



# HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

## Testimony :: Jon Purnell

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Mr. Chairman, we recently commemorated the fifteenth anniversary of the explosion at the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl. The "fallout" from that blast was not only physical in nature. It was also political. And it was followed within five and a half years by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of new independent states from its embers. Ukraine was at the center of those events and it is reasonable that we take stock, 15 years after Chernobyl, ten years after independence, of where Ukraine is.

Ukraine, with the size and population of France, is a keystone of the region. How is it doing? I will do my best to provide an overview but I would refer you for a detailed view to the State Department Country Report on Human Rights. For now, I can say that the present situation is mixed, but that the potential is unlimited.

I will start with the headlines. For the last few months, they have not been positive, and some of the news has been downright ugly.

In September of last year, investigative journalist Heorhiy Gongadze, disappeared. In November, a body was found, beheaded, in an area known as Tarascha. The body was later identified with near certainty as Gongadze. This incident has spiraled into a full-blown political crisis. Recordings, allegedly made by one of President Kuchma's security officers, surfaced and implicated President Kuchma in the Gongadze affair. The recordings have triggered a debate across Ukraine about media freedom, the pace and transparency of the investigation, and allegations of involvement by Kuchma and other top officials. Other recordings that were released suggested that President Kuchma ordered his police and tax authorities to undertake a broad campaign of threats and intimidation to ensure his reelection in 1999.

Release of excerpts from the recordings led to demonstrations in Kiev calling for President Kuchma to resign. Twice in early March, police used force to demolish tent cities that demonstrators had built in downtown Kiev. Nevertheless, our Embassy in Kiev has reported that, in general, police have acted appropriately and with restraint in responding to most demonstrations.

Woven into the crisis has been the dismissal and subsequent arrest of reformist Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. All these factors have contributed to a fracturing of the working majority in the Rada and jockeying among political groups. This culminated in a no-

confidence vote April 26 that brought down the government of Prime Minister Yushchenko.

All of this is very disturbing, and the United States has urged Ukrainian authorities to deal effectively with these issues. From the first instance, we have counseled the need for a prompt, thorough and transparent investigation into Gongadze's disappearance and murder. Recently, the Government of Ukraine has accepted our offer of FBI assistance in the investigation, including DNA testing which should settle any doubts about the Tarascha body.

We have also stressed the importance of restoring a political consensus for reform, now very much in jeopardy. The political turmoil has threatened the momentum for serious economic reform unfortunately at a time when Ukraine had made its most significant progress since independence. Ukraine is making a difficult transition from central planning to a market-based economy. In 2000, for the first time since independence, the country experienced economic growth of 5 per cent. GDP may go up as much as 7 per cent this year. We have seen some good steps forward in fiscal policy, budget reform, and the sale of six regional energy distribution companies -- including two to an American investor. The private sector has continued to grow and in 2000 represented 60 percent of GDP.

Nevertheless, this recovery remains fragile, and the economic growth lacks the structural underpinnings for sustainability. Reform is therefore still badly needed in many areas, including privatization, energy and the state budget. The political crisis of which I have spoken prevents the kind of broad political consensus necessary to move forward on these issues. Widespread corruption also stands in the way of reform, and has a debilitating impact upon society as a whole.

As for the general state of democracy and human rights in Ukraine, we have pulled no punches in describing problem areas in the Human Rights Report. The Gongadze case has highlighted problems that were already clearly present in such areas as media freedom or independence of the judiciary. These facts, however, should not blind us to some equally valid general observations such as that Ukraine has made a commitment to democracy and respect for human rights. For example, despite what some analysts feared as great potential for ethnic tension, Ukraine has been sensitive to its minority populations. Ukraine has held presidential and parliamentary elections and has experienced a peaceful transfer of power. These elections apparently reflected the will of the electorate, although there were numerous flaws and irregularities. Ukraine generally protects religious freedom, although there are some problems at the local level, boasts a thriving NGO community, and has a diverse press. The problems concerning media freedom mar this last statement; they do not negate it.

Mr. Chairman, the situation in Ukraine unquestionably offers major challenges. It remains primarily the task of Ukrainians to meet those challenges. As Ukraine takes the necessary steps, we and our European allies are prepared to assist in a substantial way. The gaze of mainstream politicians in Ukraine and most of the population remains firmly westward. As long as Ukraine looks to us and to Europe for its future, as long as Ukraine seeks integration with Western institutions, then we believe that its people will ultimately be able to work out the problems they face.

To that end, we strongly support the work of the OSCE Project Coordinator for Ukraine on human rights legislation, technical assistance for the national council against trafficking in human beings, judicial training and administrative assistance to the courts, and other projects underway. We also support the recommendations issued in the OSCE Media Freedom Representative's March 2000 report on the media situation in Ukraine.

I began with Chernobyl and it is fitting to end there. The problems from that tragedy continue to haunt Ukraine which pays dearly every day in health care and valuable land lost to contamination. But progress is being made. Ukraine finally closed the nuclear plant where the blast occurred last December. That was good news for Ukraine and good news for its neighbors. It is a fitting symbol of the progress that can result from cooperation between Ukraine and the international community.

The U.S. remains committed to its partnership with Ukraine in the full range of our bilateral relationship. The ultimate success of this partnership is in large part dependent on effective implementation of reform, both political and economic over the coming months and years. We stand ready to do our part.