibited U.S. investment, trade, and business there.

These sanctions authorities are broader and far more complex than I can adequately describe here, and they frequently overlap with sanctions relating to Russia's aggression in Eastern Ukraine. But the important point is that as early as March 2014, the United States has stood against this illegal occupation of Crimea in word and deed. Because Crimea is separate from the Minsk Agreements, even their implementation will have no effect on our Crimea-related sanctions. Those sanctions will remain in place until Crimea is returned to Ukraine.

It is unfortunate that these sanctions are necessary. But as we will hear today, the problem is not confined to the act of the illegal annexation itself, which took no more than a few days. It also includes the ongoing campaign of oppression against Crimea's inhabitants, which is marked by gross violations of human rights. Freedom of movement, religion, speech, assembly, and more are at stake.

The occupation has torn families apart by forcibly creating bureaucratic obstacles and borders where none had previously existed. It has also contributed to the crisis of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Ukraine. At least 1.5 million IDPs have been displaced by the Russian occupation and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. This only considers those who are officially registered as IDPs, so the actual number of displaced people in the country is likely even higher.

We are here today as a reminder that Crimea must not be forgotten, and that Russia's human rights abuses are no longer confined within Russia's borders. We

cannot allow Russia's behavior to go unnoticed or unpunished. We may not know what the future holds for Crimea, but we owe it to future generations to hold Russia accountable and to learn as much as we can from experts like the witnesses we have here today. I look forward to hearing their testimonies.