

JBANC Press Release –

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CEEC Holds Congressional Policy Discussion on Central and Eastern Europe

Washington, DC (JBANC) --- The Central and Eastern European Coalition (CEEC) sponsored a foreign policy roundtable discussion on Thursday June 19 on Capitol Hill to analyze high profile issues including U.S. relations with Russia, the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and energy policy. A reception honoring members of Congress was also held during the event.

The CEEC consists of 18 national ethnic organizations representing Americans of Central and Eastern European heritage. The event in the Rayburn House Office Building featured remarks by Congresswoman Allyson Schwartz (D-PA), Congressman Chris Smith (R-NJ), Congressman Dan Lipinski (D-IL), and a roundtable discussion with Ambassador-Elect to NATO Kurt Volker and former Ambassador to Kazakhstan and Georgia Bill Courtney.

The roundtable discussion centered on U.S. relations with Russia, and considered Russian leadership changes, Moscow's attempts to expand energy influence, along with destabilizing actions on its periphery, and continued opposition to NATO's enlargement. Key points made by the speakers were that the U.S. should continue to assist Ukraine and Georgia toward Membership Action Plan (MAP) status, which is the next step towards NATO membership, and that Europe and Russia should look towards a strategic partnership in energy decisions.

Rep. Schwartz has staunchly supported democracy movements in Georgia, as well as its MAP accession. In her speech, she highlighted the strategic benefit to NATO of Georgia's future membership and assured the Georgian community that Congress would continue to strongly support Georgia's steps towards democracy and NATO. Rep. Smith, who along with Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT) received recognition from the CEEC for their lifetime support for Central and Eastern Europe, condemned Russian pressure against former Soviet bloc countries and declared that the United States must continue to fight for human rights and democracy in the region. Rep. Smith has also been a leader in his support of democracy building in Belarus, as evidenced by his sponsorship of the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act and he made special recognition of Belarusian-American activists at the event. Rep. Lipinski, co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on Central and Eastern Europe (along with Republican co-chair Thaddeus McCotter of Michigan), served as the Congressional host of the reception and greeted participants.

Also present at the event were representatives from the Estonian, Georgian, Polish and Romanian embassies as well as staff from a dozen congressional offices. The event was a successful public forum for

discussion and education on several important international issues that are at the forefront of American policy during this crucial period leading up to the November U.S. elections.

The Central and Eastern European Coalition represents more than 22 million Americans. The Joint Baltic American National Committee (JBANC) and its three parent organizations are member organizations. JBANC members participating at the event included current president Marju Rink-Abel of the Estonian American National Council (EANC), Peteris Blumbers and Gustavs Plato of the American Latvian Association (ALA), and JBANC Managing Director Karl Altai, along with Erin Williamson and Monika Ramanauskaite.