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“Ukraine’s Leadership of the OSCE”

*Excerpts of Remarks, Rep. Chris Smith, Co-Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
562 Dirksen SOB
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I’d like to join my colleagues in welcoming Foreign Minister Kozhara, the Chair-in-Office of the OSCE for 2013, and, of course, in welcoming everyone who is joining us this afternoon.

Ukraine has come a long way since I first joined the Helsinki Commission three decades ago – at that time it was a country suffering under Soviet oppression, and its independence seemed like a distant dream.

Even in those days, Ukraine distinguished itself by the number of courageous men and women who fought for human rights and freedom. When Helsinki Monitoring Groups were formed in the Soviet Union, to call on the dictatorship to live up to its Helsinki human rights commitments, the Ukrainian Monitoring Group was the largest and the most harshly repressed of them all – and in the early 1990s played a leading role in establishing democracy in independent Ukraine. In many ways, Ukrainians were at the forefront of the struggle to replace the old Soviet Union with governments that respected human rights – a great honor to Ukraine.

So it is a special pleasure to have you here today, Mr. Foreign Minister, and it is a fitting and long-awaited distinction for Ukraine to lead the OSCE year. You and your country will face many challenges and opportunities this year in your role as Chair-in-Office, and I look forward to hearing you present on your on-going work and plans.

Of course it is good news that your priorities as Chairman-in-Office include an emphasis on human dimension issues, such as human trafficking, media freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination and democratic elections.

As author of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and its 2003 and 2005 reauthorizations, I especially applaud the energy which you've shown in taking on the fight against human trafficking. All of us in the fight against trafficking appreciate the special trafficking conference that Ukraine is convening in Kyiv this June in order to look closely at overlooked aspects of human trafficking, and most importantly, to strengthen the coherence of the OSCE response—including international law enforcement response—to trafficking in persons.

I also want to commend Ukraine for the work it has done already to focus attention on the hundreds of thousands of trafficking victims who are moved across borders each year and who could be rescued in transit if airline and other transportation personnel were appropriately trained and law enforcement ready to intervene. Last month, Ambassador Motsyk took the lead in sharing the Airline Ambassadors airline initiative with other Ambassadors and Diplomats from OSCE countries as well as with representatives of airlines in the United States. This training will create the situational awareness in the transportation industry that will make it much harder to traffic women. At the event at the Ukrainian embassy, here in Washington, Ambassador Motsyk introduced Nancy Rivard, founder and president of Airline Ambassadors, who demonstrated the transportation personnel training that has already been used to rescue more than 100 victims. And of course the Ukrainian government has taken the lead in organizing another major anti-trafficking event, to be held later this summer in Kyiv. Mr. Foreign Minister, your government's efforts will ensure that thousands of women and girls will be rescued from the horrors of trafficking, and will impede the traffickers so that many other women and children will never undergo it. Your commitment to introducing this program in the 57 OSCE participating states will ensure that we can rescue thousands more – I'm sure that I speak for everyone active in fighting human trafficking in thanking you for that.

Mr. Foreign Minister, I must also mention one of the problems remaining in Ukraine – probably the chief symbol of problems touching on human rights, rule-of-law, and democracy, that is, the continued imprisonment of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

This is a serious injustice – and it can be corrected by Prime Minister Yanukovich. It was exactly twelve months ago that I chaired a hearing of this Commission on Ukraine, at which one of the key witnesses was Ms. Tymoshenko's daughter, Yevgeniya, testifying via Skype. I welcome the recent release of opposition leader Yuri Lutsenko as a positive step, and appreciate the other positive gestures of the current government - at the same time I strongly urge the Ukrainian government to enhance its Chairmanship of the OSCE by releasing Ms. Tymoshenko.