



**Statement of Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin
Co-Chairman**

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Hearing: "Business as Usual? Belarus on the Eve of the Elections"
September 16, 2008

Since its independence in 1991, Belarus has been faced with a choice – whether to move forward in the direction of greater freedoms and respect for human rights, or perpetuate the Soviet model. Despite some positive steps during the early years, the situation remains rather bleak, especially for those attempting to voice views differing from the official line. For the last twelve years, since the consolidation of Alexander Lukashenka's rule, the people of Belarus have been subjected to systematic state control over society, stifling of independent media and non-governmental organizations, arrests, detentions and violence against those who peacefully challenge the authorities. This misrule has led to Belarus' self-isolation, leading it away from its rightful place among the democratic countries of Europe

Today's hearing comes at an intriguing moment, with the release of political prisoners and Minsk's reluctance to endorse the Russian aggression in Georgia. On the other hand, the current state of affairs does not appear encouraging. From initial reports, it does not appear that we are yet witnessing meaningful improvements in the run-up to the September 28 parliamentary election, and many in the democratic opposition are already calling it an electoral farce. I very much look forward to hearing from our witnesses their assessment of the conduct of the election campaign to date. I am troubled by the very limited representation of the democratic opposition on the precinct and district election commissions and by the questionable denials of registration for some opposition candidates.

Furthermore, we have yet to witness any reversal in the Belarusian authorities' general human rights record – specifically, their poor treatment of non-governmental organizations, independent media and religious minorities. Belarus' new restrictive medial law is also cause for concern.

Nevertheless, if the Belarusian government chooses to take concrete steps towards genuine progress, I am confident that the United States will be willing to help ensure Belarus' democratic development. The people of Belarus deserve to enjoy the freedoms shared by the vast majority of their fellow Europeans.