



## HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

---

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

# Testimony :: Hon. Steny H. Hoyer

Ranking Member - Helsinki Commission

Mr. Chairman, I commend you for holding this hearing. All too often, when Central Asia or the Caspian region is mentioned, it is exclusively in the context of energy bonanzas and "Great Games." The ramifications for human rights rarely get the same attention.

I have not yet been to Central Asia. But my study of the region -- for which these hearings are so valuable -- leads me to the conclusion that Turkmenistan, alone among its neighbors, never allowed any opposition to emerge. Even in Uzbekistan, some political opposition was permitted in the early 1990s. In most other countries of the region, opposition parties today labor under great disadvantages in an uneven struggle to participate in the political process and are often repressed, but at least they have the right to exist. President Saparmurat Niyazov, by contrast, has always crushed opposition elements, displaying a consistency worthy of nobler ends. It seems to me this is an important indicator of the significance of personality in the highly personalized political systems which emerged from the rubble of the USSR.

From the perspective of the OSCE, Turkmenistan is a troubling country for many reasons. As the worst human rights offender in the entire OSCE space, led by a dictator who seems to take pleasure in flouting his human rights commitments, Turkmenistan forces the OSCE and member states who care about human rights to consider how to influence Niyazov towards reform. When the situation is this bad, with no evident prospect of change for the better, perhaps isolation and condemnation should be the goals of policymakers. On the other hand, when the USSR signed the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, Moscow, too, had no intention of observing the commitments it had undertaken to implement. But in time, these commitments and the principles behind them played a key role in undermining Soviet totalitarianism. Perhaps, therefore, it would be wiser to remain engaged, keep pressing and wait for circumstances to change.

These are difficult choices, made even more uncomfortable by our revulsion at Niyazov's personality cult - so out of place in the 21st century - his cruelty, and his willingness to ignore international public opinion. Precedent is important and Niyazov is a terrible model for other Central Asian leaders. Moreover, his repression allows them, including Kazakhstan's President Karimov and Kyrgyzstan's President Akaev, to describe their own authoritarianism as progress by comparison with the worse-case scenario, and ask for Western indulgence.

Mr. Chairman, I anticipate that our expert witnesses will help illuminate these issues and I look forward to the discussion.