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“Ireland’s Leadership of the OSCE”

U.S. Helsinki Commission

Excerpts of Remarks by Chairman Chris Smith (NJ-04)

February 8, 2012

Good morning and welcome to everyone joining us this morning, especially Minister Gilmore, the Foreign Minister of Ireland and Chair in Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

It is a privilege to have you testify before us today, Mr. Minister, on Ireland's leadership of the OSCE. You are continuing a tradition that we have followed for more than a decade of hearing directly from the country holding the chairmanship of the OSCE.

While today many countries in Europe are inwardly focused on economic crises, the world still cries out for global leadership. And Ireland has stepped up to the plate, accepting the 2012 chairmanship of Europe's largest regional security organization, the OSCE, which does its best work in promoting human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and free elections.

Ireland has for a long time been one of the most constructive countries in the OSCE, enhancing the credibility of the organization it now leads. Mr. Minister, I thank you and your government for taking on the responsibility to lead the OSCE.

Mr. Minister, the Helsinki commission has a long history of engaging with the OSCE, both through and in cooperation with the State Department and independently, and as Chairman I am very happy with the priorities you have set for the Irish chairmanship – particularly the emphasis on Internet freedom and your plans to hold a meeting this year on that issue. I have recently introduced and am preparing to markup a bill on this issue, the Global Online Freedom Act, which counteracts the efforts of many governments, including some in the OSCE, to purchase U.S. technology to transform the Internet into a tool of censorship and surveillance. Earlier versions of this legislation were also introduced in the European parliament. So I look forward to working with you on this issue.

Your ideas for drawing on Ireland's experiences in the Northern Ireland peace process in reference to protracted conflicts elsewhere in the OSCE region also connects to a long-standing commission priority – since the mid-1990s we have held 13 hearings on Northern Ireland and the peace process, keeping the issue of police reform on our government's and the British government's agenda.

Perhaps the key issue the commission will be pursuing in the OSCE this year is international parental child abduction. Last year the Parliamentary Assembly passed my resolution urging the "OSCE to take up the issue of international parental child abduction," and urging a ministerial decision on the issue. I believe the U.S. government agrees that this is an issue which could benefit from a ministerial decision this year – that is, the benefit would go to the children, who suffer as the number of international parental abductions continues to climb, while governments and national courts do not always live up their obligations under the Hague convention.

Another important issue will continue to be the fight against anti-Semitism, which, following a commission hearing in May 2002, I and a number of other commissioners, including Co-Chairman Cardin, worked successfully to put on the front burner of the OSCE – resulting in a series of high-level and ministerial conferences on anti-Semitism and in a ministerial declaration on combating anti-Semitism – the implementation of which has been sadly lacking.

The work of battling anti-Semitism is now being led by the Personal Representative, Rabbi Andy Baker, and I can't emphasize too strongly how important it is to support his work and the work of the other Personal Representatives – to do otherwise would be a tragic step backward.

Mr. Minister, one of the reasons the United States so values the OSCE is that its work touches on so many human rights issues – I believe this is why you and the Irish government, which certainly values human rights just as highly as the U.S. government, will find your work this year rewarding. I look forward to hearing your presentation.