



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Sam Brownback

Ranking Minority Member - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased that the Commission has convened this hearing to look at the state of affairs in a key country which is closely allied to the United States. Though geographically small, Georgia has disproportionate strategic significance.

I have followed Georgia for years and have traveled there several [numerous?] times. I welcomed the Rose Revolution in 2003 and the Orange and Tulip Revolutions which followed in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2004 and 2005. I regret that political tensions which had accumulated in Georgia since 2003 found expression in the violent confrontations of last November. It is my sincere hope that whatever differences exist between the Georgian government and opposition can be bridged by a spirit of compromise and goodwill.

Reconciliation and accord are essential not only for Georgia's democracy and institutional development but also for its security. Georgia has been under severe Russian pressure for years and Russian-Georgian ties have accordingly been quite strained. Last year, Moscow imposed a virtual economic embargo on Georgia, barring access to Russian markets for such products as Georgian wine and mineral water.

Nevertheless, President Saakashvili has emphasized his desire to work for better relations with Russia. I welcome recent indications from Russian officials that whatever happens in Kosovo, Moscow does not necessarily plan to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I hope that Foreign Minister Lavrov, who attended President Saakashvili's inauguration on January 20, follows through with serious initiatives to improve the bilateral Russian-Georgian relationship.

At the same time, I want to firmly state my support for Georgia's NATO ambitions. I believe that NATO enlargement must proceed and that the inclusion of a strategically important country in the Caucasus offers clear benefits to U.S. security, without threatening Russia. Accordingly, I hope the upcoming NATO Summit in Bucharest in April offers a Membership Action Plan to Georgia and Ukraine as well.

I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses.