

# Congressional Testimony

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## Developments in Ukraine

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## *Introduction*

Chairman Menendez, Senator Corker, Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on recent developments in Ukraine. Given the present challenges facing the Ukrainian people and their newly elected leadership – from rebuilding an economy devastated by corruption and mismanagement to defeating the efforts of a small, but deadly group of foreign-inspired (if not foreign-sponsored) separatists – this hearing is urgently needed. The implications of what is happening in Ukraine, especially in areas near its border with Russia, could affect developments throughout the region.

### *IRI's Deep Ties to Ukraine*

The International Republican Institute (IRI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, and one of the four core institutes of the National Endowment for Democracy. Our mission is to encourage democracy in places where it is absent, help democracy become more effective where it is in danger, and share best practices where democracy is flourishing. While Ukraine's future is obviously up to Ukrainians, at IRI, we believe the community of western democracies can play an indispensable role in providing tools and assistance to help Ukraine realize its great potential.

Ukraine has long been an essential part of IRI's programs. In fact, thanks to the support of numerous funders from the United States, Europe and Canada, IRI has been operating democracy and governance initiatives there for more than 20 years. In addition to our primary office in Kyiv, we have operated offices in Odessa and, until recently, Simferopol in the Crimean peninsula.

In carrying out our mission to support more democratic, more accountable governance, we have tried to enhance civic engagement and advocacy at the sub-national level by increasing civil society organizations' capacity and strengthening their linkages with political parties. We have worked to foster a national dialogue involving civic and political activists from all around the country. For example, we have brought together local elected officials from cities which border Russia and cities in western Ukraine to learn from each other and create a network of reform-oriented leaders. We have sought to increase the participation of youth, women and minority groups in political processes.<sup>1</sup> In particular, over the course of many years, IRI has developed extensive relationships with the Crimean Tatar community. IRI has worked with Tatar civic organizations to enhance their capacity to conduct young political leadership schools and public hearings on the peninsula. IRI was

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<sup>1</sup> IRI's Women's Democracy Network (WDN), one of our flagship programs, launched a chapter in Ukraine in February 2011. The Ukrainian women of WDN started an innovative gender monitoring project during the 2012 parliamentary election campaign to support women candidates, boost the participation of women in political life, and raise people's awareness about the importance of women's participation in decision-making processes at the national level. Later this year, WDN Ukraine will establish a special Political Leadership Academy to develop potential women candidates.

also the only international organization to observe the Tatar community's local elections in 2013.

### ***May 25 Presidential Election***

IRI has monitored all national elections in independent Ukraine's history, including the most recent presidential election on May 25. IRI fielded a high-level election observation mission led by Senator Kelly Ayotte and included Congressman Peter Roskam, which visited more than 100 polling stations in Cherkasy, Chernihiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Kyiv, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Ternopil and Vinnitsya. In preparation for elections, we trained more than 5,000 observers representing candidates, parties and the Maidan to help ensure the transparency and legitimacy of the electoral process.

IRI observers reported only minor irregularities and none that would affect the outcome of the election. Our observers reported that the election was well-administered and that polling officials were knowledgeable and approached their job seriously, working long hours, without breaks to ensure that the election was free, fair and democratic. In areas of the country where nearly 87 percent of the population resides, polls were open and voting went smoothly. In the limited areas where voting was denied or suppressed – Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk – it was due either to Russian occupation or interference.

In short, in the view of the IRI observation team, these elections were free and fair, and met international standards. What makes this accomplishment especially remarkable is the range of challenges Ukrainian officials faced as they administered this election. Some of the challenges, as described below, will need urgent attention from the Poroshenko government in the months ahead. They also represent opportunities for friends of Ukraine (such as the U.S., Canada and Europe) to help.

### ***Violence from Russia***

Among the most obvious challenges that Ukrainian officials have faced in recent months was the Russian-sponsored violence in the south and east. The Russian-sponsored separatists used high-grade, cutting-edge tactics and equipment. There were widespread cases of these groups taking over radio stations, shootings, establishing checkpoints, and in one case, shutting down an airport. Well-equipped bands of military style forces sought to shut down the election in parts of the country, and in a few places they succeeded.

The appearance of Russian-sponsored special forces without insignia or other identification seemed designed to create uncertainty and confusion among military and civilians alike. The use of paid mercenaries, Russian counter intelligence service (GRU) veterans and now, apparently Chechen fighters, presented Ukrainian security leaders with new tactical challenges and, no doubt, will be studied by American and other western analysts in months to come.

### ***Tatars under Russian Occupation***

Another specific challenge that we at IRI want to bring to the Committee's attention is the plight and the tragedy of the Crimean Tatars. Nowhere have the fears of Russian influence been more acutely felt in recent months than in their community in Crimea. The history of the suffering of the Tatar people is well-known. Stalin's deportation resulted in the death of tens of thousands of Tatars. It was not until the final years of the Soviet Union that they were able to finally return to their ancestral homeland. These days, Tatars make up nearly 15 percent of Crimea's population and growing.

The Crimean Tatar community, represented by the *Mejlis* of the Crimean Tatar people, boycotted the illegal Crimean March 16 referendum and rejected its results. Instead, the community has repeatedly pledged their continued support for a united and sovereign Ukraine. Now their very existence in their homeland is under threat.

Since the beginning of our work in Ukraine, IRI has sought to assist the democratic aspirations of the Crimean Tatar people as they built their own internal democracy within representative bodies such as the *Mejlis* and the congress of Crimean Tatar representatives known as the *Kurultai*. In addition, from 2010 to 2013, IRI conducted a program from our office in Simferopol that sought to equip Crimean Tatars, particularly youth, with the knowledge and skills necessary to enact reforms on the peninsula. IRI also has supported the development of a website for the Crimean Tatar *Mejlis* to improve communications between that body and its community, and conducted a wide range of programming from building the capacity of local Tatar civil society organizations to enabling them to be able to conduct young political leadership schools.

IRI also conducted several exchanges for Tatar youth to travel to other parts of Ukraine and western Europe to learn from their colleagues and build networks of motivated and politically active youth.

Currently, IRI is unable to conduct programming in occupied Crimea. We would like to find ways to partner with the Crimean Tatar community in the future through a series of study trips for young political and civic activists to both learn from and enhance linkages with their counterparts in other regions of Ukraine. We also see a great need to foster and build independent media on the peninsula. In any case, in light of the Russian annexation and the history of brutal treatment of the Tatars, we should all be watchful of how the Tatars are able to live peacefully and democratically in the face of Russian rule.

### ***Russian Propaganda, Lack of Ukrainian Media and Social Media Platforms***

In some ways the most serious challenge facing Ukraine is the overwhelming force of Russian propaganda that has been projected into Ukraine, combined with the lack of Ukrainian media and social media in certain parts of the country. Using English language television in both United States and Europe, the Kremlin has actually convinced many that

the invasion and occupation of Crimea was merely an administrative "correction" of a Soviet decision made in 1954. It has apparently convinced some in the West that the militants it pays and supplies to create fear and chaos in eastern Ukraine are citizens who feel persecuted due to their ethnicity or language, when polling data completely refutes such assertions. The force and effect of such propaganda is even more pronounced in Ukraine where there is no access to accurate news accounts and analysis at all.

Of course, more and more people, especially young people, get their news and communications through social media platforms. Once again, these channels are currently dominated by Moscow, and countervailing platforms and views are blocked by Moscow wherever they can be. The democracies of the West should help foster free and independent news media in Ukraine that can reach all parts of the country. We should, in particular, support the creation and protection of truly Ukrainian social media that allows users to communicate freely and openly without blockage or intimidation. The recently introduced Russian Aggression Prevention Act has a number of provisions that support these ideas and IRI would welcome the chance to work on this front.

Mr. Chairman, the Cold War has been described by many as a conflict of ideals and principles: human rights and free markets versus communism and statism. I would suggest that the West is once again in a conflict, this time with Russia, over ideas and principles. Russia, with an innovative international media program that touts its "managed democracy" as the best form of government is making great gains in this battle of ideas. The United States must lead the way in formulating new approaches to counter Russian propaganda. As eloquently stated by former Under Secretary of State Paula Dobriansky, the West must counter Russian President Vladimir Putin's policies and that failure to do so "will embolden Moscow's aggression against other countries with significant Russian populations."

### ***IT Infrastructure and Cyber Warfare***

One of the most subtle, and yet serious, challenges that Ukraine faced during the election and continues to face today is a weak and, in some cases, infected information technology (IT) infrastructure. In this day and age, people depend on technology for governance, national security, the conduct of elections and many other matters. Recent reports suggest that much of the government's computer structure has been infected or compromised by foreign-sponsored viruses.

On the day of the election, the IRI delegation learned that Russia had launched a major cyber-attack aimed at bringing down the Central Election Commission's main database. Had it succeeded, the elections would have failed and perhaps given Ukraine's opponents further pretense for mischief, aggression and de-stabilizing activities. While the Ukrainian government was able to fight off the attack, what became clear was the vulnerability of Ukraine's IT systems. Ukraine needs help in replacing its IT infrastructure and in protecting it going forward.

### ***Moving Ukraine Forward***

There are also some hopeful signs for Ukraine as it moves forward from these elections. The losers in the presidential election conceded honorably and in ways that can foster unity. President-elect Poroshenko has already taken significant steps to move the country forward. He has indicated that he will retain the current Prime Minister (Arseniy Yatsenyuk) and others in the current government. He has stated his top priorities are to maintain the unity of the country by reaching out to eastern regions, tackling corruption, and creating jobs.

President-elect Poroshenko has also indicated that his government will undertake important constitutional reforms. A strong democracy relies on a constitutional order that protects citizens' rights, as well as limits government authority and provides for the rule of law.

In particular, the new government has expressed its willingness to consider amending the Constitution with the goal of decentralizing and subsequently granting greater power to regional and local councils. The direct election of governors, which would certainly result in greater decentralization, is one of the changes under consideration.

The West can and should play a supportive role in facilitating changes in local governance. North American and European expertise can be brought to bear in providing experience and technical assistance in a way that can assist in producing local governments that are more accountable to the needs of the Ukrainian people. Similarly, the West can play a critical role in advising Poroshenko and his government on innovative and effective means to show real results in the battle against corruption, which continues to be one of the key concerns of voters, and is also detrimental to Ukraine's hopes for greater foreign investment.

Ukrainians stand united in their desire to remain a unified country. In IRI's April 2014 public opinion survey, the vast majority of Ukrainians (90 percent), even those in the east, want their country to remain united. In addition, a majority of Ukrainians (54 percent) want Ukraine to join the European Union. Ukrainians deserve a leader who will undertake these issues immediately.

### ***Developing a Long-Term Strategy to Assist Ukraine***

At this critical juncture in Ukraine's further democratic development, it is essential that Ukraine's friends support the Ukrainian government and civil society efforts to build a prosperous and democratic country. In supporting these efforts, the United States, through mechanisms such as the United States Agency for International Development, should increase democratic assistance to the country to provide support to the newly-elected government to enact reforms. There is a great need to accelerate government capacity-building to fight corruption and build citizen-oriented structures. This will build citizen faith in leaders and harness the energy of the Maidan. To further promote the development of a diverse and representative party system in Ukraine, additional assistance should be provided for the development of political parties (particularly new and emerging ones

resulting from the Maidan movement). In addition, Ukraine's friends must seek to enhance the capacity of a burgeoning civil society in Ukraine, which rediscovered its voice during the Maidan movement. Marginalized groups, such as youth and minority groups like the Crimean Tatars, need to be supported in their efforts to develop a democratic and unified Ukraine.

Finally, the U.S. and others should support the building of linkages between Ukrainians from eastern, southern, central and western parts of the country. Ukrainians want to learn from each other and strengthen relationships with their fellow Ukrainians from different parts of the country. They also want to acquire the knowledge and skills to be able to build a democratic and prosperous country. IRI stands ready to work on these and other great initiatives that can help the Ukrainian people.

### *Conclusion*

Mr. Chairman, recent events in Ukraine make clear both the challenges and possibilities that lie in the months and years ahead for the Ukrainian people. The fact that Ukrainians, in the span of a few short months, were able to remove from office a corrupt but powerful leader and then just weeks later, conduct national elections that met international standards, is remarkable. The fact that all of this was accomplished in the face of threats and violence sponsored by one of the world's most powerful governments is historic. It will take every bit of this same resolve, and more, to meet the daunting economic, security and governance challenges. At IRI, we believe there are many things the U.S. can and should offer to help.

The Ukrainians, not their friends in the West, are responsible for shaping the country's future. They have a unique history and rich culture all their own, and they want to chart a path that meets their own needs and aspirations, not anyone else's. As one of IRI's Ukrainian staff proudly stated recently, "We went to the Maidan to find Europe, and instead we found Ukraine."