



The Impact of Iran for post-Soviet Participants in the OSCE

**Testimony Prepared for the Commission on Security and
Cooperation in Europe**

**Ms. Jennifer Windsor
Executive Director
Freedom House**

July 16, 2009

Mr. Chairman. Let me begin by thanking you for inviting Freedom House to testify here today. I might add that it is a genuine honor to appear on the same panel as David Kramer, a dedicated public servant and a tireless champion of human rights and democracy around the world.

You have asked us to speculate on the potential impact that recent events in Iran may have on neighboring OSCE states. To focus the discussion, I think its useful to first summarize a few key elements of what has happened in Iran to date, and then draw parallels between developments within Iran and the post-Soviet consolidated authoritarian states in the OSCE and finally to provide some initial thoughts about the impact of events in Iran on the future of those countries.

Recent Events in Iran: Key Elements

While there were no domestic and international monitors, the presidential elections that were held in Iran last month were deeply flawed by all accounts.

The announcement of an overwhelming victory by Ahmadinejad triggered spontaneous, country-wide demonstrations, in at least two-thirds of the 30 provinces, in cities including in Tehran, Tabriz, Isfahan, Shiraz, Isfahan, Rasht, Mashhad, Bandar Abbas, Sary, Qasvin and Yazd. The extent and breadth of the demonstrations took many by surprise, including those in the region. They sent a clear message – that a broad swath of Iranians was deeply frustrated with a regime that denies them any real role in the political life of the country.

The initial few days also brought hope as divisions and disagreements in the ruling coalition emerged. But then the Iranian government embarked on a brutal campaign of violence and intimidation against the protestors, carried out by government security forces and government-sanctioned vigilantes who assaulted individual demonstrators, resulting in an undetermined number of deaths. Thousands of Iranians have been detained.

So, the question we now face is whether the events of the last month in Iran will more closely parallel the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing or the early days of a Rose Revolution or a reprise of the Maiden in Ukraine. The answer seems to be the former for now, but events in Iran have not yet played out, and frankly we cannot be sure how they will.

Many of the elements that have brought about democratic change in Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia were present in Iran – fissures in the ruling elite, widespread mobilization and engagement, and a ham-handed attempt by the government to control electoral outcomes. But other key elements were missing – including a unified, disciplined citizen-led campaign with clear objectives and a fragmented security apparatus (the Revolutionary Guards and the vigilante efforts of the Basij have succeeded for now to quell significant public protests.)

Parallels Between Iran and Post-Soviet Authoritarian Regimes

Events in Iran demonstrated that authoritarian regimes have learned well their own lessons from the color revolutions, and have engaged in a comprehensive, systematic strategy to prevent such revolutions from occurring in their own societies. The consolidated authoritarian governments in the OSCE, all of which are post-Soviet states, provide apt examples of these trends, as the recently released results from our *Nations in*

Transit study in 2009 demonstrate. The measures that had already been put in place to restrict political rights and civil liberties by the Russian authorities and other authoritarian regimes have been greatly intensified since Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia, and particularly since the popular pushback in Georgia and Ukraine. The findings indicate that these are dark days for democracy in the region. Freedom House now classifies a record eight former Soviet republics as “consolidated authoritarian regimes,” our lowest category.

It is perhaps fitting that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s first trip abroad following the contested Iranian election was to Moscow. The Russian Federation has taken a leadership role in its attempts to undermine democracy within and outside of its borders. As our recent report on *Undermining Democracy: 21st Century Authoritarians* noted “The mechanisms of Russian influence in the former Soviet Union are interference in domestic politics, financial leverage, energy blackmail, and strategic communications, all aided by the strong shared legacy of the Soviet experience.”

Within Russia, and throughout the post-Soviet states, the latest *Nations in Transit* report illustrates that these regimes are specifically targeting independent media and civil society.

1. Controlling information flow, increasingly targeting internet and mobile phone technology, has become a top priority.

The Iranian regime, like the deeply illiberal ones in the authoritarian states of the former Soviet Union, has unleashed a fearsome brand of media manipulation and control – focused both on disruption and distortion.

Before, during and after the crisis, the Iranian government has sought to isolate its citizens and cut off news of events happening inside of the country, as well as reactions abroad by curtailing access to the internet and arresting journalists. Thanks to brave citizen journalists within Iran and their supporters outside, they have not been completely successful in those attempts, but clearly the current and future key battleground will be the media – new and old.

Throughout the post-Soviet states, governments are focused on controlling the information available to the broad masses of the public and using the media to discredit political opponents and independent civil society.

Of the former Soviet states, Russia is perhaps the most sophisticated in its media management – working to ensure that communication and information flows serve the interests

of the ruling elite and virtually eliminating most independent voices. You can find an excellent description of the vast resources that have been devoted to this cause in the Russia chapter of *Undermining Democracy*.

While there are still independent newspapers in most of the region – except for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – television is firmly under government control. Governments in Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan have sought to exclude foreign radio broadcasters such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the BBC, while Armenia censored all media after the post-election violence of March 2008 and Georgia blocked access to Russian Internet media sites during and immediately after the August 2008 conflict with Russia.

Increasingly, these regimes are focused on disputing legitimate online discourse, and given the role of technology in the recent Iranian events, they will likely step up their efforts in this direction. Just last week, President Nazarbayev signed a harshly repressive Internet law that defines everything on the web – including blogs and chats – as media, and thus liable to the harsh punishments Kazakhstani legislation posits for even minor legal violations.

2. Reducing the ability of citizens to associate and organize through restrictive laws and targeted intimidation and repression against key leaders has become the norm.

Pressure from government is also squeezing civil society in many of the countries of the former-Soviet Union. In *Nations in Transit 2009*, the average score for civil society in the post-Soviet states dropped for the fifth time in six years. Regional governments have particularly targeted groups that work on issues of political significance. One after another, they have passed repressive laws restricting public assembly, religious groups, and NGOs, many of which bear striking resemblances to each other. In many cases, these laws are only lightly redacted versions of Russian laws. (In at least one instance of which Freedom House is aware, a national government began discussions of a draft law that in several places still referred not to that country but to the Russian Federation.)

More nuanced harassment and restrictions are coupled with targeted brutality – such as the murder of Natalya Estemirova yesterday in Chechnya – to send a message that any activity to advance civil and political rights in these societies will be punished.

The authoritarian regimes in the former Soviet Union are particularly trying to de-legitimize and block support by the international community for groups and activists inside – in some cases making it illegal for domestic NGOs to accept foreign funds and launching media attacks to portray activists as tools of foreign agents.

The Iranian government has the distinction perhaps of adopting some of the most extreme measures in this area of control over civil society. For the past several years, individuals who had – or were alleged to have -- contact with the West were picked up, interrogated and sometimes tortured. In response to the events of the last month, the regime attempted to blame President Obama and the British embassy for interference in Iranian domestic affairs – assertions that were endorsed immediately by the Russian government.

But the consolidated authoritarian post-Soviet states do not lag behind by much. In particular, we are seeing an increasing trend of violence against independent voices in these societies, including an increasing number of incidents of journalists and activists beaten and murdered; incidents that are never satisfactorily investigated let alone resolved. In this regard, the judiciary's total subservience to the executive

branch is a key tool by which regimes maintain control and deny their citizens the ability to enforce their basic rights.

3. Managing elections by limiting political choices, monopolizing state resources, stuffing the ballot boxes, and violently repressing dissent has become the standard operating procedure for authoritarian governments who want the veneer of legitimacy brought by elections without the unpredictability of genuine competition.

While Iran's attempt at election management demonstrated that efforts to completely subvert elections are risky even when the playing field is grossly uneven, its capacity and willingness to use force has nonetheless worked in the short term to keep the chosen candidate in power.

Iran's leaders no doubt wished their managed election had paralleled much more closely with Russia's tightly-managed non-competitive "selection" process that neatly installed Putin's hand-picked successor Dmitry Medvedev in power.

Russia's fellow petro-state, Azerbaijan, likewise held an uncompetitive presidential election last year in which the result was predetermined. Even Georgia, whose leaders came to power through a revolution against so-called managed

democracy, abused administrative resources to seriously influence that country's hotly contested presidential and parliamentary elections.

Several attempts to manage elections in the region have caused such public indignations that regimes were required to deploy the type of physical violence we saw most recently in Iran. Armenia's most recent presidential poll, which was marred by irregularities and took place on a decidedly unequal playing field, was followed by lethal post-election violence after the police sought to break up what had been peaceful protests. Already this year, disputed elections in Moldova have produced post-election violence and created a political stalemate that has required a new round of elections.

Undoubtedly, the more authoritarian rulers in the region will see the post-election violence in Iran as a warning of what can happen if a regime lets down its guard, even for a moment. The unfortunate result of this trend is already visible in Kyrgyzstan, where the public is almost totally apathetic about next week's elections, unhappy with both the government and the opposition and convinced that their votes will not make the slightest difference. Initial observations by the ODIHR Election Observation Mission indicate a number of problems in what is widely expected to be a non-competitive, non-democratic race in which government officials will use so-

called administrative resources and perhaps even fraud to inflate President Bakiyev's vote count.

The Future

It is likely that recent events in Iran will only exacerbate the negative trends that we have observed in the former-Soviet space over the last several years. Among the lessons the governments are likely to take from the Iranian experience is that elections may still catalyze widespread public demands for genuine political accountability. This will cause these regimes to move even farther in the direction they are already going, towards turning the election process into a sham reminiscent of elections in the Soviet Union before perestroika. In all likelihood, regimes in the region will also move to upgrade their capacity to suppress demonstrations swiftly and comprehensively and take steps to further limit freedom of association and assembly and the rise of new communications technologies that have the potential to endanger their continued rule. In all of these respects, the lesson of Iran is nothing new to these regimes; it only confirms what they believe they already know.

Of course, Iran is not the only – nor indeed the most important -- factor pushing the more authoritarian regimes in the region in the direction of asserting greater control. The

worldwide economic crisis is probably a more important factor in this evolution. In the petro-states of the region, authoritarian governments have had an unwritten agreement with society over the past several years: we will raise standards of living; you will stay out of politics. With the fall of oil and gas revenue, they now find their ability to deliver on their part of the bargain threatened. For the poorer countries of the region, the prospect of political unrest is more direct, as rising unemployment, declining remittances and increasing crime rates threaten the livelihoods of growing swaths of the population.

In many cases, the repressive apparatus of the state is already sufficiently well developed to handle most eventualities. Nevertheless, it is a hallmark of authoritarian regimes to tighten the screws when they fear that their control is under threat, and that is certainly the trend we are observing in much of the region.

In a sense, these steps are an admission by these repressive regimes that as strong as they seem on the surface, the fact that they do not provide any room for citizen participation in the political life of their countries actually makes them quite vulnerable.

And we also must not forget that the Iranian protests have been as inspiring as their repression has been shocking. The pictures of Neda Agha-Soltan, and the global outrage that her death and the violence and brutal suppression of demonstrators around Iran have generated has reaffirmed the value of democracy and human rights – not as a Western export, but as a universal human aspiration. This is critical given the disinformation campaigns undertaken by Russia, China, and others to subvert the meaning of democracy itself.

Finally, the willingness of countries like Germany, the U.K, and the new Obama Administration to speak out against the repression in Iran should give us hope – hope that the democratic members of the international community are beginning to find their voice again, to unite to defend fundamental freedoms and rights – including freedoms of association, expression and the right to an accountable government, based on the rule of law and respect for human dignity. It is essential that they not allow other priorities, including such strategically important issues as Afghanistan, lessen their support for those who are on the frontlines of that struggle. Such support should not be abandoned, but increased in this era of authoritarian pushback.

Unity among those who believe human rights to be universal is sorely needed if the OSCE is going to continue to

carry out the critical human dimensions aspects of its mission. The post-Soviet states, led by Russia, have consistently attacked the organization's vital work in monitoring elections and promoting democracy and human rights. Sadly, the democratic members of the OSCE, who remain a solid majority among participating states, have largely failed in efforts to meet this strong challenge. If the OSCE is going to remain a relevant body that fulfills its mission of providing regional security, its members must dedicate the resources and political capital to ensure that all three vital areas of its work—military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns—remain intact.

I hope that we all can work together to ensure that the courage and sacrifice of those throughout Iran endures -- as a challenge to tyranny, and not as a dread warning to others who dare to ask that their votes be counted and their voices heard.