Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission

"Human Rights and Democracy: Obstacles and Opportunities in the OSCE Region"

Committee Members Present:
Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC), Ranking Member;
Representative Robert B. Aderholt (R-AL), Commissioner;
Representative Gwen Moore (D-WI), Commissioner;
Representative Steve Cohen (D-TN), Commissioner;
Representative Marc Veasey (D-TX), Commissioner

Witness:
Ambassador Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, Director, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

The Hearing Was Held From 10:01 a.m. To 10:48 a.m. in Room 1334, Longworth House Office Building, Washington, D.C., Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC), Ranking Member, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding

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WILSON: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for attending. This hearing on the "Human Rights and Democracy in the Organization of Security and Cooperation of Europe Region: Obstacles and Opportunities" will now come to order.

Director Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, welcome to this hearing of the Helsinki Commission. I am grateful that Chairman Alcee Hastings has given me the opportunity to chair this hearing with the director of the OSCE's flagship institution dedicated to human rights and Democracy. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is the world's largest regional security commission and body. Last year the Helsinki Commission's first hearing of the 116th Congress was the Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčak, representing Slovakia's chairmanship of the OSCE. In July, they Commission also heard from OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr. Harlem Désir. Today we are honored to have you here as we start the second session of the 116th Congress.

This hearing continues the commission's active engagement with the most senior officials of the OSCE. I appreciate that you are taking the time to be with us today, continuing the tradition of your three predecessors who also shared their priorities and perspectives for the Helsinki Commission. I understand the Helsinki Commission is a unique body. Among the 57 OSCE-participating states, our bipartisan, bicameral institution exemplifies the longstanding congressional support for the Helsinki process. This hearing also illustrates our continuing support for the institution that you head, and the goal of advancing human rights and democracy throughout the OSCE region. This dialogue with you enriches our understanding of the obstacles and opportunities as you see them.

Director, I had the extraordinary opportunity to be an election observer thirty years ago, June 10, 1990, in Bulgaria, when democracy was restored after many years of totalitarianism. Those were heady and extraordinary days and the pivotal elections in Central Europe in 1989 and '90 marked a key moment in the transition from communism to democracy. I've personally seen the fruits of democracy have been brought to the OSCE region from Lithuania to Georgia. Indeed, in spite of the challenges that remain, I am both deeply heartened by these achievements and optimistic we can move forward to build on them. I've also had the extraordinary opportunity to host election observers in my home state of South Carolina, including National Assembly Member Stefan Stoyanov of Bulgaria, Ambassador Peter Burian of Slovakia.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights was originally named the, quote, "Office for Free Elections," in 1990. It was given its current name and its enlarged mandate at the 1992 summit in Helsinki. At that time, it was understood that many OSCE governments were eagerly seeking expertise and assistance to bolster democratic reforms and make them irreversible. The office you head was designed to help provide that expertise and capitalize on that political will. Unfortunately the political will to protect human rights and advance democracy is lacking in some capitals. Moreover, some OSCE countries have sought to block other countries where the political will exists from taking advantage of the OSCE resources. Today, we will have a better appreciation of democracy as a journey, not a destination. Clearly the work of the ODIHR is as important as ever.

Director, before inviting you to speak I'd like to note that you also have an extraordinary background, yourself, as a legislator. As you know, many members of the Helsinki Commission serve in leadership positions with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and the assembly itself has strongly supported the work of

oDIHR. The president of the assembly and other key representatives regularly participate in the annual Human Dimension Implementation program you organize in Warsaw, and other OSCE human dimension work. Of course, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly is a key partner with the ODIHR in the field of election observers. The assembly has also supported civil society participation in OSCE events, such as the annual human rights meeting in Warsaw, and rejected efforts to unduly restrict that participation. I appreciate the strong cooperation with the Parliamentary Assembly that you have supported during your tenure.

We are grateful today that we have been joined by Congressman Robert Aderholt. And I will now recognize Congressman Aderholt.

ADERHOLT: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's good to be here. And I want to welcome our special guests here today. And I'll look forward to your testimony, director. And we thank you for your work in the OSCE office for ODIHR. And you know, of course I have been involved with the Helsinki Commission for going on 20 years now. And I have learned to appreciate all the great things that goes on within the region in trying to make sure that human rights and democracy is our – is one of our main focuses and look forward to your comments today. So I just want to say briefly, it's good to be here. And look forward to your testimony. And look forward to follow-on questions afterwards. Thank you very much.

WILSON: Thank you very much, Congressman Aderholt. And we regret that with so many scheduling events today – in particular, our representatives from the U.S. Senate could be tied up. But we are – it may not be a large number, but we've got someone so worthy with Congressman Aderholt.

Director Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, we're all so very grateful. You're the former foreign minister of Iceland, but you're – I was mentioning to you earlier – you have also survived as being the mayor of Reykjavik. And we understand that's frontline political position. And you survived. And congratulations.

You've been director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights since July 2017. You have 35 years of leadership experience working on human rights, democratic governance, and the rule of law at the international, national, and local levels. Throughout your career, you have been involved in policy and development work in both conflict and non-conflict countries that aims to strengthen democratic institutions and human rights. Thank you for working in your own country and internationally to achieve progress in gender equality. Director, thank you for being here. And we now recognize you for your comments.

GÍSLADÓTTIR: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Helsinki Commission, ladies and gentlemen. First of all, thank you for the warm words of welcome and

on the work that ODIHR carries out in the OSCE region, and for your positive words on the work that we do.

It is, of course, an honor to be here and speaking to the commission that has done so much to promote human rights and democracy through the 57 countries of the OSCE for more than 40 years. This year is the 30th anniversary of the peaceful revolutions that brought down the Berlin Wall, uniting Europe together after so many years of division. When we look back, we see that we have traveled a long path over the last 30 years. Not just in Europe, because 60 percent of the world's countries are now democracies of one form or another, compared to only 40 percent at the beginning of the 1990s. And that is an enormous achievement that we should remember.

It was only after one regime after another had toppled in 1989 that it became clear how much work needed to be done to get the political and the economic systems on track. The hard work that took place in the following years was only possible because of the positive drive of the people of these countries. We therefore need not only to work for change, but also we have to remember – or try to do, is to recapture and maintain the optimism of that time. Unfortunately, it's hard to escape the impression that something is not right nowadays. Solutions to many of the challenges we face may have been developed or already used successfully, but we are no longer using or even talking to each other about them – about these solutions.

We seem to be gripped by an ever-deepening polarization in which some political leaders and their voters believe that anyone who disagrees with them is an enemy who doesn't deserve even basic respect. It is no news to you that a number of politicians across the OSCE region are fueling prejudice and hatred for the sake of political gain. They do, or should, know that history has shown us many times how fatal the consequences of polarization, prejudice, and hatred can be. And we were reminded of that in Auschwitz last Monday, when the 75 years of the liberation of the camp was commemorated there.

As you know, ODIHR was established almost 30 years ago to help countries across the OSCE strengthen their democratic institutions and develop systems to assure full respect for human rights. This was never easy, but it has become more difficult as we see an increasing number of political leaders deliberately dismantling the fundamental pillars of the democratic system, seeking to remove democratic checks and balances, and gradually erode standards. But without political and social pluralism, the independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media, and the thriving civil society there can be no democracy.

According to U.N. figures, there are now more than 70 million people forcibly displaced worldwide. There is scarcely a greater calamity that can befall individuals and their families. And yet, we're seeing hatred in word and deed targeting these people, even on particularly – even, or particularly, in our own countries that are so wealthy. ODIHR has an entire department working on issues of intolerance and hatred. In this field, it is not so much developments that are striking, but how much has stayed the same. Racism and xenophobia are flourishing on the street, online and, unfortunately, also in police precincts.

We continue to work on combatting the age-old scores of anti-Semitism, but we have also increased our focus on combatting anti-Muslim hatred, as physical attacks as well as hate speech, particularly online, have grown in recent years. Our annual update on hate crime throughout the OSCE region means that ODIHR holds the largest hate crime database worldwide. And in our most recent update, we published figures from more than 40 countries, both from official and civil society sources. Our findings show that while a total of 53 out of the 57 OSCE nations have hate crime provisions in their criminal codes, far fewer actually make use of these laws. The online world has made information more easily available and allowed citizens to participate actively in democratic processes.

However, we are now seeing possibly the biggest outpourings of xenophobia as well as misogyny online. Online and social media channels are being misused to incite discrimination and even violence. Digitalization and the new realities it has created do not change the legal boundaries. Human rights are valid online, just as they are offline. And they must be protected in both spheres. The OSCE is founded on the concept that the protection and promotion of human rights, which of course includes civil society, is a precondition for security.

Currently in many places across the OSCE region, a healthy civil society is often seen not as a security partner, but as a security risk. The use of overly broad legislation, including on counterterrorism and anti-extremism, to restrict the legitimate activities of NGOs is also having an increasingly negative impact. The pressure on civic space take many forms – from legislation restricting the operations of civil society, physical attacks on offices and individuals, politically motivated lawsuits or arrests, cuts in funding, state restrictions on the freedom to hold public gatherings or protests, or negative statements and online smear campaigns. Threats often come from the state, but not always. Women activists are particularly vulnerable to pressure and attacks from public shaming on the internet or social media platforms through to sexual violence.

Ladies and gentlemen, after listening to all these challenges we are facing to democracy and human rights, you may be surprised that I nonetheless identify myself as an optimist. One reason for this is that we already have so many solutions. ODIHR itself is one of these solutions. It was actually created by the participating states of the OSCE as a tool to assist participating states in implementing their commitments – the commitment that they have made. And we do it through different means or tools. Our annual human rights conference, which is unique in bringing together civil society and policymakers in two weeks – I say it's unique because it brings together the policymakers and the civil society, and they're sitting at the same table talking together. I think it's sometimes difficult, of course. It's not easy, but always fruitful dialogue.

ODIHR thus provides a platform for both frank discussion and deeper reflection, helping those who work in the area of human rights to find effective solutions and, still more importantly, ways of making sure they are implemented. ODIHR works with governments, national human rights institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners to help strengthen judicial independence, fight for gender equality, and protect the most vulnerable groups in our societies. So partnerships is a very important part of what we do, and networks. We develop innovative platforms to reach out to human rights activists who may otherwise remain isolated and sometimes in danger.

I have endless respect and admiration for all the grassroots organizations and individual human rights defenders who are tireless in their efforts to build free and democratic societies – often in very constrained environments. We also train practitioners to use our educational tools to break down prejudice and build more tolerant societies. One example is our major project aimed at combatting anti-Semitism, made possible by the generous funding from the German government, as well as from the U.S. and Italian governments. That, among other products, has developed a ten-part educational toolkit to address anti-Semitism, success by overcoming unconscious bias, challenging conspiracy theories, or dealing within online anti-Semitism.

So this is a toolkit that we have produced for the teachers on how to deal with it in the classroom. So it's a very practical tool. And let me say that everything we do we try to be practical in our tools. We will also shortly be launching a major publication that aims to address the security needs of Muslim communities. As with our other publications, this tries to come away from a purely – come away from a purely theoretical perspective to offer practical guidance for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and civil society working to raise awareness about anti-Muslim hate crime and protect the safety on Muslim communities.

Of course, there are some areas in which ODIHR still needs to become more active. There's always call for improvement and new – and new areas to work on. One of these is working with youth. Only equality between all the groups in society can bring long-term democratic stability.

In the course of my career, I have often taken part in meetings and conferences at which the importance of the role of women was discussed with hardly any women present. But now that has changed drastically. But now I take part in meetings and conferences at which I and others of my generation discuss the importance of youth, but no young people have been invited. And this must change. It is only by sitting at the same table that today's youth can also understand that for activism to be effective it needs to be backed up by a deeper understanding of democratic and human rights systems and followed by analysis. We need platforms to explain issues, such as the rule of law, to young people so they can act now to – they can act to protect it now.

Ladies and gentlemen, we need to return to the understanding that democracy is not about friends and foes, winners and losers. It's about respect and trust, an acceptance of different opinions and a willingness to share power and seek compromises. Agreement through dialogue is the only solution to our differences, even if we end up agreeing to disagree. Just as we deserve respect, so do those who hold different opinions.

You are from the most populous country in the entire OSCE and I am from one of the smallest. But we are united in our concerns for the future of the OSCE region, for its commitment to democracy, and to the wellbeing of its people. We owe it to them not just to talk about solutions but to make every effort that they become reality. And thank you, again, for inviting me here to this hearing, and for giving me this opportunity to talk about some of the important areas that we work on. Thank you.

WILSON: Thank you very much, Director. And indeed, as an indication of the importance of your position and the statement that you've made, we've been joined by three additional members of Congress. The very distinguished member all the way from Wisconsin, Congresswoman Gwen Moore. Delighted to have Congresswoman Moore here. Also, we have been joined by Congressman Stephen Cohen of Tennessee. And we were joined, and this is going to happen where we have so many meetings, but Congressman Marc Veasey of the state of Texas was here previously.

What we'll be doing is now go through a round of five minutes of questions. I'll begin and hold myself to the five-minute rule. And we'll go according to – as persons arrived. And so somebody needs to keep the time. And we've got very talented people here who can keep five-minute time. And so this will be a very positive event.

But, director, last December I introduced a bipartisan Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act, together with my fellow Helsinki Commissioner Representative Emanuel Cleaver and some other members of the Commission. Under international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions, Russia is responsible for religious freedom violations in Crimea, which it invaded and illegally occupied since 2014, and parts of the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, which it has controlled with nonstate armed groups and illegal entities and their commands, also since 2014.

This legislation aims to combat Russia's religious freedom violations in Ukraine by requiring the president of the United States to consider these violations when determining whether to designate Russia as a country of particular concern. Russia is already on the special watch list, unfortunately. What can you say about the religious freedom violations in Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine, and Russia's responsibility for these violations and others – and what can ODIHR and the broader OSCE – what can be done to address this?

GÍSLADÓTTIR: Sorry. Thank you for this question. Everything that has to do with Ukraine, Crimea, and Ukraine in general is very relevant to our work. And Ukraine is, without doubt, one of the countries where our involvement is quite substantial. And we have been implementing programs there for some years, and we will continue to be doing that. And one of the things that we are there focusing on is to work with civil society organizations and human rights defenders in strengthening their capacity and possibility in doing their work in a – in a safe manner. So that could also apply to those who are working on freedom of religion and belief.

But in general, you know, Crimea is not accessible, as you know, for us. We have not been able to go and monitor the situation in Crimea. We did a report in 2014, but that was not – that was done not with access to the – to the area, but from Ukraine proper. And but we know that this is – and that was one of the things that was reflected in that report. And this is an issue, especially for the Crimean Tatars, to be able to operate freely in that region.

Well, let's say that there are limitations to what we can do, because everything we do in ODIHR is based on the invitation from the participating state to come and do work in the country. Or we could support, like I said, civil society organizations, because we work with governments, we work with parliamentarians, we work with civil society. So what we can do is

to support the civil society organizations in being able to carry out their work in a proper manner. And that applies also to those who might be working in Crimea.

WILSON: Thank you very much. And indeed, it's sad that there has to be an invitation, but I appreciate your work very much. ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly cooperation regarding international election observations are very important. How would you evaluate the observation efforts of parliamentarians? And are there ways in which we could further improve cooperation?

GÍSLADÓTTIR: Thank you very much. Actually, the U.S. is, I feel, one of the countries that sends us or seconds most election observers to our missions. There have been thousands of observers from the U.S. participating in our missions in different countries. And we have very good cooperation with the State Department on that. So we are – we really appreciate the staunch support that we get from the U.S. in our election observation work.

We are, of course, you know, just to tell you this year will be quite heavy on elections. We have a lot of very big election missions coming up, and especially in the autumn, in the fall. I think we will have eight consecutive missions going on in October-November. And that can sometimes be difficult to get enough seconded short-term and long-term observers from the participating States, in a situation like that one. But we rely on and we really appreciate the support from the U.S. in sending us observers to these missions.

WILSON: Thank you very much. And now we proceed to Congressman Aderholt of Alabama.

ADERHOLT: Thank you, Director. And I want to pick up on a theme that Congressman Wilson also mentioned about the – about the freedom of religion issue, an aspect of it. And of course, as you know, all the OSCE participating States have repeatedly made the commitments to recognize, to respect, and ensure freedom of religion and belief. But if you look at some of the violators around the world that violate this freedom of religion and belief, there's some of the participating States of the OSCE.

This year the U.S. secretary of state has re-designated Tajikistan and Turkmenistan as countries of particular concern. And that's, of course, the term that we have come up with here in Congress to identify particular countries that have problems with religious freedom and respect for religious beliefs. And they have designated Russia for the special watchlist for religious freedom violations. The secretary has removed Uzbekistan as one of these countries of particular concern in 2018 because of some of the positive reforms that has been going on there over the last couple years, but Uzbekistan still remains on the special watchlist.

Concerning the countries that I just mentioned, what is ODIHR and the OSCE doing to try to ensure that these participating States comply, and they recognize, respect, and ensure that there is freedom of religion?

GÍSLADÓTTIR: Yeah. First of all, let me pick up first about the Uzbekistan, because that's one of the countries that you mentioned. There, we have been engaging quite a lot with

the government of Uzbekistan on a number of issues. One of the thing is the issue of freedom of religion or belief. And ODIHR has offered to the government to provide an opinion on the draft law that they have – that has been put forward on freedom of conscience and religious organizations. And they have been – we have been getting positive feedback on our offer for support for Uzbekistan. So it has been quite encouraging to work with the government of Uzbekistan recently.

On the other countries that you mentioned – Tajikistan, Turkmenistan – then – and this is also the case in some other participating States – then it is quite concerning how the lack of respect for some of the fundamental freedoms that are definitely part of the OSCE commitments. And what we do – can do in these cases is that we have this dialogue with the government, we approach the government, we tell them about our concerns, we issue – we send letters to follow up on these things. We issue statements if needed. And we really try to push them to make use of the tools that we have to help them in dealing with these issues. And sometimes this is – this is because they are concerned about terrorism in the countries, and they have overly restrictive legislation to protect them from terrorist activities. And we just remind them that they have to do it in a manner that is in – it's in line with the human rights commitments.

So we offer them support to work on this. But then it's up to them to decide whether they accept it or not. But like I said in my opening remarks, we were created as a tool to assist the governments in implementing the commitments that they have made. And that's what we are always trying – and we are reminding them of these commitments. We are reminding them that they are part of this community. They decide for themselves to be part of this community. And that makes them responsible for implementing these commitments. But let me also mention that the OSCE states, as such, they, of course, address this issue in the Permanent Council also, in Vienna. And they can take up these issues and hold these others to account in this – on these issues.

ADERHOLT: Is there – or, do you have any recommendations that the United States can do to encourage compliance with this – you know, with these commitments to freedom of religion and belief among the states? Anything you could – from your perspective – I know it's a broad question. But from your perspective, is there anything that we can do as the United States?

GÍSLADÓTTIR: I think – you know, of course it is important to raise this issue at the OSCE level in the permanent council, like I mentioned, in Vienna, because OSCE is a community of values that are reflected in the commitments that we have made. But it's also a community of responsibility, meaning that the participating States should hold these others to account through the permanent council. Raising issues there is very important also, because that makes it also easier for us to follow up on it.

ADERHOLT: Thank you. Thank you for comments and on that and some clarification on that. That's very helpful.

And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

WILSON: Thank you, Congressman Robert Aderholt.

We now proceed to Congresswoman Gwen Moore of Pennsylvania – excuse me, Wisconsin.

MOORE: (Laughs.) Thank you so much. And thank you for appearing. And thank you for your tireless work as the director for the ODIHR, Office for Democratic Institutions.

I was really pleased that last August, about six months ago, the Parliamentary Assembly President George Tsereteli appointed Pia Kauma as special representative on civil society engagement. And I was so pleased because I saw up close and personal how stifled civil society has been in speaking out against human rights violations. And I am wondering what the nexus is with ODIHR an with this OSCE Parliamentary Assembly special representative on civil society engagement. Is there an active engagement with regard to addressing some of the laws that have criminalized speech, association, and assembly? Or is this sort of a quiet mission? What is the tactical approach to dealing with what I think is an extreme sort of shutdown of speech?

GÍSLADÓTTIR: Yes. Just like yourself, I'm really pleased to see that Tsereteli, the president of the Parliamentary Assembly, has nominated a special representative on civil society. And I think that is very much needed, because what we are seeing in the region, for the past few years, is that the space for the civil society has been shrinking. And we are seeing more legislation that are restrictive when it comes to civil society. We are seeing more attacks on human rights defenders that are also part of civil society.

We are seeing now – and I just have to mention that in the case of Russia, this foreign agent legislation that is becoming more and more even restrictive. This is all very concerning trends that we are seeing. And if we can join forces through the Parliamentary Assembly and ODIHR and with the participating States to work on that, that is – that's important. There are several things we can do. Of course, you know, the Parliamentary Assembly has the kind of political advocacy voice. And they are in contact, in dialogue, with the parliamentarians from these countries that have all these restrictive rules of civil society. And it's really important to raise these issues at that level.

MOORE: OK, so thank you for that. So you think basically what we ought to be doing is making sure that the OSCE engages with the legislators in those countries, and that would be a good tactic. Can you tell me more about how the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions works to counter threats to women? We are seeing that women activists are vulnerable to pressures and attacks. Journalists have been targeted. And just really interested in seeing what you're doing in particular. You noted in your testimony that sometimes you're the only woman at these tables. So what is happening currently with protecting women who are under threat?

GÍSLADÓTTIR: Yeah, that is – of course, you know, there are several channels, maybe, where – how we can address that. First of all, we, of course, have to ensure that the law enforcement is capable of dealing with these cases that come up, identify them, and deal with them properly. That's one thing. Also, in the legislation – that there's a proper legislation in place in the participating countries and we can recommend to them how to deal with this through

the legislation. But then again also to assist the women activists, the human rights defenders – female human rights defenders – and to train them in how also to be more aware of their safety and how they can better protect themselves. So we can do it through different channels. And I think we are working on all these – through all these channels.

MOORE: Thank you. My time has expired.

WILSON: Thank you very much, Congresswoman Gwen Moore. We appreciate your service so much.

We now proceed to Congressman Stephen Cohen of Tennessee.

COHEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for your attendance. ODIHR's got a tough job. After the war, we saw democracy come to a lot of countries, particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain. But the problems of anti-Semitism and prejudice against the Roma have continued. They were two of the – Nazis targets Jews, and secondly Roma. And they are the two significant groups where you see anti-Semitism and anti-Roma behavior. I'm not sure where I can ask you a question and you can be safe to answer it, but what would you say are the worst countries right now within the OSCE for tolerating, or encouraging, or permitting anti-Semitic and anti-Roma conduct?

GÍSLADÓTTIR: I'm afraid that I will not be able to answer this –

COHEN: That's a tough question. I've been – I was in Budapest. Beautiful city, but there's problems there with anti-Semitism. They deny it. They claim, oh, we're great. We love Jews. You know, some of our best friends are Jews, and all that stuff. But the rabbis told us, and the civil parts of the religious institutions told us, that there's a lot of anti-Semitism, and it's bad. And what they've done with Soros is obviously anti-Semitism. I mean, they've made him out to be the devil. Poland's got similar problems I think. Would Poland and Hungary be at the top of a list?

GÍSLADÓTTIR: It depends on how do you define it. What we see, you know, if you take anti-Semitic attacks or attacks against U.S. communities or people, we see a lot of them also in Germany and France, and here in the U.S. we also see these things. So it's reflected in so many different ways. In Hungary we still have this anti-Soros legislation in place, which is anti-Semitic, if you like. So it is – depends on, you know, how do you measure that? How do you – because anti-Semitism can be reflected in so many different manners.

COHEN: Yeah. It's hard to measure, I understand that. And maybe it's not a good question. I guess what I'm saying is I'm distraught at the idea that 75 years after the fall of Germany that anti-Semitism is on the rise. And it's on the rise in this country too. But what I saw in Hungary was really disturbing. It was a denial of what was going on. And Soros was truly used. And he's been used in this country as well, but I don't know if it's been as directly considered anti-Semitic as what we've seen in Hungary, but it's been pretty bad too in this country. Soros is just trying to give people educations or promote democracy, and yet he's vilified. And it happens in this country as well.

What happens in France, and I heard a lot about it when I was in France, a lot of that I guess has to do with maybe Muslim immigrants – a lot of the neighborhoods where the problems exist? Is that – is that accurate? Or is that just – the French are they not without blame themselves too?

GÍSLADÓTTIR: Of course, you know, some of these attacks can be traced to that kind of neighborhoods, but I think – and now I'm talking from the top of my head – that more of these attacks come from extreme right-wing populist groups. So that is a concern, because they have been growing in influence in countries like Germany, France, Italy, and some other countries. And with that comes – you know, we see more intolerance against those who are the "others," who are different.

And because you mentioned the Roma people, that is very concerning because I always say – and I'm saying it here again – the Roma people, if you look at Europe, they are at the bottom. If we have a hierarchy of discrimination, they are at the bottom there. They are most vulnerable group in Europe, in my opinion now. And they have been attacked in so many European countries. And I'm not going to mention these countries, but this is really concerning. That –

COHEN: There was a Roma representative at the U.N. program on Monday concerning the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. And he talked about the fact that the Roma Holocaust hasn't really been recognized, and it needs to be. How are Black people in general treated in Europe? Are they discriminated against in a fairly systematic manner as well?

GÍSLADÓTTIR: They are definitely also experiencing discrimination. And we have been working with people of African descent in Europe to identify this discrimination. But I think we always have to be concerned about the discrimination against all these groups when things are developing, as they are now in Europe. But the Roma are definitely those who are, I would say, the most discriminated.

COHEN: And my time is up, but in just my general observations it looks like the worst areas are – for discrimination and all, it's in the former Soviet republics who are close to Russia and concerned, and nationalists and all. But there's other places too. But where there seems to be no problems is Iceland. (Laughter.) Thank you. I yield back the balance of my time.

WILSON: Thank you, Congressman Stephen Cohen. And indeed, Director, we are so grateful that you have been here, and you've really brought some distinguished members, and brought them out. And I'm grateful for their participation.

And as we conclude, last week was very meaningful to me. I had the opportunity to participate with Speaker Pelosi on a delegation – congressional delegation. We visited Auschwitz-Birkenau. And it's just so clear, the horror there, the contrast between the beautiful city of Krakow, and so close by the mass murder camps. And it reminds us so much of never again. And then I'm very grateful that this week President Andrzej Duda of Poland hosted there,

at Auschwitz, a ceremony to recognize the liberation of the death camps, and how important it is that it never occur again.

And it's a recognition too that the first targets were people of Jewish faith, but also the people of Poland were brutally treated by the Nazis. And we just don't want to see that again. And your work can help make that possible. And I just, again, am grateful that you are here today. We look forward to working with you in the future. So proud of your personal achievements in your life. There have been distinction that means so much to all the people of the OSCE region, 57 countries.

At this time we shall adjourn. (Sounds gavel.)

[Whereupon, at 10:48 a.m., the hearing ended.]