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U.S. Helsinki Commission Briefing: Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

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Chairman Wicker and Co-Chairman Smith, I want to thank the Helsinki Commission and its members for the opportunity to participate in this timely briefing on the state of democracy, human rights, and overall progress in Central and Eastern Europe.

Make no mistake, what we are witnessing in Central and Eastern Europe, the rise of illiberal democracies, weakened rule of law, attacks on press freedom and media independence, increased corruption, and the rise of ethno-nationalism, is a threat to the successful democratic transition of Europe and Euro-Atlantic integration that has been underway for over two decades.

The external challenge exacerbating this alarming situation is Russia's hybrid war on targets in this region, including a relentless campaign of disinformation, economic corruption, and election meddling. These campaigns exacerbate instability and undermine democracy.

The challenges to democracy in this region were highlighted in Freedom House's Freedom of the World 2017 Index. The report points out, "While in past years the declines in freedom were generally concentrated among autocracies and dictatorships that simply went from bad to worse, in 2016 it was established democracies—countries rated Free in the report's ranking system—that dominated the list of countries suffering setbacks. In fact, Free countries accounted for a larger share of the countries with declines than at any time in the past decade, and nearly one-quarter of the countries registering declines in 2016 were in Europe."

The Transatlantic community, led by the United States and the EU, must prioritize democracy, human rights, and economic development in Eastern and Central Europe to push back against these challenges. This does not mean the United States and Europe should downplay regional security challenges, including those posed by Russia, a threat that needs constant attention. It means that in conjunction with greater regional security we must increase our bilateral and joint diplomatic engagement and development assistance efforts in the region to support continued democratic and economic transition.

How should be the United States and our transatlantic allies respond these challenges? I will offer four core strategies to answer this question and guide policymaking in this space.

First, transatlantic partners must resist the idea of retrenchment. Now is a critical moment for the United States and our European partners to be vocal and clear about our support for democracy and human rights particularly in this region. Ignoring the spreading cancer

of illiberal democracies in Central and Eastern Europe is not an option. Over time it will impact U.S. and European interests if left unchecked.

The United States counts on allies in the region for security, including in the fight against terror, to promote democracy, human rights, and trade. The less democratic and more corrupt that Central and Eastern European nations become the less reliable they are as allies and more likely they are to be influenced by Russia or other actors.

Moreover, there is a disturbing, intra-European demonstration effect undermining democratic transformation. The United States and Western European leaders seek to see countries in the region such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia continue down a path of Euro-Atlantic integration. These countries look to EU neighbors like Poland for democratic inspiration and development support. Unfortunately, instead of modeling the democratic transformation of their neighbors, what we are seeing across the region is a disturbing trend of governments copying undemocratic action occurring in their neighborhood.

A second way in which the United States and Europe should respond to challenges in Europe is not to try and reinvent the wheel. Transatlantic partners know what needs to be done to address illiberal democracies and strengthen resiliency to address internal and external challenges. We can draw on 70 years of experience from the implementation of the Marshall Plan following the end of World War II to the creation of multilateral institutions including NATO, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

After the Soviet Union collapsed, and for the last two and a half decades, the EU and the United States have learned from their work to provide far-reaching assistance and support to Central and Eastern European nations. The U.S. Congress played a pivotal role by introducing and passing the bipartisan Support for Eastern European Democracy Act in 1989 and the Freedom Support Act in 1992. This support contributed to successful democratic and economic transition in the region and resulted in new NATO and EU allies, including Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

The support provided by the U.S. and EU for democratic transition, and a vibrant civil society and independent media, are still evident. Just last week there were protests in over 100 Polish cities in response to concerns about moves by the government to curb judicial independence. The German Marshall Fund through its Black Sea Trust, Balkans Trust for Democracy, Fund for Belarus Democracy, and recently-launched Alliance for Securing Democracy, has been on the front lines in ramping up U.S. efforts to support civil society, independent media, and sustainable democratic institutions and address Russia's malign efforts to undermine democracy in Europe.

A third strategy for transatlantic response to challenges in Europe is to keep U.S. leadership central. The U.S. must play a bigger role in addressing the backsliding in democracy and governance in Central and Eastern Europe as a full partner with the EU. In the 1990's and the first decade of the 2000's the United States led this effort, providing billions in bilateral and multilateral development assistance for democratic and market reforms, and Euro-Atlantic integration of several European countries including Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. Not only was this assistance essential as part of a U.S. effort to support a Europe "Whole, Free and at Peace," but it was U.S. diplomatic, technical

assistance, and leadership and implementation support, that helped nascent democracies in the region transition.

U.S. assistance and attention over the past decade has atrophied, demonstrated by the closure of USAID missions across Central and Eastern Europe. The U.S. prematurely withdrew USAID and its resources from the region and wrongly concluded that EU institutional support alone could further advance democracy and human rights in these countries. To be sure, challenges of Brexit, Grexit, migration, the Eurozone crisis, and Russia, among others, hinder the EU's focus and response to democratic backsliding from within.

Instead of deep cuts to U.S. assistance in this region and tepid diplomacy, which sends the wrong signal and opens the door for Russian meddling, it is critical that the Trump administration and Congress provide the right mix of bilateral assistance and diplomatic support. This must include increasing support for an independent media, civil society, combatting corruption, and student exchanges.

While the United States needs to balance interests in the region carefully, the White House must offer a clearer and more definitive response to illiberal challenges in Europe such as judicial backsliding in Poland and Hungary's closing space for NGOs. Furthermore, it is time for USAID and the administration to review options to place development professionals on the ground in Central and Eastern Europe and provide greater technical assistance and support to bolster democracy, rule of law, and to combat corruption.

A fourth strategy to respond to European challenges is for transatlantic partners to establish mechanisms to strengthen development cooperation. Over the past quarter century, this development cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe has not been as strong as it needs to be; it is in need of makeover. Unlike NATO, there is not a set mechanism for coordination, a North Atlantic Development Organization, for development assistance cooperation and coordination among allies. In Eastern Europe, the U.S. and EU assistance rank first and second in overall assistance. However, despite sharing many of the same objectives, coordination between the partners is weak. There is programmatic overlap that could lead to the waste of scarce resources or the U.S. and EU working at cross-purposes.

Just as we want to maximize collective transatlantic defense cooperation via NATO we also want to maximize the impact and effectiveness of transatlantic development assistance. USAID has ongoing dialogue with its EU counterparts to strengthen cooperation in Europe, Eurasia, and globally. It is time for that dialogue to transition into a comprehensive MOU to lay out a joint U.S.-EU development assistance strategy and institutionalize and sustain this coordination.

Mr. Chairman, we all recognize the historic democratic transformation that has taken place in Europe from end of World War II to the present. This region is far better off now than it was when President Bush signed the Freedom Support Act into law in October 1992. The United States has greatly benefitted from this transformation and from our partnership with our European allies, including our Central and Eastern European allies. Their support and partnership in advancing a world order based on democratic values,

human rights, and freedom has been nothing short of fundamental in importance to the advancement of our own political objectives and way of life.

For Eastern and Central European countries to continue to be reliable allies and partners we, along with our EU partners, need to recognize the geopolitical challenges washing across this region. The United States and the EU need to act immediately, coordinate development assistance, prioritize continued democratic development, assist civil society, and marshal the expertise, resources, and experiences of the past seventy years. Only then can we successfully address the growing internal and external challenges in Europe.