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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

Before the

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OF THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS**

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**HEARING ON
“BUSINESS AS USUAL? BELARUS ON THE EVE OF ELECTIONS”**

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the political situation in Belarus prior to its September 28 parliamentary elections. The regime in Minsk has adopted a different approach to the elections, in comparison to the 2004 contest, but the changes are of style, not substance. Belarus has not held a free or fair election since Alexander Lukashenka was elected president 14 years ago. From the 1996 constitutional referendum to the 2006 presidential elections, the regime has been rightly charged with obstructing election monitoring, manipulating and falsifying tallies, and repressing opposition candidates. This time around, the thrust has changed, but the end result will almost certainly be the same.

To win Transatlantic political and economic concessions, the regime is altering the way it conducts elections in three ways: by allowing international scrutiny, asserting technical improvements, and moderating the campaign climate. The changes are tactical, but they are directed at achieving a familiar outcome. In the past, Lukashenka cared little about Western outcry over the regime's lack of restraint in persecuting the opposition and falsifying elections. The regime's new business plan is to try to minimize international condemnation of and encourage domestic apathy about what is already a flawed process. Lukashenka wants a "quiet election" that will advertise "progress" on several fronts and can be sold to the West, while still producing the predictable outcome.

Selling Abroad

The regime's first adjustment towards muting international criticism has been to open up the elections to the outside world. Unlike Russia, Belarus has welcomed international monitoring of the upcoming elections. As compared to previous contests, Minsk has issued invitations in a timely manner and not refused visas to observers. In contrast to 2004, the regime has been less obstructionist, granting the OSCE mission

access to the highest levels of government. Lukashenka has declared: "We want to show western countries and Russia how elections should be organized."

This election is being orchestrated primarily for US and European consumption, with the primary purpose of improving Belarus' international image. The country's top election official has made it clear that the Central Election Commission's primary goal is to "have the results be recognized by the international community." The acceptance of and focus on international observers also helps generate legitimacy amongst the 71 percent of the population that thinks the election should be monitored. But just as importantly, the regime's détente with the international community seeks to divert citizens' attention away from the election's domestic aspects. The country's airwaves and newspapers have been flooded with pieces on Europe, not the elections. Close to a third of the state-controlled media's election coverage has centered on the international monitors, not the candidates or races.

The regime's spotlight on the international has been carefully focused. In terms of international monitoring, it has concentrated on the more friendly CIS observers. During the second week of August, the state news agency Belta devoted four times as much coverage to the CIS monitors than to their western counterparts, but there has been almost no official coverage of domestic observation efforts. The CIS mission has been careful to reinforce the "quiet election" being organized by the regime. Its Russian head declared: "The preparations for the parliamentary election in Belarus are going on in a calm manner, just as planned."

Like the government, the leadership of the democratic opposition has also recognized the paramount role of the international community. By focusing much of its efforts on competing with the regime for Western attention, instead of campaigning, the opposition is also deflecting the electorate's attention away from domestic issues and races. OSCE observers describe the ongoing campaign as "noiseless," and a domestic observer declared that "there has never been such a 'quiet campaign' in Belarus." Calls for a boycott by some in the opposition also threaten to turn the election into exclusively an international show. As the first interim report of the OSCE/ODIHR mission reported, there is "very little evidence" that an election is actually underway in Belarus.

Better Business Practices?

The second tack to temper international dissatisfaction with the election process is the regime's focus on organizational and technical matters, rather than political contests. Lukashenka has declared that "we want the elections to be held in an open and democratic way so that nobody will be able to criticize us." It comes as no surprise that the Central Election Commission is pointing to procedural improvements as evidence of Belarus coming "closer to international standards." Chairperson Lidia Yarmoshyna pointed out, for example, that the CEC has received a total of 275 complaints since the parliamentary campaign began, as compared with 888 complaints during the last parliamentary campaign. The CEC has touted accrediting more observers and registering a greater percentage of candidates as successes in preparing for the elections. The CIS

monitoring mission has praised the Belarusian authorities for successfully “securing the proper organization of the election process.”

Cosmetic changes in routine do produce good publicity, especially if the state controls the media, like in Belarus. If this election is perceived as more efficiently run, it gives the appearance of being more democratic. A focus on procedures helps to influence the more than one-third of voters who consider the country’s election code as flawed and do not believe this election will be free or fair.

Similarly, the state-run media’s election coverage is reporting on those who are running the election, not those running in it. During the second half of July, the state-controlled media devoted more than 70 percent of its coverage on the parliamentary elections to President Lukashenka. During the first half of August, the state’s leading daily, *Soviet Belarus*, dedicated 90 percent of its election coverage to the president and the CEC. *Gomel Pravda*, a regional newspaper covering 17 election districts, managed to top that figure, allotting 99.82 percent of its space to the president and CEC.

The regime’s depiction of the election as a series of well-organized procedures helps to promote “calm” because it diverts attention from competing candidates, parties, platforms or issues. As an independent media monitor noted, “When we watch a play, the director is not present on the stage. So far, we have only seen the director, lighting technicians and bit players, not the actors themselves, that means the parliamentary candidates and their voters, the main actors in the election process. The state media writes very little about these actors.”

An orderly election also contrasts nicely with a democratic opposition that is painted by the regime as illegitimate, disorganized and riven by conflict. Protests by the opposition against procedural irregularities are being used by a regime which bases its legitimacy on stability to accuse the democrats of being unruly and disturbing the peace. The Central Election Commission has declared, for example, that criticism over the formation of election commissions is part of a strategy aimed at preventing the campaign from being as quiet “as we would like it to be.” By spending more time tussling with the regime over election procedures than campaigning, the opposition has contributed to the regime’s priority of conducting a “well-ordered” election. The state’s actions and its media coverage are not designed to inform voters but to influence foreign observers. They foster mass indifference, and preserve the political status quo. According to one OSCE employee, the most important thing for the regime – and apparently the opposition as well – is how this election looks to the West, not how it affects Belarusian citizens.

Targeted Advertising

The third means to insure a “quiet election” is to temper political noise at home. The regime has made an effort to moderate its repression against the democratic opposition. Candidates report that the current election environment is appreciably better than of 2004, when the regime barely cared about international opinion and made little pretense in allowing any semblance of competition. The state-run media’s coverage has

improved in the sense that there has been less vitriol flung at the opposition. This time around there is no climate of fear. There is some truth in the claim by the secretary of the Central Election Commission that "The campaign is being carried out peacefully, in a quiet manner."

But again, this is a change in approach by the regime, not a change in direction. Heavy-handedness has been shelved for subtlety. Brute force has been set aside in favor of low-level harassment, and intimidation has been replaced by fostering indifference. While purposely raising the international profile of the elections for its own purposes, the regime's game plan at home has been to play down the elections.

Before the campaign began, the regime made sure to eliminate many of the opposition's troublemakers. As my colleagues have pointed out, leading representatives, including former statesmen, government leaders and VIPs, were left off of election commissions. A dozen of the opposition's "rising stars," who had previously run strong campaigns and developed popular support, were not registered as candidates.

Those who made it past the procedural hurdles of registration have not been subjected to the full force of the state's repressive apparatus. Rather than being beaten or arrested, as in 2004, they or members of their campaign teams have been forced to undergo tax inspections, expelled from university, fired from their jobs, drafted into the army and subjected to other forms of pressure by the authorities. The regime hasn't abandoned the use of force, just ratcheted down its intensity. In fact, because the regime wants this election to come off well, most of the election-related arrests have been of those advocating a boycott or, as one judge put it, "an unsanctioned event." Yes, in Belarus, even boycotts must be approved by the state.

To foster indifference among the populace, the state-run media has played down the elections. From July to August, election-related coverage actually decreased. The state broadcast media has devoted more time to reporting on the weather than the elections in spite of the fact that, as one media monitor quipped, "there were no floods, storms or tsunamis in our country." It has devoted almost zero coverage to opposition campaigns. As late as the last week of August and first week of September, *Soviet Belarus* and *The Republic*, two leading state dailies, provided no positive or no negative reporting on political parties – they simply ignored them. During the same period, a leading news program on state TV devoted less than three percent of its election reporting to an anonymous opposition and anonymous political parties. There is no mention of the elections as a choice between different candidates, political platforms and possible paths of social, political and economic development. State radio rejected the opposition's request to hold candidate debates. Another independent monitor was discouraged to see that "except for the publication of political programs in the newspapers and short advertisements on television and radio, there is literally no election campaign going on in the media."

Finally, the regime has used its administrative resources to limit the public outreach of opposition campaigns and silence competition between different political

visions. Candidates' television addresses were broadcast during rush hour, from 5:30 to 6:30pm, when working people were still commuting home. They appeared not on national TV, but on regional channels, which less people watch. The state provided the equivalent of \$800 to each candidate for campaigning. This is the only funding that can legally be used to get out his or her message. Meetings with voters have been restricted to only a few, out of the way places, such as parks where dogs are allowed. Candidate materials are only allowed to be posted on isolated billboards. The regime's goal is to make the elections unnoticeable for the general public and to prevent any political excitement among common people. Citizens will be encouraged to go to the polls without knowing their choices, and the regime is doing all it can to keep a tight rein on those who might disturb the ritualization of voting that still exists in this post-Soviet state.

Mr. Chairman, during Soviet times, Belarus was known as "The Quiet Republic." The regime is doing all that it can to make this a "quiet election," palatable to the West. But "the sounds of silence" emanating from Minsk insure that this will not be a free and fair election. To answer the question in the title of this hearing, it's not business as usual in Belarus this fall, but a scam is still in the works. Thank you