



OPENING STATEMENT

Representative Christopher H. Smith Chairman

Hearing on “Serbia’s Leadership of the OSCE”

*February 25, 2014
(as prepared for delivery)*

Good afternoon. I wish to warmly welcome His Excellency First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić [Eee-VIT-Suh DAH-Cheh-Ch]. I thank you for your willingness to share your plans for Serbia’s leadership of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2015. Your chairmanship comes at a pivotal moment in European and Eurasian security. We face today challenges as great as those 40 years ago at the signing of the Helsinki Final Act. There have been tremendous successes, but the fundamental trust we have built has eroded to the point that armed conflict rages in the OSCE region. Successes in the struggle to stabilize conflict in and around Ukraine will help us discover if the OSCE will be able to carry on its history of protecting human rights while providing core resources for conflict resolution.

I am sure that you are aware our Commission follows closely the work of the OSCE’s Human Dimension. I applaud your efforts to improve the logistics of events in this dimension and regret that your efforts to move the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) to a more logical time early in the year were unsuccessful. I hope that participating States remember the unwillingness of Russia and others to work constructively. Their ongoing efforts to diminish our activities in this dimension will hurt the capacity of the OSCE. As we witness backsliding on the implementation of human rights commitments ranging from religious freedom to media freedom, how can we afford to shorten the HDIM or reduce funding for the Office Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)? I call on your chairmanship to reinforce activities across the board in any discussions that may occur on reforming the Human Dimension.

Mr. Minister, religious freedom remains a priority of the Helsinki Commission and unfortunately a challenge throughout the OSCE region. Christians and Muslims face increasing discrimination and intolerance; religious minorities face greater threat of violence. The OSCE Ministerial Council in Basel even acknowledged that anti-Semitism is on the rise, ten years after the pivotal Berlin Conference on Combating Anti-Semitism I called for convening through my work in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. I co-chaired the U.S. delegation to the first conference and attended the commemorative event last year. In ten years, many participating States are failing to implement our Helsinki commitments on religious freedom and failing to grasp the gravity of the situation. Our faith is the foundation from which human security begins. People throughout the OSCE region should be able to freely pursue their faith without fear of violence. I hope that you, Mr. Minister, share the priority of religious freedom through your leadership this year.

As you may know Mr. Minister, I drafted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act that has mandated the State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report for the last 15 years. While there has been progress, I am disappointed that Serbia remains after years a Tier 2 country, lacking much needed investments in victim shelters and sufficient protections against intimidation during criminal proceedings. Mr. Minister, I hope that you will work with your government to prioritize our common commitments to protect vulnerable women and children who deserve better. In my capacity as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Special Representative on Human Trafficking Issues, I intend to **[INSERT Initiatives]**. I welcome the outcome of 2015 Unified Budget negotiations which begin the rectify shortfalls that had emerged in staffing for the counter trafficking efforts of the ODIHR and the Special Representative and Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. I applaud the work of Ambassador Madina Jarbussynova; she is off to a strong start for her tenure as Special Representative. The upcoming 15th Alliance against Trafficking in Persons Conference focusing on the vulnerability of migrants will be an opportunity carry on the OSCE's leadership in addressing human trafficking trends. I look forward to the support of the Serbian Chairmanship to ensure institutional commitment from the OSCE that matches the magnitude of the challenge we face with modern slavery.

Mr. Minister, we will be unable to effectively address any of these human rights priorities that I have raised without improving stability in the OSCE region. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has the potential to undermine our efforts beyond the borders of these two countries. Parties seeking to destabilize human security in the protracted conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are emboldened when world governments do not take a strong stance against violations of sovereignty. Russia's aggression in Ukraine constitutes the gravest threat to the OSCE in decades and it is incumbent upon the OSCE to respond to this threat in a resolute and firm manner. Russia and its proxies in Ukraine almost immediately breached the new February 12 Minsk agreement, capturing the strategic rail town of Debaltseve (**De-ball-sa-veh**) and refused to allow access by OSCE Special Monitoring Mission observers. Although fighting has decreased elsewhere along the front lines, the Russians continue to attack just outside of the strategically important seaport city of Mariupol. I look forward to hearing from you on what steps the OSCE can take to help implement the Minsk agreements and get Russia from continuing to violate Ukraine's sovereignty.

Widespread corruption is the foundation of many challenges we continue to face in the OSCE region. At the end of January, I led several colleagues in introducing the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (H.R. 624). This bill prohibits human rights offenders and corrupt officials operating anywhere in the world from entering into the United States and blocks their U.S. assets, essentially globalizing the Sergei Magnistky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012. Mr. Minister, I hope that you will join us in similar initiatives to counter the corruption which destabilizes our human rights efforts.

Mr. Minister, thank you for your time today. I look forward to your testimony and the success of your chairmanship.