



“Germany’s Chairmanship of the OSCE: Priorities and Challenges”

Rep. Christopher Smith

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Good afternoon and welcome to everyone joining us today – especially to His Excellency Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

With the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the refugees from Syria and nearby countries entering the OSCE region – as well as the security threats the Syrian conflict is generating – I think it is safe to say this will be a challenging year for the OSCE. We are grateful that Germany has shouldered the responsibility to lead the OSCE at this critical time.

Through its influence and the respect it has earned from all sides among OSCE nations, Germany is ideally suited to lead the organization.

Never in the OSCE’s history has its relevance been so clearly necessary. Russia’s latest and most egregious attempts to change borders by force and expand its territory continue to reverberate across all three dimensions of the OSCE in direct defiance of all ten principles of the Helsinki Final Act.

That the OSCE is a consensus organization does not make it powerless in the face of a Russian veto. Even as Russia walks away from its OSCE commitments, undermines Europe’s longstanding security architecture, it is still able to bear witness – to speak truth to power – and to convene and encourage negotiations.

The Chair-in-Office can persistently declare that Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea will never be recognized by the international community; that its flimsy denials of military intervention in Donbass and Luhansk are fooling no one; that that even at home, imprisoning voices of dissent will not silence them; and that the outsourcing threats and attacks on those who would exercise rights Russia itself recognized some forty years ago in no way absolves it of accountability for the consequences.

We hope and fully expect that the Chair-in-Office will do this – and we will give our full support. I'm confident that our government will continue to do so, and certainly my Co-Chairman, Sen. Roger Wicker, and I, and our fellow Commissioners will do everything in our means to support you as well.

Your Excellency, I look forward to a conversation with you today on your plans for your Chairmanship. As you know, a number of us will also raise issues that we work on in the OSCE. I have spent much of my career, both within Congress and the OSCE PA, in support of human rights, including the fight against trafficking and anti-Semitism. You may be aware that I offered the first OSCE PA resolution on fighting human trafficking in 1999 in St. Petersburg, and the first resolution on fighting anti-Semitism in 2002.

We are glad to see that these issues are high on your Chairmanship's agenda as well. Unfortunately, despite our collective best efforts, these problems have not gone away, and may be getting worse.

One of the other issues I'll be raising is prisoners of conscience held by OSCE countries.

I'd like to take this opportunity to announce that the Commission will soon post a list of prisoners of conscience held by various OSCE participating states – this list will be very carefully vetted, and we will advocate systematically on behalf of the people who are on it, in keeping with the Commission's mandate.

This list will be in response to a disturbing trend among a certain states that find it easier to imprison dissenting voices rather than engage in dialogue with them. After 1990 the situation with prisoners of conscience dramatically improved in the OSCE – the reversal in the past several years is deeply disturbing. I hope that the German Chairmanship will be able to make the release of political prisoners a priority as well.

I'd like to make a specific appeal on behalf of Khadija Ismayilova, a prisoner of conscience in Azerbaijan. Khadija is an Azeri, and worked as an investigative reporter for Radio Free Europe. She did outstanding work exposing the corruption of the Aliyev family and for her work she was sentenced to 7.5 years in prison. In December of last year I chaired a hearing on her case and the repression in Azerbaijan more broadly. I'd ask you to make her release, and the release of other Azeri prisoners of conscience, a priority.

If you make a visit to Azerbaijan, please request to meet with her personally. Azerbaijan has over 100 prisoners of conscience, and Russia has a similar number.

Thank you, Your Excellency, for speaking to the Commission this afternoon.