

Hearing on “Iran and the OSCE Neighbors”
U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Testimony of David J. Kramer¹
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Helsinki Commission, my first time doing so since I left the U.S. Government in January but certainly not my first time as a witness. It was an honor to serve on the Commission representing the State Department while I was Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. I also would like to take this opportunity to commend the Commission and its members for their visit to Belarus in late June, where you secured the release of Emanuel Zeltser, who had been unjustly jailed and deprived of proper medical and legal access. Your statement insisting on further reforms and liberalization from the Belarusian government before there would be further changes in U.S. sanctions policy sent exactly the right message. May you have similar success in future travels to other countries.

Mr. Chairman, turning to the topic of today’s hearing, “Iran and the OSCE Neighbors,” what we have seen in Iran over the past month is part of a larger phenomenon that we’ve been witnessing all over the world, including in the OSCE region, for quite some time, albeit to varying degrees: namely, intensified efforts by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes to stay in power at virtually all costs. This became even more apparent in the aftermath of the “color revolutions” in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. Lack of accountability, distrust of the population, and unwillingness to hold truly free and fair elections are common tendencies among these regimes, and the developments in Iran will only reinforce these tendencies. Authoritarian regimes study and learn lessons from each other, whether in clamping down on NGOs, restricting the press and new media, or repressing civil society. Authoritarian regimes view real elections as a major inconvenience, to say the least, but go through a charade anyway to lend lip service to the “democratic process” – as long as they protect against any surprises. But the beauty of truly free and fair elections is that they can and do produce surprises – i.e., a change in the status quo. And that is why they are viewed as such a threat. That is why color revolutions are viewed the same way – as threats to the status quo or to orchestrated transitions of power.

And yet, through their efforts to stay in power, authoritarian regimes eventually undermine their own positions by exacerbating the lack of trust with their own people, who, over time, lose patience with corrupt, incompetent, and undemocratic leadership. That process may take weeks, months, years, even decades, but rest assured, as President Bush said in his second inaugural address January 20, 2005: “America will not pretend that jailed dissidents prefer their

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chains, or that women welcome humiliation and servitude, or that any human being aspires to live at the mercy of bullies...Eventually the call of freedom comes to every mind and every soul. We do not accept the existence of permanent tyranny because we do not accept the possibility of permanent slavery. Liberty will come to those who love it." It is that inevitability, I hope, that leaders in the region will eventually understand, and that further crackdowns and rigged elections are not the answer.

Mr. Chairman, in preparing for today's hearing I couldn't help but think back to 2004 and Ukraine. Specifically, following a second round of presidential elections in that country in which hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians turned out on Maidan Square to protest what they deemed to be fraudulent election results. On November 24, after then-Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich was declared the winner of Ukraine's runoff election, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell appeared at the Department's press briefing and delivered a crystal clear message: "We cannot accept this result as legitimate because it does not meet international standards and because there has not been an investigation of the numerous and credible reports of fraud and abuse," he said. "It is time for Ukrainian leaders to decide whether they are on the side of democracy or not, whether they respect the will of the people or not. If the Ukrainian government does not act immediately and responsibly," he went on to say, "there will be consequences for our relationship, for Ukraine's hopes for a Euro-Atlantic integration, and for individuals responsible for perpetrating fraud..."

Then-Senator Joseph R. Biden, at the time the ranking Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, said Ukraine's leaders should "immediately invalidate the election results, invite an independent commission to investigate the numerous reports of fraud and protect all peaceful demonstrators." Leaders from other countries joined in: German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder declared, "There has been massive electoral fraud." Canada echoed Powell's statement by announcing that it, too, did not accept the election results.

Let me be clear: the people who protested on Maidan Square those wintry days in November are the ones who deserve credit for making sure their votes mattered and for producing a positive outcome from the Orange Revolution, as it became known. Still, Powell's words that day in November and the outspokenness of others provided important support not only for a free and fair election in Ukraine but for the principle of free and fair elections around the world.

That we had relations with Ukraine (albeit testy with the outgoing Kuchma Administration) and thus some leverage, that there were credible election observation missions there including from the U.S., and that exit polls showed the challenger Viktor Yushchenko as the real winner are obvious differences from the situation the Obama Administration faced in Iran in June, where we have no diplomatic relations, no leverage, and there were no credible outside observers in place. The Obama Administration also must contend with the nuclear weapons issue with Iran, an issue that the U.S. didn't have to worry about with Ukraine in 2004.

Still, even with these significant differences, one is left to wonder what might have been had we taken a similar position toward Iran in June 2009 as we did toward Ukraine in 2004. Yesterday, more than a month after the Iranian election, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had this to say: “We watched the energy of Iran’s election with great admiration, only to be appalled by the manner in which the government used violence to quell the voices of the Iranian people, and then tried to hide its actions by arresting foreign journalists and nationals, and expelling them, and cutting off access to technology. As we and our G-8 partners have made clear, these actions are deplorable and unacceptable.”

It is worth noting that following the problems in 2004, Ukraine has held two national elections that have met international standards for free and fair elections. It will hold another presidential election this coming January and has an opportunity to conduct three such free and fair elections in a row, which would make it stand out compared to many of its neighbors. If anything, what has just happened in Iran reaffirms how far Ukraine has come since 2004. Its politics may be frustrating and messy, but today’s Ukraine is largely democratic, albeit fragile.

Alas, the same cannot be said for other countries in the region. Two upcoming elections raise particular concerns: Kyrgyzstan which holds presidential elections next week, and Moldova which holds parliamentary elections June 29 that will then determine that country’s next president. Developments in Iran will likely be on the minds of authorities in both those countries.

A poor country with few natural resources, Kyrgyzstan was once thought of as the island of democracy in Central Asia before it went through its own so-called color revolution in 2005. Yet, Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution, in which former President Akayev deserted office as crowds gathered in protest, was less a true popular revolution than the transfer of power from what was widely viewed as one corrupt group to another. The current government’s inability to meet basic needs – the population endures rolling blackouts, for example – has meant a loss of confidence in Bakiyev and, in turn, in the electoral process. In the lead-up to next week’s election, we have seen disturbing developments recently including the mysterious deaths of a leading opposition figure (Medet Sadyrkulov) and a journalist (Almaz Tashiev), harassment and detention of opposition leaders, and the shutting down of broadcasts of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Notwithstanding the importance of our military base in Kyrgyzstan, we should be stressing to the government that this election is a test of Kyrgyzstan’s progress and that failure to pass that test will have a negative impact on our bilateral relations.

Elsewhere in Central Asia, aside from parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan this coming December and in Tajikistan next February and absent the death of one of the region’s long-time rulers, there is unlikely to be a precipitating event in these countries that would lead to considerable unrest and opposition demonstrations. And to make sure the lid is kept on against any possible problems, Kazakh President Nazarbayev signed into law last week new controls on the Internet. In a striking irony, the OSCE, which Kazakhstan will chair next year, described this

new law as repressive and had urged Nazarbayev to veto the bill. This is but one example of a growing number of attempts to control media outlets, including the Internet, in Central Asia, and the recent experience in Iran, where the Internet and text-messaging played a role in the protests, will likely lead to even greater efforts to clamp down. Together with our allies, we need to be pushing back on these disturbing trends.

In Moldova, we saw unprecedented violence and vandalism after the first parliamentary election in April fed by the lack of confidence among many voters, especially younger ones, in a clean electoral process. Unfortunately, one cannot rule out the possibility of a repeat of that situation during the re-run of elections July 29 – albeit not on the scale of what we witnessed in Iran. Many Moldovan voters are fed up with the ruling Communist Party and want change badly enough that they may find unacceptable any outcome that would not lead to different leadership. We should be encouraging transparency in ballot-counting and peaceful protest along with the right of assembly. Stern messages should be conveyed now and throughout the election that a repeat of April's events is unacceptable.

Perhaps the country with the greatest interest in developments in Iran is neighboring Azerbaijan. Roughly a quarter of Iran's population of 66 million people is Azeri; this is approximately twice the size of Azerbaijan's population of 8 million and heightens the importance of events that happen in Iran. The main challenger to Ahmadinejad, who reportedly is not very popular within the Azeri-Iranian community, was Mir Hussein Mousavi, an ethnic Azeri from Tabriz. Still, on June 15, three days after the Iranian election, President Aliyev sent a letter of congratulation to Ahmadinejad, expressing confidence that Azerbaijani-Iranian relations would "continue strengthening to meet our peoples' interests." According to eurasianet.org, Azerbaijan's pro-government television channels offered limited coverage of the post-election protests, reflecting nervousness on the part of the government in Baku. By contrast, print media, especially those affiliated with the opposition, offered significantly more coverage of developments in Iran. The bottom line for the authorities in Azerbaijan, as both the President Aliyev and Foreign Minister Mammadyarov made clear on July 6, was that events in Iran were the "internal affair" of Iran – and certainly were not to be emulated.

For quite some time, however, well before the recent developments in Iran, the Azerbaijani government has taken steps to solidify its control. It closed down broadcasts of Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and the BBC earlier this year despite promises that the broadcasts could stay on during good-faith efforts between the broadcasters and Azerbaijani authorities to negotiate a solution. A March referendum to eliminate term limits for the presidency opens the way for the incumbent, Ilham Aliyev, to remain president-for-life given his control over the political landscape. Despite the release this year of several journalists, others face harassment and detention for seemingly political reasons. Most recently, the Azerbaijani parliament passed legislation, albeit somewhat watered down after protests, that would badly affect NGOs and their sources of funding. If signed by President Aliyev, this law would threaten the activities of many organizations. And just last week, two youth leaders, Adnan Hajizada and

Emin Milli, were beaten by unknown assailants but then arrested and detained by authorities and tried on spurious charges of hooliganism. They were convicted and sentenced to two months in jail over protests from many in the human rights and diplomatic communities; their assailants, meanwhile, were released.

The U.S. State Department's annual Human Rights Report released February 25 described the situation there this way: "The government's human rights record remained poor and worsened in some areas." It faulted Azerbaijan's presidential election last October for "serious restrictions on political participation and the media, pressure and restrictions on observers, and flawed vote counting and tabulation processes." It also cites harassment, arbitrary arrests, and detentions of critics and political opponents and restrictions on freedom of assembly.

Strengthened in his position after the controversial referendum on ending terms limits, President Aliyev should use his position to launch a liberalization campaign. He should do so not because the West wants him to but because such a move is in Azerbaijan's long-term interests and is the best guarantee against an Iran-like situation unfolding in his country. At the same time, we should be pressing him to veto the NGO law, free the remaining journalists still in detention, and return the suspended broadcasts to the air.

Armenia is another country keeping a close eye on the situation in Iran, given the deepening ties between the two over recent years. President Serzh Sarkisian traveled to Teheran this past April and signed a number of agreements. Some 5,000 Iranian nationals live in Armenia, and according to Iranian Press TV, 79% of them voted for Mousavi, only 15% for Ahmadinejad. Still, Sarkisian "warmly" congratulated Ahmadinejad and "the friendly people of Iran" on the election outcome. "I am confident that together with you we will continue our joint efforts to deepen and strengthen Armenian-Iranian relations in various fields," he said in a letter made public by his office. By contrast, a group of Armenian journalists appealed for the release of Iranian colleagues who had been arrested in the aftermath of the disputed election.

Armenia, too, has its share of problems in the area of democratic reform. The U.S. State Department's annual Human Rights Report noted that in 2008, the Armenian government's human rights record "deteriorated significantly during the year, with authorities and their agents committing numerous human rights abuses, particularly in connection with the presidential elections and the government's suppression of demonstrations that followed." Just last month, days before Iran's election, Sarkisian dissolved a task force established to investigate last year's deadly post-election violence in Yerevan in which ten people were killed; the reason given was the task force members' failure to "rid themselves of their political agendas." The opposition Armenian National Congress Party said it will continue to investigate the very sensitive events of March 1-2 instead. Dozens of protestors arrested in last year's demonstrations remain in jail. Controversy also surrounds May 31 municipal elections in Yerevan, which opposition parties allege were fraudulent. A Council of Europe election observation mission concluded that the municipal poll was largely "in compliance with European standards," notwithstanding "serious

deficiencies" observed in some voting stations. The U.S. should be pressing the Armenian government for a thorough, credible investigation of the events in March 2008, an end to harassment of journalists and opposition figures, and the release of remaining political prisoners.

In Georgia, the reaction to events in Iran has been very quiet. The disagreements between the Georgian opposition and the Saakashvili government have kept their attention focused on their own internal situation. Unlike the governments in Baku and Yerevan, however, the government in Tbilisi has not congratulated Ahmadinejad. In Georgia, the U.S. should stress the need for institutional reforms, including a truly independent judiciary, and constructive engagement with the opposition, and Vice President Biden's visit there next week is an ideal opportunity to convey that message.

Last but not least, Russia. Ahmadinejad attended the second day of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Yekaterinburg June 16, at which Russia and the other SCO members embraced and congratulated the Iranian leader despite the brewing controversy over the election results. Russian President Medvedev held a one-on-one meeting with his Iranian counterpart and, according to press reports, indicated support for upgrading Iran's status in the SCO from observer to full member. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told reporters the Iranian election was an internal matter for Iran and praised Ahmadinejad's visit to Russia as "quite symbolic."

The authoritarian leadership in Russia since Vladimir Putin's rise to power has been working to establish a system that would minimize any possibility of a color revolution in Russia, let alone an Iran-like scenario. Even with its economic difficulties and barring a radical change for the worse and absent a precipitating event like a contested election (which won't happen any time soon), Russia is not vulnerable to the kind of scene recently witnessed in Iran. It does, however, benefit from anything that leads to a rise in the price of oil, and events in Iran caused a brief surge in the price. While Russian officials do not want to see more turmoil in Iran, they are likely to draw the conclusion that elections and their outcome shouldn't be left to chance. That is a conclusion, I fear, that will be reached not just in Moscow.

Indeed, what we saw unfold in Iran and the government's reaction to the protests there are what we've been seeing around the world for quite some time. Alas, the events in Iran are likely to reinforce pre-existing tendencies toward further cracking down and repression, not toward liberalization even though over time these tendencies are more apt to weaken, not strengthen these regimes. Speaking out against such tendencies is important and needs to be done by the Obama Administration in conjunction with our allies. And just as it did in Belarus most recently, this Commission will continue to be a vital voice for speaking truth to power.