



**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 Chairman Rep. Alcee Hastings

Good morning and welcome to this U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing “Life Under Occupation: The State of Human Rights in Crimea.” We will now come to order.

It is hard to believe that almost six years have passed since Russia’s invasion and subsequent occupation of Crimea. Just as it did in Georgia in 2008, Russia defied international law and, in a sudden, brazen display of revanchism, rewrote the borders of a sovereign nation.

Of course, we know now Crimea was just the opening salvo in President Putin’s campaign to stop what he saw as the inexorable movement of a fledgling democracy towards greater integration with the West, its values, and its institutions. To him, the Ukrainian people’s desire for closer ties to the EU, for stronger democratic institutions, and for an end to endemic corruption was impermissible. So, he did the unthinkable and, through blatant subterfuge and an utter disregard for international law, he took by force a part of Ukraine’s sovereign territory, changing forever the lives of the people who lived there. He then went on to instigate a bloody conflict in eastern Ukraine that remains active to this day, at the cost of 13,000 dead

and many thousands more injured or displaced. Putin did all of this in order to stymie Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Today we are here to talk about the lives of the people who live under the heavy hand of Russia-occupied Crimea. Some have been forced to flee their homes; some to give up their fundamental freedoms of expression and worship and even their ethnic and cultural identity in order to survive. Through a variety of hardline methods, including forced citizenship, sham referendums, legal intimidation, disinformation, and prohibitions on access to and use of Ukrainian language, Russian authorities have sought to stifle dissent and project to the world the false image of a prosperous and free Crimea. By limiting access to international and Ukrainian human rights organizations, the Kremlin has effectively created a veil between Crimea and the rest of the world

This morning, we have three respected witnesses with us who will pull back that veil and show us the harsh reality of Russia's oppressive occupation – one which includes arbitrary arrests, harassment, imprisonment, censorship and other brutal tactics aimed at forcing a proud people into submission, whether they be civil society activists, community or religious leaders, artists, journalists, or simply those whose religion and ethnicity are viewed with distrust and fear.

The goal of today's hearing is to shine a light on the human rights situation in Crimea and to send a clear message to the people there that the U.S. Congress, the Helsinki Commission, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have not forgotten about your plight.

First to speak is a man who has come to symbolize through his courage and moral strength all those Crimeans who refused to bend to the Kremlin's will. Oleg Sentsov is a Ukrainian filmmaker and director who was detained by Russian

authorities in May of 2014 on trumped-up charges of terrorism and sentenced to 20 years in a Russian prison. But he refused to be silenced. In 2018, he began a hunger strike that lasted 145 days to call for the release of all Ukrainian political prisoners held in Russia, capturing the world's attention to his and his countrymen's plight. This nation and this Congress never forgot about you, Mr. Sentsov, and it moves me greatly to have you here with us, once again a free man. We look forward to hearing your thoughts on the situation in Crimea.

Next we have Tamila Tasheva, who is the Deputy Permanent Representative of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Before being named to her current position, Ms. Tasheva worked as a co-founder and head of "CrimeaSOS," a human rights group focused on the plight of internally displaced persons as well as the overall human rights situation in Crimea. She was also a volunteer during the Euromaidan [Your-oh-My-DON]. Prior to 2014, Ms. Tasheva was a civil society activist and organizer of events and initiatives highlighting the religious and ethnic culture of Crimea. Welcome, Ms. Tasheva, to today's hearing. We appreciate your participation.

Lastly, we have Melinda Haring, who is Deputy Director of the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center. Previously, Ms. Haring was the editor of the Council's "Ukraine Alert" blog. She is a longtime observer of the region, whose works have been published by NPR, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Washington Post and other prominent outlets. Over the course of her career, Ms. Haring has worked for Eurasia Foundation, Freedom House, and the National Democratic Institute. In addition to her duties with the Atlantic Council, she is also a vice chair of the board of East Europe Foundation in Kyiv and a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Welcome, Ms. Haring; and thank you for testifying today.

With that, I turn it over to our first speaker, Mr Sentsov.