



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Alcee L. Hastings

Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this hearing. Georgia has been very much in the news lately and may remain in the headlines for some time, so the reason for this hearing is obvious. We hope to examine today where we all stand after the events of the last few months, during which Georgia has experienced quite a lot of history.

I am sure everyone here is familiar with the chronology that led to Georgia's snap election last month. President Mikheil Saakashvili resigned in November, after riot troops in Tbilisi violently dispersed demonstrators, who, he claimed, were planning a coup at Moscow's behest. The crackdown, including the closing of the country's most popular television station, drew international criticism. Mr. Saakashvili then called for new elections, along with referenda on the timing of parliamentary elections and support for Georgia's eventual entry into NATO. Tbilisi invited observers from all over the world to monitor the process.

I was appointed to lead the international observation mission for the OSCE by Foreign Ministers Miguel Angel Moratinos of Spain and Ilkka Kanerva of Finland. The OSCE observer mission comprised the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the ODIHR, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament.

In Tbilisi, we met with candidates, including the opposition. We also met with Nino Burjanadze, the Speaker of Parliament who was then the Acting President.

On the basis of all the information we received, as well as monitoring the balloting and vote-counting in many precincts, we concluded that while there were significant challenges that needed to be urgently addressed, Georgia's election largely met OSCE standards. On January 6, we announced our conclusions to the world.

According to Georgia's Central Election Commission, Mikheil Saakashvili was re-elected President with over 53 percent of the vote, thus avoiding a runoff. That result has been officially ratified and Mikheil Saakashvili was inaugurated on January 20.

Now, I am well aware that many Georgian opposition leaders reject the official results. They do not recognize Mikheil Saakashvili as President. They may well believe that the international observation mission was wrong, did its work badly or was pursuing even less savory goals.

But I would like to affirm here that I stand behind the conclusions the OSCE observers reached in Tbilisi on January 5-6. We had no ulterior motives or an agenda dictated by any government; we called the election as we saw it.

Still, questions have been raised by NGOs and subsequent reports, among others by the ODIHR. This hearing will provide a venue to air some of those concerns.

Moreover, reconciliation has not been achieved in Georgia. Opposition leaders last week put forward a list of demands, including a recount of the ballots, equal representation on election commissions and guarantees of media freedom. They say that if these demands are not met, they will launch a “permanent” street protest starting February 15 and will boycott parliamentary elections scheduled for this spring.

So, once again, we face uncertainty in Georgia. Will we see an electoral approach to the resolution of political conflict or a protracted period of street politics?

I hope that Georgians can find a way to bridge their differences. It would be deeply regrettable if uncertainty turns into instability. I see the upcoming parliamentary election as an opportunity to redress some of the grievances that have accumulated in Georgia over the last few years. There is every reason to believe that opposition parties have a good chance to win many seats in parliament, perhaps even a majority. For that reason, I strongly urge them not to boycott the election but to participate and campaign more actively than never before.

But ultimately, it is for the Georgian people to decide how they want to pursue the development of democracy and integration into Western institutions – clearly, important goals for Georgia’s population.

Our three witnesses, representing the U.S. Government, the Georgian Government and the Georgian opposition, will give us critical perspectives on these issues. We have also asked the National Democratic Institute [NDI] and the International Republican Institute [IRI], which both fielded high-level prominent observer delegations, to submit statements for the record. Freedom House has also sent us materials.

I am not going to provide a detailed biography of our witnesses. Their impressive resumes can be found on our website.

We will begin with Matthew Bryza, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia.

Afterwards, we will hear from Vasili Sikhuralidze, Georgia’s Ambassador to the United States.

Our third witness is Salome Zurbishvili, Georgia’s former Foreign Minister and now the leader of the opposition party “Georgia’s Way.”