

EXAMINING THE PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE IN BELARUS



December 4, 2007

**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

Washington: 2010

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The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

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The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC

[The briefing was held at 2:01 p.m. in room 1539 Longworth House Office Building, Washington, DC, Hon. Alcee L. Hastings, Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, moderating.]

Commissioners present: Hon. Alcee L. Hastings, Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe and Hon. Mike McIntyre, Commissioner, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Participants present: Aliaksandr Milinkevich, Movement for Freedom; Anatoliy Lebedko, United Civic Party of Belarus; Enira Bronitskaya, Human Rights Activist; Pavel Severinets, Malady Front of Belarus; Sergey Kalyakin, Belarusian Party of Communists; Anatoliy Levkovich, Belarusian Social Democratic Party; and Dmitriy Fedaruk, Acting Chair, Malady Front.

Mr. HASTINGS. I'd like to call this meeting to order.

I thank you all for being here and welcome you to this Helsinki Commission briefing, "Examining the Prospects for Democratic Change in Belarus," a country located in the heart of Europe, but which has the unfortunate distinction of having one of the worst human rights and democracy records in the European part of the OSCE region.

I'm very pleased that we have with us today a delegation of courageous leaders of Belarus' democratic opposition and leading human rights and democracy activists.

The delegation is being hosted by the International Republican Institute, and I genuinely appreciate their help making their presence here possible.

I must say that I feel a special connection with our speakers, as all were closely involved in the March 2006 Presidential elections. As President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly at the time, I led the OSCE election mission to what I perceived as deeply flawed elections.

Our first speaker, Aliaksandr Milinkevich, is leader of the Belarusian nongovernmental organization For Freedom. He was candidate for President of the United Democratic Opposition Party in the 2006 elections and was a recipient of the European parliament's 2006 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Our second speaker, Anatoliy Lebedko, heads the United Civic Party and co-chairs the United Democratic Forces. We first met in the 1999 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly annual session.

He is an outspoken defender of democratic rights. Anatoliy has been harassed, imprisoned and beaten by the authorities in Belarus.

I'm also pleased to welcome Enira Bronitskaya, a human rights advocate, civil society activist, and former political prisoner who was jailed for 6 months last year for her work as co-leader of the elections monitoring NGO Partnership.

Partnership was banned the Belarusian authorities after it wrote a report and presented evidence of election fraud.

Following the presentations of our speakers, other members of the delegation will come up to the dais and be available to answer questions from the audience.

If you have not yet done so, you are welcome to pick up our speakers' biographies on the table.

At the post-election press conference the day after the 2006 elections, I stressed, and I quote what I said then, "The Belarusian people deserve better, indeed, better than the status quo."

Regretfully, in light of the intervening 20 months of continued repression and stagnation, this remains my message today.

I would like to say that when I was in Belarus, the authorities treated me well. I remember saying to the foreign minister that, coming from Florida, if the Belarusian election was flawed, I certainly would call it like I see it.

Mr. Lukashenka has missed opportunities to liberalize the economy and the political system. Rather, he has chosen to maintain tight control over these and other aspects of society, especially when it comes to the media.

Finally and most importantly, I want to commend the courage and commitment of the members of the delegation present here today, who, along with their colleagues, are struggling for democracy, freedom and respect for human rights, under very trying circumstances.

Indeed, some of their colleagues, including Aliaksandr Kazulin and Andrei Klimov, continue to languish in prison, while other are disappeared nearly a decade ago without a trace.

I look forward to hearing from our speakers about the situation in their country and their agenda for change, especially in advance of parliamentary elections scheduled for next year.

Mr. Milinkevich, the floor is yours.

Mr. MILINKEVICH. Thank you very much. I am Aliaksandr Milinkevich, from Belarus and the movement For Freedom.

Mr. MILINKEVICH. [through interpreter]. I would like to talk about how the regime deals with politically active people. Political prisoners and political repression are hot topics for Belarus. During the last year, the practice of preventive detentions has become widely used before all big political events. For instance, the police did not detain any participants of the European March on October 14. However, according to human rights defenders, 50 people were detained and received fines and short jail sentences during the month preceding the rally.

This figure does not include the people who were detained up to 3 hours. It is not always easy to collect all information about such cases, but we know about more than 100 of such cases.

Mainly, pro-democratic activists are charged with disorderly conduct and participation in unauthorized gatherings. Most often, police officers testify as witnesses in such trials or verdicts are made without any testimonial evidence.

It is not always possible to provide legal assistance to them. Attention to such cases should be greater. As of today, the solution to the problem of preventive detentions has not been found.

But the people we need urgently to talk about are political prisoners.

Mikalay Autukhovich, who was sentenced to 3 years and 6 months of imprisonment for an alleged economic crime. Dzmitry Dashkevich was sentenced to 1.5 years of imprisonment for participation in an unregistered organization. Less than a month ago, Dmitry Dashkevich was tried again. The authorities charged him with refusal to provide testimonial evidence. This time he was punished with a fine, but the trial deprived him of the hope for early release or amnesty.

Aliaksandr Kazulin was sentenced to 5.5 years of imprisonment for malicious hooliganism and participation in actions that breached public order.

Andrei Klimov was sentenced to 2.5 years for an article on the Internet, which, in the opinion of the authorities, called for the overthrow of the constitutional system. The trial over Andrei Klimov was held in a complete information blackout. His family was simply concerned about Andrei's life.

Klimov had a stroke during the investigation. A month ago, he was transferred to Mazyr prison and his family did not receive his letters for a long time. Klimov is the first political prisoner in Belarus who serves his sentence in a medium security prison.

Yury Lyavonau was sentenced together with Mikalay Autukhovich to 3.5 years of imprisonment on charges of economic crime.

Artur Finkevich was sentenced to 2 years of restricted liberty for political graffiti. Less than 2 months ago, Artur Finkevich was charged with violation of the prison regime. The case has already been sent to court. Artur faces a new sentence of up to 3 years of imprisonment.

Release of all political prisoners is a necessary demand made to the regime. However, at present, some countries of the European Union have active communications with our authorities and do not insist on this condition.

In the end, I want to speak about solidarity. Solidarity and support of every repressed citizen and every civic activist destroys fear. We are doing that inside the country, but international campaigns of solidarity are also very important.

This creates both the international response and much needed support to Belarusian democratic activists.

Mr. HASTINGS. Mr. Lebedko?

Mr. LEBEDKO [through interpreter]. I would like to start with a word of thanks to Mr. Chairperson of the Commission on behalf of all our delegation for organizing this meeting, for real actions which the Helsinki Commission is doing for Belarus.

Last time we met in Kyiv during the Parliamentary Assembly of OSCE, which adopted a resolution on Belarus, which is very important for Belarus, and we would like to thank you for that, as well.

To save time, it is a great honor for me to speak in the U.S. Congress. The hearings today are direct testimony of the fact that Belarus is still on the international agenda.

I represent the team of political optimists in Belarus. Possible pessimist's appraisals are a little bit more accurate, but I am convinced that only optimists will be able to bring changes to Belarus.

For the sake of objectivity, I suggest considering all arguments and perspectives. I will start with existing risks and threats.

One, Belarus continues to remain a test laboratory for the production and distribution of a neo-authoritarian ideology of Lukashenka in Eurasia and Lukashenka remains the leader of revenge forces in the former USSR.

This situation is a central underestimation of the situation in Belarus by the international community.

Two, the authorities continue to stake their power on repression and violent solutions to problems. We have clearly declared that UDF is in support of dialogue with the authorities, but we cannot shake a hand which is balled into a fist. We cannot shake a hand that holds the keys to the prison cells of Alyaksandr Kazulin, Andrei Klimov, and Dmitry Dashkevich and other political prisoners.

We maintain that the real dialogue about concrete issues of political prisoners and free and fair elections is substituted for never ending talks. There is a danger that the international community will be stuck in this conversation, which has neither a time limit nor agenda.

Three, the regime demonstrates certain signs of mimicry. The evidence is the newly created pro-Presidential political structure in Belarus and the formal transfer of power to Lukashenka's son, Viktor, in 2011, while the real ruler continues to rule.

The consequence of such a scenario will be a continuation of the situation in Belarus for another 5 years.

Factors that reflect an optimistic future outlook. There is a distinctively new situation. People demonstrate readiness to listen and to hear the positive alternative proposed by the United Democratic Forces for the demand for alternative development.

It is connected to energy problems with the atmosphere of the deteriorating relations with Russia, with the cut in social benefits and guarantees for 5.5 million of Belarusian citizens. As a consequence, the popularity of Lukashenka after the Presidential campaign declined 21 points.

Two, despite the focus of the pessimists and contrary to the efforts of the authorities, the UDF did not split after the Presidential elections. The Congress of the Democratic Forces, which took place in May this year, pressed a new strategy.

According to the adopted strategy the coalition is to implement three campaigns—the European campaign, the social campaign, and the campaign for free elections. Each political entity signed the agreement about preparation for the election campaign, according to which the single list of UDF candidates is formed and the single message to the voters is worked out.

The national committee of UDF is preparing a package of positive alternatives for Belarusian citizens, including concrete proposals from the European Union.

Three, lack of the former consolidation in the circles of the ruling nomenclature. Four, existence of serious contradictions between the Kremlin and the Red House.

The proposals for action. One, political prisoners and Europe are two notions that are incompatible both geographically and politically. This problem demands unity of efforts of both supporters of change in Belarus and the international community.

We expect an increase in activity through diplomatic channels, on all different means of influence on the Belarusian authorities. While there are political prisoners in Belarus, it is not possible to hold free and fair elections, until Belarusian newspapers have to be printed abroad, there are no grounds for withdrawal of sanctions against certain Belarusian officials.

Investment in democracy is the most useful and effective investment of capital. Today we speak about the necessity to significantly increase assistance for the structures of the civic society and independent mass media.

The democracy support acts have a long-term effect. Efforts of the U.S., EU, OSCE and European Council need to be joined. All this will combine diplomatic efforts that we hope to win over the regime and see change occur.

Such as elections with OSCE standards, release of political prisoners, et cetera. In particular, Lukashenka needs to understand that if 2008 parliamentary elections are not free and fair, there will be more consequences in addition to those actions already taken and sanctions currently in place.

Lukashenka should have a choice—either a special conference in Belarus to create conditions necessary for holding elections under OSCE standards or an international tribunal over the Belarusian regime and ideology of Lukashenka.

The situation demands strengthening of coordination of a common strategy of the United States and the European Union regarding Belarus. Our recommendation is to return to the practice of joint leaders or representatives of the European Commission and the U.S. State Department to Minsk. It is better to have a common voice and a coordinated position when speaking to official Minsk.

I am ashamed that Belarus remains the last enclave of dictatorship on the map of Europe. I know that Belarus and its people deserve better. This better is democracy and European values and standards.

The solution of the Belarusian problem is in Minsk, not Washington, DC, Moscow, or Brussels. No one will solve our problems for us. We do not expect a miracle to happen in 2008.

This year is very special for us. This is the year of the 90th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic and the year of the parliamentary election in Belarus.

It places special responsibility on all supporters of change. As the leader of political optimists, I believe in the inevitability of change and in the future of Belarus.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you very much.

Although she is obstructed from me over there, we do have present with us the U.S. Ambassador to Minsk, Karen Stewart. Ambassador, welcome. I'm delighted that you're here.

And we've also been joined by my colleague in the House of Representative and on the Helsinki Commission, Congressman Mike McIntyre, from North Carolina.

Mike, we've had two of our presenters already and, if you'd like, at this time, before we go to Enira, to make any statement you may wish.

We are working with an interpreter. So use your North Carolina drawl.

Mr. MCINTYRE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I did have the privilege of being at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly this past summer, when we did have some issues come up about Belarus, and, of course, I'm speaking about the Assembly we held in Ukraine.

One of the concerns I had and, in fact, had an amendment about was the concern of protecting religious freedom in Belarus. And so I will read with interest the statements already given today and, also, listen with interest to the next statement, in particular, to make sure that religious freedom is being allowed and that religious freedom is not being oppressed in Belarus.

Thank you very much.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you very much, Congressman McIntyre.

We now will hear from Ms. Bronitskaya. Thank you for being here, Madam.

Ms. BRONITSKAYA. Thank you for this opportunity to speak here. I would like to speak about oppression against youth in Belarus and the specific area of freedom, the right to education. Problems in this sphere in Belarus are not really new, but now the situation is becoming worse.

Youth is the most active group in Belarus. They are the most active participants of the peaceful civil protests in March 2006 and mainly the youth from 19 through 25. They are students of different universities and colleges.

Young people in Belarus are not afraid anymore to be arrested and the authorities are looking for new possibilities of oppression. Unfortunately, Belarusian authorities have a lot of possibilities to press on youth. Since 2005, all the students who want to study in foreign establishments of higher education on a temporary or exchange basis need to obtain written permission from the minister of education.

Universities in Belarus are more and more becoming institutions that do not provide education, but prepare ideologically right people. The minister of education of Belarus has prepared a decree that now is waiting to be signed by the President, according to which, in the next year, university entrants will need, before exams, to have interviews in the local ideological departments. And without its positive decision they can't enter any humanitarian specialty.

Five months ago, students were deprived of social benefits, but the government wants to establish targeted aid for those who have difficult financial situations and the tendency is that university administration will be such bodies which will decide who needs this supplemental financing.

The majority of universities have in their statutes the right to exclude students after administrative or criminal cases, but it's just a right that universities use according to their interests.

From spring 2006, the practice of excluding students from universities for their political views became more regular. We know 200 students who were expelled after the March event, but real figures can be much higher.

Official reasons for expulsion of students include the following—breaking rules of internal educational establishment regulations and allegedly for “poor progress.” The real reasons of expulsion were penalty under administrative law through deprivation of liberty from 3 up to 15 days; penalty under the administrative law through a fine; membership in democratic youth organizations, membership in political parties, distribution of campaign materials during the Presidential campaign of 2006.

There are several ways of excluding and the last was just before and after the European March in October 2007 and just now, while we are here, the administration of both the university are trying to exclude a youth activist of Young Front from the university and we’re told that just because of the attention of the democratic community and international community, she will receive the possibility to continue her education.

Many European countries have responded to the repression of Belarus students by opening scholarship programs for expelled or repressed Belarusians. From 2006, because of political reasons, about 430 students studied their education abroad.

During the last 3 years, there were only two students who protested against their exclusion to the court. They both lost. The main emphasis in these cases was to prove that these students were expelled because of political reasons, and we hope that such practice, such court practice will be widened.

During the last year, we regularly received information about pressure on school children. The administrations of the Belarusian educational establishment feel their complete impunity. More attention should be paid to these cases. Each case of such pressure and exclusion must be known and criticized by democratic forces in Belarus and the international community.

We consider that any contacts of the European Union structures or European or American funds with university administrations that conduct political repression against students should be stopped.

Thank you.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you very much.

I do take cognizance of the work of young people. I, when in Belarus, was mindful of the very active youth and it brought to mind my own work here in this country as a young man.

It took a lot of time, but we did make a lot of change. So if that model is any example for you, then I sure hope that you continue your efforts, as we did.

I’m going to ask now if Pavel Severinets and Sergey Kalyakin and Anatoliy Levkovich and Dmitriy Fedaruk would join us. They will be available to answer our questions.

Before going to questions, and I invite you all, ladies and gentlemen, to ask questions of our presenters, I’d like to thank our interpreter, Alina Stefanovich. I’ve worked with her before, and I deeply appreciate your efforts.

Alina, don’t bother to interpret this. This is just my musing. In Boston, about 2 months ago, I met the father of a child and the child, his name was Mendel, and Mendel was born in Sweden. His father is Spanish and is head of “Radio Free Europe,” broadcast in Spanish.

And he, along the way, learned Swedish, Spanish, German, and his father and mother are Jewish, Hebrew, and English. And this little thing is almost 6 years old and I’m talking with him and his cousin, who is 7, who speaks three languages.

And I say to him, “Well, Mendel, count for me in all five of those languages,” and he did 1 through 10 just like that. And so then he turned to me and he said, “You count for me in one language.” So I tried German, I did pretty good in German. And he said, “One more.” I said, “I don’t know anymore.” He says, “Why?” I said, “I don’t know,” I said, “but you’ve encouraged me. I’m going to try to learn to speak Spanish.” And he said, “Good. By the time you speak Spanish, I’ll be speaking Chinese.”

That’s a great story. So I marvel at all of you who are multilingual. It’s one thing human society and our world needs to learn more of the languages and cultures of respective countries.

So if I could start and then, Mike, if you will join me with the questions. Why don’t we just put a couple out there and have our guests respond?

One of the things that I’m interested—and now if you would interpret for me at this point.

Do you think some of these elections in Russia will have any kind of an impact on your parliamentary election?

And I’d also be interested, since we do things—I’m sorry. Go ahead.

And as you know, about a year ago, we passed, here in the House, the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act. How would you assess the impact of that?

Any response? Yes, Mr. Milinkevich.

Mr. LEBEDKO. I will start. As for the election campaign in Russia, it is easy for me to answer this question, because our party made a special statement about that.

Unfortunately, I would have to say that we will witness the Russian Federation becoming like the country where Lukashenka rules. What we experienced 10 or 12 years ago now we see happening in Russia.

Independent television is disappearing. Self-censorship becomes the deputy editor-in-chief of main Russian newspapers, and this is a very dangerous tendency.

And my impressions about the last speech by Putin, it seems to me that Alyaksandr Lukashenka writes speeches for Mr. Putin now. I think now Russia will be busy with its own internal election campaign.

This incites the heads of the political regime in Belarus even more. It’s one thing that there was an impression that Lukashenka is only one dictator in Europe. It is a different situation if such a tendency starts growing and spreading in Russia. This would be in a simply different context of the situation.

This is why we express our solidarity with the democratic forces in Russia. I also think the absence of a real democratic party in the state Duma is also not good for Russia.

On the 13th and 14th, Putin comes to Minsk to meet with Lukashenka. So many things will become clear after this visit.

Maybe somebody else could visit the second question.

Mr. MILINKEVICH. Or just add a couple of words to what Anatoliy has just said.

I think that all countries of the world, especially neighboring countries, are interested in Russia being democratic. The things that are happening are really sad.

But it seems to me we should look for the key to democratization not only in Russia, but also in the countries around it. I’m absolutely convinced that if Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia will be really democratic and independent, it will be a lot easier to make Russia democratic.

Of course, the behavior of Russia is, in many things, determined by a post-imperialistic reaction. The hopes to restore the empire, actually, in many terms, determine the foreign policy of Russia.

As for the Democracy Reauthorization Act, it is a very important document. This is huge moral support for the people who are fighting for freedom in our country.

It is also important that such acts will have a concrete result. We completely support targeted political sanctions against Belarus. But when we talk about economic sanctions, one should do them very carefully and accurately, because these sanctions will not be interpreted by us or by you, but by Belarusian propaganda.

But it is very important for us so that the Belarusian people understand why sanctions have been imposed. This is why we are for sanctions, yes, but every time we need to have consultations before imposing them.

As far as support to civil society and media in Belarus, foreign support of civic society and media, we think such support is extremely effective. But we also would like to stress that we would like as many means as possible to be given for activity inside the country, so they are not sent, as it often happens that the majority of them are sent somewhere abroad in a neighboring country.

Unfortunately, the regime did everything possible to cut down all possible internal sources of resources.

Thank you.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you very much.

I would point to Sunday's election and the fact that the Parliamentary Assembly of OSCE and the Council of Europe jointly declared that the Russian elections were not free and fair and did not meet OSCE standards.

Congressman McIntyre?

Mr. MCINTYRE. Thank you very much.

In the time that I have here today, I did want to ask the followup on my opening statement about the religious freedom issue, which I think goes to the core of human rights, of who we are and who we believe ultimately in this time, as well as for all eternity.

And so I would like to ask, with regard to persecution of the minority religious communities in Belarus, why is the government continuing to escalate pressure on minority religious communities and to what extent do we find those of non-Orthodox denominations being threatened or repressed?

Mr. SEVERINETS [through interpreter]. Thank you, Mr. McIntyre, for this question, because this is very urgent for Belarus.

I represent the Belarusian Christian Democracy and we work with believers of different Christian denominations.

Mr. MCINTYRE. I'm sorry. Tell me the name again, the what?

Mr. SEVERINETS [through interpreter]. Belarusian Christian Democracy.

Mr. MCINTYRE. Thank you.

Mr. SEVERINETS [through interpreter]. During the last 5 years, when the new repressive law about religious freedom in Belarus was introduced, there are hundreds of cases of violations of the freedoms and rights of believers in Belarus.

According to this law, if you read the Bible or pray somewhere not in a church, you can be arrested, you can get a fine, or you can even get a short jail sentence.

The regime does not register hundreds of religious communities, especially Protestant communities. It refuses to register them and also deports Christian pastors and Catholic priests.

Last year, the regime tried to confiscate the church building from one of the Protestant groups in Belarus. It's called New Life Church and the believers, about 200 people, had to go on a hunger strike of protest and they actually sit in this building as a fortress and tried to escape officials and police.

Christians, and, first of all, I'm talking about Protestants and Catholics, they are coming on the side of the opposition, trying to help fight against the regime, because they see the regime as pressuring them.

In July of this year, when a Protestant pastor was arrested and kept in jail for 3 days, about 4,000 believers of all Protestants in the nation came to a rally of protest and a rally of prayer and the heads of all Protestant churches were there.

There are also cases when Protestant pastors are deported from the country and they lose their family, because the family stays in Belarus, as Belarusians, and the pastors would be, for example, Polish and he has to stay in Poland. He cannot come back to Belarus and meet with his family.

Mr. MCINTYRE. If I may ask, is the situation worsening or getting any better at all?

Mr. SEVERINETS [through interpreter]. The situation is significantly worsening. And just one example, now believers are gathering signatures, together with us, to have the religion law would be recalled, somehow canceled. So there are about 40,000 signatures already collected.

And, of course, we would really welcome some support from you, like prayer support, solidarity support, political support for the Belarusian Christians.

Mr. MCINTYRE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for addressing that very important issue. We'll do what we can to support you and definitely be praying for you.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you, Congressman.

We now go to you, ladies and gentlemen. I appreciate your patience. And if any of you have questions, and I invite those of you in the audience and the media, if you have questions, to put them to our presenters.

And I would ask, if you have a question, that you use the podium and tell us who you are.

The Congressman and I have a lot of questions, but we'd like to try, in our briefing, to have as much participation from the audience as possible.

QUESTIONER. My name is Mary Mulliman. I work with the Bosnia Support Committee.

I just had a question about the EU and whether it has any influence on Belarus and Belarus democracy.

Does Belarus want to be part of the EU and would it accept any conditions that the EU would set?

Mr. LEBEDKO [through interpreter]. I thank you for the question.

Now we have a clear tendency of growth in the number of pro-European people in Belarus, mainly the young people. People have an opportunity to travel, to travel abroad

to European countries and certainly such people want to be present in Europe not only geographically, but also to be integrated into the European political and economic sphere.

But still, in my opinion, this issue is not in Brussels, but in Minsk in Belarus. We do not want to be so-called accepted somewhere or to get some credit. We will come to Europe, but we need to take several steps toward that, and the first step will be European values.

The second step would be European standards of human rights, freedoms, economic standards. When we make the second step, then we will have the political and moral right to raise this issue of becoming an EU member, because then we will meet the Copenhagen criteria.

As for support from the European Union, we have to recognize that there are partners with different interests in Belarus. With Poland, with Ukraine, there are northern countries which show greater interest and there are some other countries which are a longer distance from Belarus and they show less interest.

When we speak about democracy, it never happens that there is too much help. But I would like to stress again that Belarus is a European country, with a European history and we do not have to go anywhere. We need to return democracy back to Belarus.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you very much.

Questions?

QUESTIONER. [Off-mike.]

Mr. HASTINGS. If you would speak loudly, we would appreciate it.

QUESTIONER. My name is [inaudible]. I'm from Belarus myself.

My question, I will ask it in Belarusian.

QUESTIONER [through interpreter]. My question is about mass media. How do you think mass media are important for Belarus and do you think the support to mass media to independent TV and radio is sufficient or not?

Mr. KALYAKIN [through interpreter]. Unfortunately, in Belarus, practically 100 percent of all mass media are monopolized. There are no independent TV channels or radios which would be independent from the state and from the state propaganda.

There are only seven independent newspapers left in Belarus, the general circulation of which is not more than 70,000 copies per week total circulation.

The state actually bans distribution of the newspapers because the retail system of distribution is also state owned. The shops just refuse to conclude agreements for distribution of the newspaper, and the same goes for subscriptions for newspapers.

The Internet sphere is still relatively free. We need to say that about 30 percent of Belarusian citizens use the Internet regularly. So this is a lot less than in Europe and the United States. When we talk about some kind of political information, then less than 4 percent of Belarusian citizens get such information from the Internet.

So Belarus has signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among which there is freedom of press, and, also, other international documents, does not meet its obligations and this is a very hot issue for Belarus right now.

So we support all kinds of ideas and projects of aid to independent television, independent radio, and, also, some kind of support for independent reporters and newspapers and we also think that this support is not enough.

And we think until we, Belarusian citizens, have the freedom of mass media, until they can read independent newspapers and other media, we cannot talk about freedom of elections in Belarus, because if people do not have objective and political information, we just cannot talk about respect of freedoms in Belarus.

Mr. MILINKEVICH [through interpreter]. I will add a couple of words. All media which work in Belarus need support. Certainly, I'm speaking about independent media.

In a week, the televisions of Belarus will start broadcasting satellite television Belsat. This television is financed by the Polish Government. We really hope this will be a breakthrough in the informational field.

Now, when we were asked for support on this project, the television project, within the framework of the Belarus Democracy Act, this project really becomes international, because it is difficult for the Polish partners to carry it alone.

Mr. HASTINGS. We signed letters recently concerning support for Belsat here in the Helsinki Commission.

You have a question, sir.

QUESTIONER. Yes, I do. First of all, my name is Matt Karlaborski and I come from the Fund for American Studies. Every summer, in Prague, I have the opportunity to work with 130 higher education students from central and eastern Europe, as well as central Asia.

I just wanted to say I have a deep appreciation for what you have experienced fighting for democracy and freedom within your country.

And Americans, especially of my generation, really cannot comprehend what you have experienced in a lifetime, so I want to thank you.

My question now concerns Russian interference in Belarusian politics. For example, after 2006, I know Russia raised the energy prices to Belarus.

Has Belarus done anything to counteract that and how much is Russia really interfering in your work specifically?

Mr. LEVKOVICH [through interpreter]. The problem for oil and gas prices for Belarus, I know that the Belarusian regime receives money from the difference of prices for Russian oil and gas and this was real help of Russia to Belarus, as some analysts were saying, the Kremlin was kind of paying for the regime, for the Belarusian regime.

I know really well that stability costs much and for over 10 years, the regime actually kept itself on the difference of prices. It was about five to seven billion every year.

And I don't think the main problem is that Russia finally started increasing prices. I think the main problem is that the regime, for so many years, enjoyed the situation and did not modernize the economy.

Today the aid from the Kremlin is stopped and Belarus needs to learn how to live without these drug needles. This is the reality that we need to take into account.

Thank you.

Mr. SEVERINETS [through interpreter]. I will add that Russia has played and is playing a very negative role in Belarusian politics. The goal of the current leadership of the Kremlin is to swallow Belarus as a country.

The military strategic cooperation which goes on between the Kremlin and the official Minsk does not depend on the prices of oil or gas and it really has a very clear anti-Western, anti-American character.

Maybe Russia is already tired of paying utility bills for Belarus, so to speak, but they still want to swallow Belarus up and they will do everything to do that, and Belarus hopes that, together with other countries, with the United States, Ukraine and other countries, we will be able to fight against that.

Mr. HASTINGS. I'd like to hear from the young man on the end. He didn't come all the way here not to say anything.

So perhaps I would ask you, what do you think the top human rights concerns are of young people in Belarus? And since you are a part of the opposition democratic forces, what do you believe are the greatest needs at this time?

And I invite the other presenters, as well, but, sir?

Mr. FEDARUK [through interpreter]. Thank you for the question.

Certainly, the greatest danger for young people in Belarus right now in the sphere of human rights is this law which was passed right after the Presidential election in 2006, which bans participation in unregistered organizations.

I represent Young Front here. In our organization, we have about 20 people who are criminally prosecuted under such charges. Today, Dmitry Dashkevich, the chairperson and leader of Young Front, is in prison just for fighting for Belarus and believing in God.

It seems it's supposed to scare young people. It seems the regime can use this mechanism to intimidate people, and to imprison the most active young people. But despite this fact, there are many young people who continue to fight. Young people grow up and they continue the fight of the older generation.

We would like to thank you for your support, because the fact that Pavel Severinets, who also served a prison term for organizing protest actions after the referendum in 2004, the fact that he is here and the fact that I am here is also due to your support.

We really need your support from here. What do we need today in Belarus? Because really every citizen in Belarus knows about Young Front right now, after all the criminal cases, after all the trials, all young people know about Young Front.

And now we really need an opportunity to deliver information about our ideas to grow circles of the population, because we see an alternative not only with fighting the Lukashenka regime, because we are sure that evil cannot be overcome with evil.

We want to present a new generation of Belarusian youth which will join the Front, young people who believe in God and love their country, because such features were very typical for the people who also founded your country. So we have a good example before our eyes.

Build the democratic Belarus we all want to see.

Mr. HASTINGS. I'm glad I asked. I also would be interested to know, roughly, what are the estimates of political prisoners that are currently in confinement and is the United Opposition involved in their defense?

Ms. BRONITSKAYA. [through interpreter]. We do everything that we can. Unfortunately, we cannot do much for these people. Unfortunately, now, we have six people who are recognized prisoners of conscience by the international community.

They are imprisoned and, unfortunately, the only thing we can give them today is our moral support. Inside Belarus, we organize regular solidarity actions. This is the condition, release of political prisoners, should always be set in context with our government.

Unfortunately, as has already been stated, some European countries, some countries of the European Union are quite active in contacts with the government in our country.

Inside the country, we are also supporting the families of the political prisoners. There is also a solidarity program right now where we support not only the families of the six imprisoned people, but, also, other people who have been repressed, because for us, repressions are not only long-term imprisonment repressions, there are also everyday repressions.

Mr. HASTINGS. Ms. Bronitskaya, are women in Belarus actively involved in opposition? I know you are. And how about women overall?

Ms. BRONITSKAYA. [through interpreter]. I think our women are very strong. In many cases, they are stronger than men. They participate in their own way.

Maybe they're not always playing the leading role, but I think without women who participate in our opposition forces today, the position would not be as strong as it is now.

Just one example. When I was tried with my colleagues who were imprisoned, I think the greatest work was done by our mothers. I regularly meet others, women, mothers of the people who were repressed and I really think they can do a lot.

Mr. LEBEDKO [through interpreter]. For the Presidential election, we've had more than 1,000 people behind bars at one moment. Today, according to human rights defenders, we have six political prisoners. Political prisoners is still a No. 1 issue for us.

When a person receives 5.5 years of imprisonment just for running as a Presidential candidate, this is just one example, solidarity should unite people all over the world.

The fact that a former MP was imprisoned for 2.5 years just for a publication on the Internet, it should make us all unite. But I should also speak about some success. In Belarus, practically every week, hundreds of people come out to the streets with portraits of political prisoners. We know about such actions which are happening not only in Belarus, but also in Washington, DC, in Brussels, in Vilnius, in Warsaw.

And thanks to solidarity, we managed to stop this chain of death squads which kidnapped and then physically liquidated people. We are very grateful to you, Mr. Chairman, that during your opening statement, you mentioned the disappearance of opponents of the regime, because we should not forget about it.

Mr. HASTINGS. I'm deeply concerned about that issue. I would like to say and ask you to convey my best wishes to all of the families and especially to Alyaksandr Kazulin's wife, who I met when she was here.

I asked her the question whether our speaking out about her husband in prison helped or hurt and her response was, "Please continue and he wants you to continue to speak out."

So I take this opportunity today to send a message to Mr. Lukashenka and his government that holding Alyaksandr Kazulin until the year 2011 is wrong in the eyes of the world.

And I also would send a message to young people in Belarus that you do make a difference and even though I'm an older man now, I participated in civil rights demonstrations very actively in this country when many thought that this country would not change.

Last Sunday, after coming from Madrid, I drove down the street in Florida, that I once saw the sign in Fort Lauderdale, FL, that said "No Jews, Niggers and Dogs Allowed." That was 40 years ago. Today, I represent that same street as their congressperson.

So I encourage especially all the young people and all people to continue your pursuit of freedom.

Time won't permit us to go into every aspect, but I do believe that the OSCE mission in Minsk plays a constructive role in promoting democracy in Belarus.

I also believe that the nongovernmental organizations, particularly IRI and NDI, when they are on the ground, make for substantial positive changes.

It's also important—I was glad, Anatoliy, when you mentioned Vilnius and Warsaw, I was going to ask you about the cooperation level of other areas that are in the near abroad of Belarus, particularly Latvia and Ukraine.

And I personally will be attending as a representative of the OSCE the elections in Georgia on January 5th. And I have witnessed the union of young people as far away as Lebanon communicating with people in Ukraine and Georgia.

I won't carry on. I'm leaving in a few minutes with the Slovak Ambassador to the United States. Tomorrow I speak with the Tajik Ambassador and representatives from Tajikistan.

I began my day speaking with the secretary of state of Kazakhstan, the former Ambassador here, Saudabayev. We in the Helsinki Commission will keep a lamp on these issues and we will act frequently and fervently to promote not only Belarusian democracy-seekers, but democracy-seekers all over the world.

I thank you, my friends, for your courage and deeply appreciate your being here.

Mr. Milinkevich?

Mr. MILINKEVICH [through interpreter]. Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you and the Helsinki Commission for what you are doing on behalf of the whole group.

When I was flying here to Washington, DC, I had a young woman sitting next to me, not dealing with politics, she's doing science. She was flying to a scientific conference. And we started to talk to each other and she said, "You know, during the protest last year on the square, I was there, as well."

I asked her, "Why were you there? What brought you there? It was so scary." And she just said, "Well, I felt that if I want to defend my dignity, human dignity, I should be there and I also feel that someday my children might ask me, 'During the struggle for freedom, did you help fight the regime, as well?'"

And the majority of people on the square were like her and the fact that there are more and more such people is also part of your participation.

Thank you for solidarity and for support.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you very much.

We will adjourn the briefing. Thank you all so very much.

[Whereupon the briefing ended at 3:34 p.m.]

APPENDICES

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ALEKSANDR MILINKEVICH, MOVEMENT FOR FREEDOM

Political prisoners and political repression are hot topics for Belarus. During the last year, the practice of preventive detentions has become popular before civic and political. For instance, the police did not detain any participants of the European March in October. However, according to human rights defenders, 50 people were detained and received fines and short jail sentences 30 days before the rally. This figure does not include the people who were detained up to three hours. It is not always easy to collect all information about such cases, but we know about more than 100 of such cases. Mainly, pro-democratic activists are charged with disorderly conduct and participation in unauthorized gatherings. Most often police officers testify as witnesses in such trials, or verdicts are made without any testimonial evidence. It is not always possible to provide legal assistance to them. Attention to such cases is insufficient; as of today the solution to the problem of preventive detentions has not been found.

People who we continue to talk about as political prisoners:

Mikalai Autokhovich was sentenced to 3 years and 6 months of imprisonment for an economic crime;

Dzmitry Dashkevich was sentenced to 1.5 years of imprisonment for participation in an unregistered organization. Less than a month ago, Dzmitry Dashkevich was tried again. The authorities charged him with refusal to provide testimonial evidence. This time he was punished with a fine, but the trial deprived him of the hope for early release or amnesty;

Alexander Kazulin was sentenced to 5.5 years of imprisonment for malicious hooliganism and participation in actions that breach public order;

Andrei Klimau was sentenced to 2.5 years for an article on the internet, which, in the opinion of the authorities, called for the overthrow of the constitutional system. The trial over Andrei Klimau was held in a complete information blackout—his family was simply concerned about Andrei's life. Klimau had a stroke during the investigation. A month ago he was transferred to Mazyr prison, and his family did not receive his letters for a long time. Klimau is the first political prisoner in Belarus, who was given a sentence in a medium security prison;

Yury Liavonau was sentenced together with Mikalai Autokhovich for 3.5 years of imprisonment on charges of an economic crime.

Artur Finkevich was sentenced to 2 years of restricted liberty for political graffiti. Less than two months ago, Artur Finkevich was charged with violation of the prison regime. The case has already been sent to court. Artur faces a new sentence of up to 3 years of imprisonment.

Release of all political prisoners is a necessary demand to be made to the regime. However, at present, the European Union has active communication with our authorities, and does not insist on this condition.

In the end, I want to speak about solidarity. Solidarity and support of every repressed citizen and every civic activist destroys fear. We are doing that inside the country, but international campaigns of solidarity are also very important. This creates

both the international response and much needed support to Belarusian democratic activists.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ANATOLY LEBEDKO, UNITED CIVIC PARTY OF BELARUS

It is a great honor for me to speak in the US Congress. The hearings today are a direct testimony of the fact that Belarus is still on the international agenda. I represent the team of political optimists in Belarus. Possibly, pessimists' appraisals will be more accurate, but I am convinced that only optimists will be able to bring changes to Belarus. For the sake of objectivity, I suggest considering all arguments and perspectives.

I will start with the existing risks and threats

1. Belarus continues to remain a test laboratory for production and distribution of a neo-authoritarian ideology of "lukashism" in Eurasia, and Lukashenka remains the leader of revanche forces in the former USSR. This situation is a central underestimation of the situation in Belarus by the international community.

2. The authorities continue to stake their power on repression and violent solutions to problems. We have clearly declared that UDF is in support of dialog with the authorities. But we cannot shake a hand which is balled into a fist. We cannot shake a hand that holds the keys to the prison cells of Alexander Kazulin, Andrei Klimau, Dzmitry Dashkevich and other political prisoners. We maintain that a real dialog about concrete issues of political prisoners and free and fair elections is substituted for never ending "talks." There is a danger that the international community will be stuck in these conversations, which have neither time limit nor agenda.

3. The regime demonstrates certain signs of mimicry. The evidence is the newly created pro-presidential political structure "Belaya Rus" and the formal transfer of power to Lukashenka's son Viktor in 2011, while the real ruler continues to rule. The consequence of such a scenario will be continuation of the situation in Belarus for another 5 years.

Factors that reflect an optimistic future outlook:

1. There is a distinctive new feature to the situation. People demonstrate readiness to listen and to hear the positive alternative proposed by the United Democratic Forces. The demand for an alternative grows. It is connected with energy problems, with the atmosphere of deteriorating relations with Russia, with a cut on social benefits, and with guarantees for 5.5 million of Belarusian citizens. As a consequence, the popularity of Lukashenka after the presidential campaign declined 21 points.

2. Despite the forecasts of the pessimists, and contrary to the efforts of the authorities, the UDF did not split after the presidential election. The Congress of the Democratic Forces which took place in May this year passed the New Strategy. According to the adopted strategy the coalition is to implement three campaigns: The European campaign, the Social campaign, and the campaign "for Free Elections". Eight political entities signed an agreement about preparation for the election campaign, according to which the single list of UDF candidates is formed, and the single message to the voters is worked out.

The National Committee of UDF is preparing a package of positive alternatives for Belarus and its citizens, including 12 concrete proposals to the European Union.

3. Lack of the former consolidation in the circles of the ruling nomenclature.

4. Existence of serious contradictions between the Kremlin and the Red House.

Proposals for Action:

1. Political prisoners and Europe are two notions that are incompatible both geographically and politically. This problem demands unity of efforts of both supporters of

change in Belarus and the international community. We expect an increase in activity through the diplomatic channels using all different means of influence on the Belarusian authorities. While there are still political prisoners in Belarus, while it is not possible to hold free and fair elections, and while Belarusian newspapers have to be printed abroad, there are no grounds for withdrawal of sanctions against certain Belarusian officials.

2. Investment in democracy is the most useful and effective investment of the capital. Today we speak about the necessity to significantly increase assistance to the structures of the civic society and independent mass media. The “Democracy Support Act” will have a long-term effect.

3. Efforts of the US, EU, OSCE, and European Council need to be joint. Only through a combined diplomatic effort can we hope to win over the regime and see change occur; such as elections by OSCE standards, release of political prisoners, etc. In particular, Lukashenka needs to understand that if 2008 parliamentary elections are not free and fair, there will be more consequences—in addition to those actions already taken and sanctions currently in place. Lukashenka should have a choice: either a special conference on Belarus that creates conditions necessary for holding elections under OSCE standards, or international tribunal over the Belarusian regime and ideology of “Lukashism”.

4. The situation demands strengthened coordination of a common strategy of the United States and the European Union regarding Belarus. Our recommendation is to return to the practice of joint visits of representatives of the European commission and the US State Department to Minsk. It is better to have a common voice and a coordinated position when speaking to the official Minsk.

I am ashamed that Belarus remains the last enclave of dictatorship on the map of Europe. I know that Belarus and its people deserve better. This “better” is democracy, and European values and standards. The solution of the Belarusian problem is in Minsk, not Washington D.C., Moscow, or Brussels. No one will solve our problems for us. We do not expect a miracle to happen in 2008. This year is very special for us. This is the year is 90th anniversary of the Belarusian People’s Republic and the year of the parliamentary election in Belarus. It lays special responsibility on all change supporters. As the leader of political optimists, I believe in the inevitability of changes and in the future of Belarus.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ENIRA BRONITSKAYA, HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

I would like to speak about repressions against youth in Belarus and a central realm of freedom—the right to education. Problems in this sphere in Belarus are not new, but the situation is becoming much worse.

The young generation is the most active group in Belarus. They were the most active participants in the peaceful civil opposition of March 2006. For the most part, it is youth between the ages of 19 and 25—students in different universities and colleges that are active. Youth in Belarus are not afraid to be arrested. Yet, authorities are looking for new ways to put pressure on them.

Belarusian Universities have a lot of possible avenues through which to pressure students. Since 2005, all students who want to study abroad, in a foreign institution of higher education, on a temporary or exchange basis, are required to obtain written permission from the Ministry of Education.

Universities in Belarus are becoming less and less about education and more about ensuring that citizens are ideologically aligned with the regime. The Ministry of Education of Belarus has prepared a decree that now is waiting to be signed by president. According to this decree, those entering the university next year will be required to participate in interviews to determine their level of ideological commitment. Without a positive score in these interviews, students will be unable to pursue different humanities specialties in the universities.

Five months ago, students were deprived of social benefits. The government claims to want to help those who have a difficult material situation. The tendency, however, is that university administrations will be given the resources and will become responsible for determining who needs supplementary financing.

The majority of universities are granted the right to exclude students on the basis of administrative or criminal cases. Most universities use these statutes to advance their own interests and agenda.

Since the spring of 2006, expulsion of students from universities on the basis of political ideology became common. We know of 200 students who were expelled after the March events, but real figures could actually be higher.

Official reasons for student's expulsions were the following:

- Breaking the rules and/or regulations of the internal educational establishment;
- Poor progress

The real reasons of expulsion were:

- Penalty under administrative law for deprivation of liberty, 3 to 15 days;
- Penalty under administrative law through fees;
- Membership in a democratic youth organization;
- Membership in political parties;
- Distribution of agitation materials during the presidential campaign of 2006.

There were several waves of exclusion (during spring events of 2006, the spring-summer university examinations; in autumn of 2006, the period of the examinations; and during the local elections campaign, October 2006–January 2007). Several expulsions and waves of intimidation also occurred before and after the European march in October 2007.

Many European countries have responded to the repression of Belarusian students by opening scholarship programmes for expelled or repressed Belarusians. Since 2006, due to these circumstances, about 430 students began their education abroad.

During last two years, there were only two students who protested their expulsion from the university in court. Both cases were lost. The main charge in these cases was to prove that these students were expelled for political reasons. We hope that such court practices will be improved.

During the last year, we regularly received information about pressure on school children. But, the administrations of Belarusian educational establishments enjoy impunity. More attention should be paid to these cases. Each case of such pressure or exclusion must be known and criticized by democratic forces and the international community. Further, any contacts and funding between the European Union, and other European and American organizations with university administrations who participate in these political repressions, should be ended.



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