

PRESENTATION

BY H.E. VASIL SIKHARULIDZE, AMBASSADOR OF GEORGIA TO THE USA, CANADA AND MEXICO

at the hearing

BY THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

on

GEORGIA IN 2008: ELECTIONS OR STREET POLITICS?

Washington, DC

6 February 2008

Mr. Chairman
Distinguished members of the Commission,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to extend our appreciation and gratitude to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe for organizing this hearing. I would like further to thank you for your leadership of the team of election observers from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. Thanks shall also go to all international and non-governmental organizations, which participated in the election monitoring process in Georgia.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to begin with several points on developments leading to the January 5 snap presidential elections. Georgia has implemented successful and much applauded economic and governance reforms achieving formidable growth. Nevertheless, poverty and unemployment still remain major issues and time is needed for tangible results to be delivered to every Georgian family.

This was main motivating factor behind mass rallies of November 2, 2007. The leaders of the demonstration came up with 4 demands to the authorities, which were negotiated in the framework of the Standing Intern-Factional Consultative Group chaired by the Speaker of the Parliament Ms. Nino Burjanadze. Here, I would like to note that this and other formats for political dialog existed before November events and are used today for meaningful dialog. Going back to November 2007, compromise on 3 out 4 original demands voiced at the demonstration was in sight, when leaders of the rally left the negotiations and came up with some new demands, setting a pattern of constant position modification that can be observed till now.

It has to be noted that while November demonstrations remained peaceful, authorities did not resort to any restraining measures, despite the fact that permit for rally had expired for 5 days. When the police attempted to restore traffic on the blocked main avenue, protesters turned violent. The authorities had to restore law and order.

As it was revealed later, at the peak of mass protests a well-planned coup by one of the heavily influential figures was to be executed. This plan was aiming at subversion of constitutional order by using large and unruly numbers of people and, at the same time, paralyzing the vital state structures.

Georgian Government used all necessary and adequate means that any democratic government would use in order to uphold law and order in the country.

The President made a decision to resolve the political crisis through the most democratic way – elections. He has announced his determination to resign and to hold snap presidential elections on January 5, 2008. The announcement by President Saakashvili was made two weeks prior to the actual resignation, offering additional time to the 45 days provided by the Constitution. This gave sufficient time to all candidates for campaigning and helped the observers and monitoring groups, the Central Election Commission and voters to better prepare for the election.

As to the elections themselves, I would like to only briefly cite some observers' statements, who were present in unprecedented numbers – around 1000 international and several thousands of local monitors scrutinized the process.

As International Election Observer Mission, including monitors from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the European Parliament (EP) stated that "the election is assessed in line with OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections and national legislation". Moreover, virtually everybody agreed with the Mission's assessment that "this election was the first genuinely competitive presidential election, which enabled the Georgian people to express their political choice".

To broad acceptance of such a mood among observers, Georgian NGOs usually rather critical of the authorities, added that despite some irregularities on election day, the elections were held without any major violations and, thus, were valid, reflecting the will of Georgian people.

At the same time, the reports have identified "significant challenges". As advised, the Georgian leadership stands ready to address promptly all outstanding issues and further improve election system of Georgia. Moreover, President Saakashvili has already invited international organizations, such as the Council of Europe, to assist in addressing systemic shortcomings. He also has invited international experts to arbitrate election disputes to make the process even more transparent.

Meanwhile, the new Government of Georgia is tasked to implement the ambitious program of further economic liberalization. One of the main priorities for the Government is improvement of social security system and reduction of unemployment. NATO integration, peaceful resolution of conflicts, energy security, and fighting terrorism remain Georgia's foreign and security policy priorities. The plebiscite was held

in parallel with the elections, which has demonstrated overwhelming support in Georgia for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Georgia's leadership continues dialog with all political forces for achieving constructive compromise on important issues and hopes to achieve mutual understanding. As some opposition leaders have stated, authorities are demonstrating constructive approach to their demands for constitutional and legislative amendments. As we speak, intensive negotiations are underway to reach mutually acceptable agreement.

Unfortunately, recent developments demonstrate that some political forces view politics as a zero-sum game. Though, this phenomenon is certainly not unique to Georgia but rather is characteristic to all young democracies. Some of the political groups have been flirting with the idea of non-recognition of official election results bringing virtual accusations without substantive evidence. Interestingly, only handful of claims has been submitted by approximately 35000 opposition observers. Those claims have been scrutinized by the foreign and international observers, who concluded that the shortcomings have not affected the outcome of the elections.

Nevertheless, the leadership of Georgia stands ready to cooperate with the entire political spectrum to engage them more actively in democratic institutions. The President has specifically invited some political parties and individual figures into the cabinet.

The upcoming parliamentary elections, which will be held in spring 2008, will be important benchmark for politics in Georgia. We hope very much that campaign will be very interesting and vibrant. Georgia's leadership is fully committed to holding free and fair parliamentary elections.

Mr. Chairman, January 5 snap presidential election had important impact on further strengthening Georgian democracy. The Government of Georgia has demonstrated ability of solving political crisis through political, democratic means. The processes have been turned from the "street politics" back to the political formats, enhancing democratic institution and, ultimately, serving the best interests of the Georgian Nation.

Thank you