

Statement of Rep. Christopher H. Smith
Ranking Member, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
“Georgia in 2008: Elections or Street Politics?”
February 6, 2008

Mr. Chairman, this hearing is particularly timely given developments in Georgia, a country with tremendous potential. Indeed, Georgia is a country which this Commission has followed closely over the years, particularly given pressures placed on it by other countries, particularly Russia. I and other Members of the U.S. Delegation to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly have often worked with Georgian colleagues, especially Speaker Nino Burjanadze, to pursue common initiatives, including in the area of human trafficking. I also would like to applaud Ms. Burjanadze for the constructive role she has played in the drama of the last few months.

I have followed these events closely. The violent crackdown on demonstrators last November was quite unexpected, especially considering the peaceful course of the 2003 Rose Revolution and the fact that the protest was apparently winding down when the confrontation began.

President Saakashvili has said a key aim of his second term will be to address persistent widespread poverty. That policy priority makes sense. Most Georgians have not benefited from the country's impressive economic advances over the last few years. So focusing on the poor is a good way for President Saakashvili to spread the gains of market reforms. Still, for the first time since 2003, a significant bloc of opposition leaders rejects the legitimacy of Georgia's head of state. A new round of protests may begin next week, according to reports this morning.

I hope, however, despite the occasionally red-hot rhetoric in Georgia, that a common language and consensus can be found. I would much prefer to see all sides engaging in a hard-fought campaign for the upcoming parliamentary election than standing toe-to-toe on Tbilisi's main square. I urge the Government of Georgia to make the electoral reforms called for by the international observation mission to ensure confidence in the upcoming parliamentary elections.