



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Christopher H. Smith

Co-Chairman - Helsinki Commission

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your leadership in scheduling this important hearing on Ukraine at the Crossroads. There has certainly been an important confluence of events and incidents in Ukraine which demand our attention.

Last week, Ukrainians marked the fifteenth anniversary of the Chornobyl nuclear explosion, the world's worst nuclear accident. And while the Chornobyl power plant was shut down last December, the consequences of this nuclear disaster still leave their mark on the Ukrainian nation, as well as on Ukraine's neighbors, especially Belarus. For the people of Ukraine, Chornobyl was only the last of a series of devastating events of the last century, having been preceded by two World Wars which inflicted exceedingly heavy casualties on Ukraine, and Stalin's man-made famine which claimed 7 million victims.

In 1991, Ukraine achieved her long-awaited independence, with its promise for a better future. Over the last decade, the people of Ukraine have struggled to lift the burden left by the last century, but the efforts of their leaders have been mixed. The average Ukrainian now enjoys more freedoms than ever. Contrary to some predictions, Ukraine didn't crumble along regional and ethnic cleavages. Ukraine is a good neighbor and a constructive partner with the West, and the official policies are aimed at integration into Europe.

At the same time, Ukraine's promise for a better future has not yet been met. We know this all too well from the tape scandal, alleging the involvement of top officials in malfeasance. We know this from the Ukrainian authorities' sometimes heavy-handed responses to the independent media and opposition.

More recently, this promise for a better future was thwarted by forces reluctant to engage in the kinds of reforms that will truly break the ties with a gloomy, communist past. It was these forces who voted – ironically, on the fifteenth anniversary of the Chornobyl disaster – to dismiss popular reform-minded Prime Minister Yushchenko. An even greater irony, of course, is that since he was appointed Prime Minister in December 1999, Ukraine's economy was showing its first post-Soviet growth. He pushed long overdue reforms in the agricultural and energy sectors and, in trying to bring the economy out of the shadows, threatened the powerful business oligarchs and the communists who have long been resistant to reforms.

Despite these setbacks, and despite the forces hostile to reform, it is clear that the United States

must not abandon Ukraine. Whether through political support or through concrete assistance to strengthen democracy, it is incumbent upon us to work with the Ukrainian people so that the promise for a better future for which so many sacrifices were made will – at long last – become a reality.

Mr. Chairman, I join you in welcoming our distinguished witnesses for this hearing.