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**Business as Usual? Belarus on the Eve of Elections
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Mr. Chairman, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Commission today. I want to first comment on the title for today's hearing "Belarus on the Eve of the Elections—Business as Usual?" Unfortunately, I fear that this is an aptly appropriate title for this pre-election period. Sadly, the government of Belarus has a track record of denying its people their fundamental right to have their voices heard through the ballot box, and we fear that this election will prove to be no different.

A view of the history of elections in post-soviet Belarus is sobering. After gaining independence in 1992, the first parliamentary elections were held in 1995 and democratically elected Members of Parliament rightfully took their seats in Parliament. This bright period of democracy lasted a scant year, and in 1996, President Lukashenko dissolved the elected parliament and a new Chamber of Representatives consisting of 110 members loyal to Lukashenko was appointed.

Parliamentary elections were next held in 2000 and OSCE observers declared that they "failed to meet international standards for democratic elections." The 2004 elections fared no better. The OSCE declared "parliamentary elections in the Republic of Belarus fell significantly short of OSCE commitments. Universal principles and constitutionally guaranteed rights of expression, association and assembly were seriously challenged, calling into question the Belarusian authorities' willingness to respect the concept of political competition on a basis of equal treatment... Belarusian authorities failed to create the conditions to ensure that the will of the people serves as the basis of the authority of government...."

According to exit polling conducted by the Gallup Organization and IRI, the results showed that Lukashenko's proposal to change the Belarusian Constitution to allow him to seek a third term did not have the support of a majority of the voters and would not have passed. Moreover, based on the exit polling, Belarusians did not simply vote against Lukashenko, but voted demonstrably for pro-democratic candidates running for parliament. According to our polling, twenty-two pro-democratic candidates would have won seats had the votes been fairly counted and reported, but as you know; no members of the opposition were allowed to take seats.

Mr. Chairman, due to recent actions by the regime in Belarus, there appears to be cautious optimism by the international community that Mr. Lukashenko is taking steps to improve relations with West and to lighten his grip on the opposition. In the past month, we have witnessed the release of the final three remaining political prisoners in Belarus; including former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. We herald the release of

these brave men, but it behooves us to question the motives behind their release. Lukashenko has a history of making overtures to the West when it suits his interests or he faces challenges from Russia; and it did not go unnoticed that Mr. Kozulin's release came one day after Russia rebuked Belarus for not publicly supporting Russian actions in the South Ossetia and Abkhazia conflict. In addition, it should be noted that the release of Mr. Kim and Mr. Parsyukevich came one day after Lukashenko's closed door meeting with President Medvedev in Sochi.

While the release of these political prisoners is a positive step, we must remember that this action by the regime is singular in nature, and falls far short of the list of requirements for increased diplomatic engagement that have been set by both the European Union and the United States. We must be careful not to view the upcoming elections through rose-colored glasses and must be increasingly on guard to monitor both the pre-election as well as election day events.

In assessing whether these elections will be free and fair, or "business as usual;" it is instructive to review the factors which the OSCE has stated contributed to the failure of past elections:

1. The executive apparatus maintained control on election commissions;

There are 110 district election commissions (one for each district which elects a Member of Parliament) with a total membership of 1430 seats. Out of these 1430 seats, the opposition was only allowed appointment to 44 seats; representation of only 3.1%.

Next, there are a total of 6,485 precinct commissions which comprise between five and 19 members each and total of 69,845 open seats. Of these 69,845 open seats, the opposition was only allowed appointment to 48 seats; 0.07 percent of the total membership of election commissions.

Mr. Chairman, let me be very blunt: if the regime in Belarus was interested in running free and fair elections, it would ensure that all the votes are truthfully counted. However, when only .07 percent of the precinct election commissions—the very commissions where the votes are actually tabulated—are opposition members; this is evidence enough that the regime has every interest in controlling the voting results.

2. Candidate registration procedures were abused to prevent undesirable candidates from participating in the elections, limiting voters' choice;

It is fair to ascertain that Lukashenko realized that it was in his best interest to allow a large number of opposition candidates to become registered in order to give the international community the false impression that he is allowing a fair playing field. The regime knows that it has other ways to control the candidates and the voting results, as I just mentioned.

Before the candidates were registered, IRI received numerous reports that potential opposition candidates were being dismissed from their jobs or expelled from university. One of the most outrageous reports of repression against candidates is as the case of Alexander Mekh, who works for Belarus' profitable pipeline transit company Beltransgaz. Mr. Mekh was fired for his political activism, and managed to tape the conversation; a copy of the full transcript is attached. During this conversation, Mr. Mekh is pressured to stop his political involvement or lose his job. His boss tells him, "You are a clever man, you just think what you are doing?! You will not have income, how will you provide for the family?! You won't start a business. No one will employ you in Kobryn. This is dead end!"

On August 29, the CEC announced that only 276 out of 365 people were registered as candidates for the elections; this number is less than both the 2000 and 2004 elections. 51 candidates who were denied registration appealed and only 8 of these were re-instated. In summary, since 365 people were seeking registration, this means that 25% were denied the right to even be on the ballot. Of the candidates registered, only 78 are opposition members. With 110 electoral districts, this means that voters in approximately 29% of the districts aren't even being allowed a choice; if they vote, they have no option but to support the regime's candidate.

Once again we see that candidate registration is a convenient way for the government to remove "undesirable"—meaning opposition—candidates with strong support. The case of Ales Lahvinets, an activist of "For Freedom" movement, is illustrative. After Mr. Lahvinets's appeal for registration was denied, the CEC chair Lydia Yermoshina told him: "No one should ever lecture the CEC. It costs dearly."

Lukashenko has also recently made overtures that during this election it may be possible that a few opposition members are elected. We must ask ourselves: does this constitute democracy? Does "allowing" a few opposition members to take seats satisfy U.S. calls for free and fair elections?

3. Campaign activities were regulated excessively, limiting candidate performance;

One way the regime can subtly regulate opposition campaign activities is by showing bias towards regime-supporting candidates. Viktor Ivashkevich, a BPF member and candidate hopeful who was not allowed registration, was told by voters in his constituency that signatures for the regime-supporting candidate in his district were forcibly collected from students at a local high school and college.

Other candidates complain of restrictions on printing their election materials. By law, each registered candidate is given \$830 by the government with which to create campaign materials. Opposition candidates have reported trouble getting printing houses to publish their campaign leaflets. Alyaksei Haurutsikau, registered candidate in Vitsebsk, had his documents refused by his regional printing house, yet publications of

the pro-regime candidate in his district were published without problem. These are only two examples of numerous violations which are being reported every day.

4. Significant restrictions on the fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly and association had an intimidatory and constraining effect on the campaign;

In Belarus, there is a law against mass gatherings, which means that any group of more than two people must receive government permission to assemble. This law is largely used to control opposition meetings with supporters and voters. In August, the CEC actually published a list of “approved” venues where candidates can meet with voters. These venues range from a dance club to a meadow. Candidates were reminded by Lydia Yermoshina, head of the CEC, that candidates would have to receive permission in the event they wanted to meet with voters in any venue not listed, including dialogue on the street. This completely hinders effective voter outreach by the candidates.

An example of this is Anatol Bukas, a candidate in Barysau, who reported that the local authorities didn’t schedule the first meeting for voters with registered candidates until September 9; thus limiting their campaign to only two weeks. Furthermore, he also was warned by officials that they should review and approved the message to be delivered to voters beforehand.

5. Heavily biased State-controlled media dominated the electronic and print sectors, and no effective counterbalance was provided by the independent media. In the end, candidates had very limited access to the media;

By law, each candidate is entitled to limited coverage in the official news media consisting of five minutes of TV time, and five minutes of radio time. They are also entitled to limited access to print media, consisting of the ability to print one statement no longer than two typed pages in one official newspaper which is determined by CEC. However, the government continues to censor the information of opposition candidates. For example, “Respublika,” an official newspaper of the Council of Minister of Belarus, refused to publish election programs of three UCP candidates on the grounds that they contained negative estimates of Belarus’ political and economic situation.

On September 5, the addresses of candidates for deputies in the Chyhunachny constituency in Vitsebsk were scheduled to be televised. The first address by the pro-regime candidate went without problems. The second address was by opposition candidate Andrei Lyavinou; however, during his speech the sound disappeared “suddenly” as he made the following statement to voters “I urge you not to take part in the early vote. The procedure of early vote does not guarantee the principle of transparency: for the entire 5 days the ballot box is not under control of the district elections commission, observers and mass media since 5 p.m. each day.” Miraculously, sound was suddenly restored when it was time for the third candidate and regime supporter to make his speech.

6. Provisions for early voting, mobile ballot boxes, the vote count and aggregation of results, far short of minimum transparency requirements for independent verification.

The main avenue for the regime to falsify elections occurs during the early voting period. In Belarus, voting begins five days before the actual election day. During this period, we anticipate that the regime will not truly count the votes. It will, as it has done in previous elections, manufacture votes for pro-regime candidates.

CONCLUSION:

Mr. Chairman, it appears that once again it is “business as usual in Belarus” and that the odds are overwhelming stacked in the regime’s favor. Yet even in the midst of this repressive culture, the Unified Democratic Forces, a coalition of pro-democratic activists in Belarus, is ardently striving to offer voters an alternative to the Lukashenko regime.

Since 2007, the UDF has been drafting and implementing their strategy for these elections. The cornerstone of this strategy was the development a single, unified list of candidates to run for each of the 110 seats on the Chamber of Representatives. The UDF’s goal was to maximize resources and support to ensure they had one strong, capable candidate representing the UDF in each electoral district. Each UDF candidate on the unified list was chosen through a primary, caucus or some other democratic method in each district. Unfortunately, only 78 of these candidates have been registered.

The UDF has used data derived from polling and focus groups, to create a joint campaign message for all of the UDF candidates to run under. Polling data evidenced that voters are most concerned about the worsening economic situation in Belarus: rising prices, inflation, low standard of living, the cut in social benefits, and unemployment. The goal of the UDF’s campaign message is to prove to voters that they are a viable alternative to the Lukashenko regime, and that they have concrete ideas of how to bring positive change to the country. The campaign message is entitled “Power for the People, and not People for the Power.” The concept of the campaign message is that the current Chamber of Representatives in Belarus holds no real power, and serves as a rubber-stamp for President Lukashenko. The UDF’s goal is to remind voters of their rights as citizens, and that positive change and solutions to the worsening economic situation can only take place if the people have a voice in government; including, the ability to elect members of parliament who can enact change.

Mr. Chairman, if elections in Belarus were free and fair, I truly believe that the UDF would be represented in the parliament. IRI’s polling demonstrates that the citizens of Belarus are ready for a change. When asked to choose between a parliamentary candidate that supported change or a candidate that supported the status quo in Belarus; respondents indicated by a two-to-one margin that they would support a candidate for change. When asked whether reforms in Belarus were necessary, the responses were overwhelmingly affirmative: 83% said yes to reforms for the economy; 82% said yes to reforms in social welfare; 62% to reforms in politics; 85% to reforms in healthcare; and 71% to education

reforms. The voters in Belarus clearly desire change and they deserve to be heard. U.S. and European Government officials must remain vigilant in calling for democratic reform in Belarus. It is imperative that we continue to document electoral abuses and repressions against opposition candidates and monitor the events on election day. We need to remind the Belarusian government that the world is paying close attention to this situation, and improved relations with the West are related to the transparency of elections in Belarus.

Mr. Chairman, the Unified Democratic Forces have proven their willingness to unite and campaign against all odds. But they realize their campaign to bring change to their country is not limited to the parliamentary elections of September; this is a campaign which knows no electoral boundaries. Lukashenko might prevent change via the ballot box in 2008, but he can not squelch the will of the people forever. Voters want change, and the Unified Democratic Forces represent that change. We owe it to them to acknowledge their dedication and stand with them until the end when they witness the fruition of their goal for a free and democratic Belarus.