

Statement by the Honorable Christopher H. Smith
Ranking House Member, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Hearing on “Ukraine: Beyond Stalemate?”
March 16, 2010

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this timely hearing, as Ukraine enters a new phase in its historic transition from totalitarianism to democracy; from being a colony semi-isolated from the world to being an independent, vibrant state. I’ve been on the Helsinki Commission now for more than 25 years, and this Commission, as you know, has been throughout its existence at the forefront of supporting human rights and democracy in Ukraine – even in the dark days prior to the restoration of that country’s independence. Importantly, our support for Ukraine, as well as for the aspirations of all the OSCE countries that once suffered from Soviet rule, has always transcended party lines.

Even though nearly two decades have passed since independence, Ukraine still carries the burden of an almost unfathomable 20th century history, which brought numerous calamities, including two world wars, repressive Soviet domination, Stalin’s genocidal famine, Nazi invasion, and, more recently, Chornobyl. While this legacy recedes with time, it still weighs on the country.

Against the backdrop of this difficult legacy, it is in Ukraine’s interest to become a full-fledged democracy, where human rights and the rule of law are fully respected. Indeed, when you take this legacy into account, Ukraine has made an amazing transformation. It has overcome challenges to its democracy that could have resulted in return to authoritarian rule. And, thus far, it has succeeded in standing firm in the face of outside threats to its sovereignty and independence.

This, of course, does not mean that Ukraine does not continue to face a difficult road in realizing its full potential. Widespread corruption, weak rule of law, an often dysfunctional political system, an energy sector in serious need of reform, and a Russian leadership that all-too-often still views Ukraine as part of its sphere of influence, are all challenges Ukraine’s leadership needs to confront. Ukraine also needs to continue its work to eliminate the scourge of human trafficking. Difficult as they may be, these challenges are not insurmountable, but will require political will.

What might Ukraine's foreign policy look like, given that the new president derived his victory from the more Russia-oriented Eastern and Southern Ukrainian electorate? Will Ukraine be able to improve relations with Russia while maintaining its independence in both foreign and domestic policy, a critical component of which is the energy issue? What can we do to strengthen our partnership with Ukraine? What concrete steps with respect to internal political and economic reforms will Ukraine take to further its declared European direction?