

Statement by Rep. Mike McIntyre
Member, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Hearing on “The Impact of the Iran Crisis on its OSCE Neighbors”
July 16, 2009

Welcome to this hearing on the impact of the Iran crisis on its OSCE neighbors. The world has been watching with fascination the drama that began over one month ago with Iran’s presidential election. As of today, no one knows what will be the outcome of the unrest that followed the announcement of a landslide victory for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Just as the situation continues to unfold inside Iran, so it does among Iran’s neighbors, which are watching events there with emotions ranging from curiosity to anxiety. The purpose of this hearing is to examine the implications of these events in the neighboring and nearby OSCE republics, especially in the former Soviet Union.

Of course, there are many differences between those secular states and theocratic Iran. But in the post-Soviet space, super-presidents have generally overwhelmed other institutions while removing the public from politics through rigged elections and suppressing street protests. Russia and Belarus have largely managed to keep things in check, but other CIS states have experienced post-election unrest, including Armenia, Azerbaijan and most recently Moldova. Have they been watching Iranians risking their lives in protest and nervously wondering “if even there, why not here?” Or “why not here again?”

In the dynamic of state-society confrontation in repressive states, precedent has a special importance. Iran’s Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini said as much in his June 21 sermon, claiming that those who organized the demonstrations “thought that Iran is another Georgia.”

In the post-Soviet space, governments and publics closely watch what goes on in other countries. If opposition movements and civic activists who have lost faith in the prospect of democratization are heartened by news of post-election street protests elsewhere, ruling regimes are appalled. The May 2005 massacre in Andijan, where Uzbek authorities shot hundreds of demonstrators, followed by only 2 months the post-election demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan which led to the ouster of then-President Askar Akaev. Was Uzbek President Karimov signaling to his own people and to his neighbors that the wave of Rose, Orange and Tulip Revolutions would spread no farther?

Indeed, the precedent of street protests that result in regime change is the No. 1 nightmare of repressive governments. So it is not surprising that Russian President Medvedev not only rushed to congratulate Ahmadinejad but then went to Cairo and in a clear counter to President Obama's speech in that capital, stated that Russia opposed Western attempts to promote democratization in the Arab world.

What, then, are the likely or potential implications of the events in Iran on post-Soviet states? I look forward to hearing our expert witnesses examine this question. Before introducing them, I would like to call on ... for any remarks he/she may have.