



**“Georgia’s Parliamentary Election: How Free and Fair Has the Campaign Been,
and How Should the U.S. Government Respond?”**
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman
September 20, 2012

Welcome to our hearing on Georgia’s parliamentary election, which is now only eleven days away. The campaign has brought Georgia to a crossroads; it is the most crucial event in Georgian democracy since the Rose Revolution of 2003.

At that time, Georgians responded to a rigged election with a peaceful protest movement. It was a great moment in Georgian history, the first of the color revolutions. The Rose Revolution brought Mikheil Saakashvili and his team of western-oriented modernizers into office. Hopes were high in Georgia as Saakashvili strengthened the state and launched many reforms.

Russia’s 2008 invasion and occupation of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Osetia failed to topple President Saakashvili, and our country has strongly supported Georgian sovereignty. Vladimir Putin’s invasion was yet another revelation of his cynical brutality. As an aside, I would note that I was in Georgia in the days following that invasion, working to effect the return of two girls – daughters of one my constituents – caught behind Russian lines, and I was deeply impressed by the courage and determination I encountered in every Georgian I met.

That brings us to the present moment. Only a year ago, President Saakashvili’s ruling National Movement seemed poised to easily win the October 2012 parliamentary election over a fragmented opposition.

But in October 2011 Bidzina Ivanishvili began to unite elements of the opposition into a new coalition that posed a serious challenge. Mr. Ivanishvili is a multi-billionaire and though a newcomer to politics, has vast resources. Saakashvili’s government quickly stripped him of his citizenship and parliament passed campaign finance laws that limited the use of his assets. At the same time, the instruments of the state – budget, police, security services – began to be deployed against Ivanishvili’s party and its supporters, though to what extent is a matter of dispute.

Consequently, the election campaign has raised questions about Mikheil Saakashvili’s reputation as a reformer. I’m sure we’ll hear from our witnesses to what degree his government has institutionalized genuine democratic governance, as opposed to the appearance of it. I don’t

mean to pre-judge this question; it's a difficult one that our witnesses are outstandingly qualified to grapple with.

But the main questions we'd like to hear our witnesses answer touch on the conduct of the campaign: specifically, the opposition's charges that the Georgian state has targeted Ivanishvili and his supporters, through harassment, intimidation, beatings, selective enforcement of the law, and violations of freedoms of assembly and expression. If substantially true, that would be terribly sad; it would indicate that the Rose Revolution had gone bad.

At the same time, Ivanishvili and his coalition have been tarred as working on behalf of Russia. The Georgian government sometimes seems to paint the conflict not as one between two political parties but between the Georgian state and its foreign enemies trying to subvert it. We certainly need to hear your thoughts on this as well.

I believe the members of this commission have open minds on all these questions, and that your testimony will be important in informing Congress and our government on the conduct of the Georgian election campaign, now in its last days. We are fortunate to have been able to assemble such outstandingly qualified witnesses.

At this point I would remind everyone joining us today, whether in the room or through Web case, that all parties in the political process have to behave responsibly. At the same time it is the responsibility of the government – which controls the apparatus of state - to create the conditions for a free and fair election.

Before concluding, I cannot fail to mention the terrible scandal which broke yesterday in Georgia, concerning gross abuses in prison. Videos have emerged that reveal the most horrifying tortures, including the sadistic rape of men by prison officials. The Georgian minister of corrections has resigned, individuals have been arrested, and the government has pledged to punish all those responsible and uproot this problem. I welcome those actions and promises. But I also note the statement made by the national security advisor who said: "We as a government made a grave mistake when we did not properly evaluate the signals coming from the Ombudsman and other civil society groups about the systemic problems in the penitentiary system." That is a telling admission. It is precisely the systemic nature of this abuse that evokes the greatest concern because it raises questions about the nature of the Georgian state's relationship with its citizens.