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STATEMENT OF

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Just over one year ago, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly ad hoc Working Group on Belarus undertook its first visit to Minsk to assess the political situation and to explore avenues for resolving the parliamentary crisis. Now, many missions later, we stand at a crossroads in Belarus where some issues have been resolved, but serious questions remain. Across the past year, the OSCE Parliamentary Working Group has created a strategy and pursued a policy designed to promote dialogue between the opposition and Government of Belarus. This strategy has also been adopted and promoted by the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Minsk, in a unique combination of international parliamentary and governmental cooperation. It was hoped that, with international guidance, all sides of the Belarusian political process could be involved in resolving the political issues which have stalemated the democratic development of the country. I have just returned from Minsk representing one side of a parliamentary Troika of international organizations which has been recently formed as an extension and further internationalization of this dialogue process. I would like to begin by summarizing the current state of affairs.

Characteristics of the current situation

A Constitutional and political crisis still exists and divides the country between those who support the 1994 and 1996 Constitutions. Although it is difficult to ascertain how much the average citizen identifies with this issue, the possibility of a union with Russia does have a deeper resonance with some people in the countryside but also divides the country politically. Whereas the political debate on constitutionality and legitimacy may not have a serious impact on day-to-day life, a political and/or economic merger with Russia is seen as a positive move by some citizens (mostly for economic reasons) and a loss of sovereignty and individuality by many others.

In addition, declining economic standards are pervasive throughout Belarus and are a major factor in the political dynamics of the country. Though international experts point out that the country is not in a state of complete economic collapse, inflation, unemployment and declining living standards are all aspects of every day life in Belarus that must be accounted for by the Government. Often the blame for this is officially placed on Western countries which have "isolated" and applied "double standards" to Belarus. Alexandr Lukashenko is portrayed in the State press as someone defiant and willing to stand up to this international "pressure." Nonetheless, at some point, it would seem logical that increasing numbers of the population would begin to question the country's leadership.

Within the internal circle of power in the administration, it has become apparent to our Working Group that some leaders disagree on what course of action to follow, either economically or politically. Many within Government

are opposed to a political merger with Russia. Many also see the only hope for the country's economic development coming through access to Western capital and technology. Others favor a closer alliance with Moscow for political and strategic reasons. This schism in the inner circles of Belarusian power has led to a number of resignations and reappointments in the recent past. Those in favor of closer relations with Russia appear now to have gained the upper hand in this ideological and tactical struggle.

The OSCE's parliamentary and governmental strategy to promote dialogue between the opposition and Government has met with acceptance by virtually all camps in the Government and in the opposition. All sides of the political equation have spoken in favor of dialogue. However, because of the past history of mistrust, or due to fundamental differences of interest, some have sought to avoid engaging in dialogue.

The question of trust weighs heavily over the political spectrum in Belarus as the human rights situation in the country has deteriorated seriously in the last two years. Opposition leaders and members have been subject to arrests, detentions, and various highly questionable practices. Some have even disappeared. Whereas many opposition leaders have continued their activities unabated, there is nonetheless a chilling effect over the opposition's ability to promote its ideas and programs.

The result of all these factors is a democratization and Western integration process that is characterized by ups and downs. We have seen across the past year a number of steps forwards and steps backwards. However, we are by no means at the same point of departure as we were last year. A number of events and changes in the political system have changed the course of politics. The OSCE's strategy of promoting dialogue has been a key influence on this process of change. I would now like to summarize the major aspects of our strategy.

Strategy

The ad hoc Working Group of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has from the very beginning sought to overcome the constitutional and political crises in Belarus through a political dialogue that would include the Government, the opposition and NGO's. The dialogue concept has centered around the question of holding free and fair parliamentary elections in Belarus in the year 2000. As the mandates of both the 13th Supreme Soviet, recognized by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly as the legitimate Parliament of Belarus, and the operational legislature are set to expire with this next round of elections, this political event was believed by Working Group members and the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) to provide a solid foundation for a possible discussion and compromise. However, one aspect of the dialogue that has been of crucial importance to the opposition has been related to the kind of Parliament that was to be elected. Would it have real power and perform a democratic role as a check and balance to the executive?

One preliminary factor in the parliamentary effort was to try and unite the opposition into a more cohesive, coherent and credible negotiating partner. Against a unified, official representation, the stratified and divisive opposition political parties were unable to enunciate or argue for any clear demands. To augment this process, the OSCE AMG also worked on a regular basis to promote the creation of a positive, political program and platform. A major reason for the creation of this platform was to direct the opposition's attention towards the real problems of the country and to appeal directly to voters. One of the major, official criticisms of the opposition in Belarus has been that the country's political parties are not organized and do not represent any real constituency. Although important, the continual and strict reliance on the question of constitutional legitimacy, appeared to the Working Group members as too limited for rallying the opposition's support.

Another aspect of the Working Group's strategy has been to enhance communication channels between the OSCE and the Belarusian authorities. Through steadfast support of the AMG, and through a series of high-level contacts of its own, the OSCE parliamentary dimension sought also to broaden and strengthen avenues for dialogue and discussion at the governmental and inter-parliamentary levels. To maintain this channel of communication, the Working Group decided it was necessary to have Parliamentary Assembly representatives present at times of crisis in Belarus and when windows of opportunity presented themselves. Numerous visits of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Working Group have been conducted in the past year to defuse situations and to facilitate further communication.

While trying to be politically pragmatic, the Working Group consistently promoted the notion that democracy is not just elections, but also tolerance, equal opportunities for all to participate, respect for the rule of law and accountability. On these points, the Working Group sought to maintain tactical flexibility, but strategic rigidity.

Through the development of these forms of enhanced communication, the strategy then sought to involve the opposition and Government in activities which promoted common interests and goals (thereby learning how to

work together). The Working Group and AMG also felt at this point that NGO's should also be involved as third parties in the dialogue process, as many NGO's were better structured and more developed than their party counterparts.

In pursuing a strategy working with political parties and NGO's, the Assembly Working Group and the AMG focussed not just on Minsk-based organizations, but also with local and regional NGO and party structures. As these groups often enjoyed better credibility with the population at large, this aspect of the strategy also concentrated on the creation of an emerging political class unburdened by the political events of the recent past which focussed instead on traditional bread and butter voter issues.

In order for this kind of strategy to succeed, it was necessary for the Parliamentary and Governmental sides of the OSCE to agree and to coordinate their own activities. The linkage between the OSCE Governmental approach (diplomatic/technical) and the Parliamentary approach (political flexibility) proved a useful and powerful combination. The Parliamentary Assembly also sought to coordinate activities with other international actors and governments and sponsored a meeting in Copenhagen for this purpose which was then followed by a series of other, smaller international coordination meetings. Early this year, a parliamentary troika was formed between the groups with responsibilities relating to Belarus from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, in order to reinforce the international community's support for efforts to promote free and fair parliamentary elections in Belarus.

Another of the key aspects of the Working Group's efforts has been in seeking to coordinate its own policy with those of neighboring states (Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania), as well as regional and global actors (Germany, Russia, and United States). In this regard, a number of high-level meetings were held and OSCE Working Group representatives travelled to national capitals to discuss the situation and developments in Belarus.

Achievements of the PA Strategy

Perhaps the most visible achievement of the Assembly's strategy has been a much more unified opposition. Although some parties and organizations continue to prefer confrontation with the administration and condemnation of any efforts at negotiation, most political parties have agreed to work together to promote a dialogue with the Government on free and fair elections. An intrinsic part of this dialogue process includes access for the opposition to the State-controlled media and a number of other basic issues. The unification and strengthening of the opposition, as well as its credibility, has also resulted in a unified message oriented to the needs of voters and the nation. The unification process was initiated during a Working Group meeting for political party members and NGO's held outside of Bucharest. Governmental representatives, though invited to attend, declined to go.

The Bucharest process as it became known promoted a format for the mediation dialogue of "2+1+1" (Parties and NGO's, the Government and OSCE). The overall process promoted consensus on confidence-building measures (the release of some political prisoners, as well as opposition access to State-controlled media), but later was to include a roundtable dialogue on the preparation for the elections (from both the legal and political point of view) and the functions of the future Parliament.

Another significant achievement was the media agreement guaranteeing opposition access to State press that was signed by both opposition and State representatives, though it has yet to be implemented. Whereas there appeared some resistance in the Governmental administration to implementation of the media agreement per se, the Parliamentary Assembly Working Group made an interim proposal to allow a controlled and phased access of the opposition to the media which appears to have been accepted. Since this proposal was made, there have been appearances of opposition representatives on State TV and Radio, as well as the publication of opposition viewpoints in the State print media on a limited basis.

Some prominent political prisoners (Chigir, Statkevich, Lebed'ko, etc.) were released, after repeated efforts by the OSCE and high-level visits by the Chairman of the OSCE Parliamentary Working Group. In a similar vein, the registration and re-registration of some independent newspapers, as well as some political parties and NGO's was also achieved after repeated visits and mediation efforts. Most of these accomplishments can be attributed to the establishment of relatively permanent and stable communication between the Parliamentary Assembly representatives and the authorities of Belarus, as well as the Working Group's efforts to reinforce the OSCE AMG, its work and its reputation.

The open recognition of the opposition's existence by Mr. Lukashenko and the Belarusian authorities, as well as the tacit recognition of the need for dialogue with the opposition and society in general, is a very significant

accomplishment of this strategy. Prior to these efforts, the Government generally refused to even recognize the existence of an opposition in the country. The adoption of the dialogue concept by the Government also pays tribute even at the most minimal level to the importance of public participation in the governing process.

A related accomplishment of the Working Group strategy has been the creation and organization of permanent structures within the Government's inner circle of power for a national dialogue. Originally these structures were related to the OSCE-moderated dialogue, but are now associated with the dialogue taking place under Mr. Lukashenko's aegis. Relatedly, there appears to be a greater appreciation in the inner circles of power in the Belarusian administration that blanket arrests and detention of the opposition is counter-productive to the process and to the country's already-tarnished human rights record.

Although an election code was passed by the operational legislature and signed by Mr. Lukashenko, he and his administration have stated clearly that amendments can be made to the election code based upon the national dialogue. It should be noted that the new election code is an improvement over its predecessor, though still features a number of deficiencies. The OSCE has raised a number of technical issues and cited areas in need of improvement, some of which have been made. The elimination of administrative sanctions as a means of prohibiting candidates from competing in the elections was a primary concern raised by the Parliamentary Working Group representatives and has been removed from the current code. Though still insufficient to meet OSCE commitments, the apparent willingness to amend the code leaves some room for optimism.

One other key achievement of the Parliamentary Assembly's strategy was the creation and the recent visit of the Parliamentary Troika to Minsk, which included representatives of the three international parliamentary organizations. This international body represents a coordinated parliamentary-international policy vis-a-vis Belarus and also signifies the commitment of the international community towards Belarus. During this visit, the Troika group expressed its dismay at the interruption of the process leading up to the dialogue, but also was encouraged by the expressed intentions of all sides to find solutions through dialogue.

Strategic Goals Still to be Achieved

Though the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Working Group on Belarus strategy has been very successful, the political environment in Belarus is very dynamic and fluid. There remain some goals which have yet to be reached so far. Foremost among these is the establishment of a permanent, meaningful dialogue on the election system and a consensual election code. It is hoped that the current official proposal for dialogue, sponsored by Mr. Lukashenko, will serve this purpose, but this has yet to be proven. A major expectation for such an inclusive dialogue would be a consensual election code that would then be adopted simultaneously by the legitimate and operational parliaments, thereby avoiding certain legitimacy questions for some electoral participants.

As the current election code was adopted unilaterally by the National Assembly and signed by Mr. Lukashenko, it was not a product of dialogue and does not address some of the opposition's concerns. Any national dialogue in Belarus needs to try and address the concerns of the opposition. One of their greatest concerns is that the electoral code is not currently in full compliance with international commitments. A number of issues, including media access for the opposition, the composition of election commissions, campaign finance provisions, domestic observation, etc., still need to be addressed. In this regard, the implementation of the signed media agreement would be a positive step in addressing some of the concerns of both the opposition and the international community.

Working Group members and the OSCE AMG also still hope to achieve an agreement on the functions of the future parliament. In terms of democratic development and international support, it is believed that the newly elected legislature must have real powers and perform a meaningful role. One avenue towards achieving this goal could be the repeal of all presidential decrees which limit the authority of the legislature.

Another goal of the Working Group has been to secure the release of all political prisoners, and for harassment and intimidation of individuals and organizations to cease. In order to create a positive electoral environment, it is important for all aspects of Belarusian society to have an unimpeded ability to compete in the electoral process, without fear of repercussion.

Finally, the Parliamentary Assembly Working Group hopes to influence a change in the official Governmental rhetoric which has been consistently anti-opposition and sometimes anti-Western. Again, in order to build a constructive relationship, more positive rhetoric, stressing areas for mutual cooperation, would seem beneficial.

Future

Given the limited time remaining before elections will be held in Belarus (although a date has not officially been set, expectations are that the elections will be held in the Fall), a number of issues remain as priorities:

- First is to encourage the opposition and NGO's to enter Mr. Lukashenko's proposed national dialogue. The short-term benefit of this would be to transform an amorphous dialogue into a structured, meaningful and inclusive exchange of ideas. The longer-term goal would be to reach consensus between the Government and the opposition on the election legislation. Ideally this agreement would reflect international standards, include access of the opposition to the State-controlled media and would also include an agreement on the functions of the new parliament.
- On the other side of the equation, the Working Group also believes a major priority is to continue to encourage the Government to include the opposition in the national dialogue, and to make the dialogue an inclusive, meaningful process.
- Continued emphasis on the need for the respect of human rights and increased tolerance in Belarus is also necessary at this point. Freedom of expression and respect for rule of law is controlled by the Government. If the dialogue process is to be successful, it must reflect a real consensus. Even a good election law that does not respect this fundamental aspect of democracy would be insufficient.
- The Working Group also believes it necessary to define a step-by-step process for international organizations regarding the provision of technical and other assistance, as well as tangible incentives and rewards for a gradual implementation of reform in Belarus. Though a "carrot and stick" policy has been advocated for Belarus by some governments and international organizations, Working Group members believe there need to be carrots as well as sticks.
- Similarly, the international community needs to be better organized in order to provide assistance for the forthcoming elections. This particularly relates to the creation of an agreed-upon, coordinated approach for the provision of technical assistance and observation. An international conference seems an ideal venue to agree upon minimal standards and improvements necessary for international observation to take place, as well as standards of compliance necessary for the eventual recognition of the election results. During such a conference the specific competencies of different assistance organizations should also be identified and coordinated, so as to avoid duplication of function and to streamline efficiency.
- The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Working Group also firmly believes that international contacts with Belarus should be maintained, even during difficult periods in its political development process. The democratization process in Belarus has been characterized by steps forward and backward. Isolation and a continued eastward drift of the country will not serve any long-term interests.
- Finally, an international plan between Russia, the United States and European powers should be created to assist, encourage and promote the democratization process in Belarus. Through the concerted efforts and interests of major governments, the rewards of democratization can be emphasized and highlighted.

Conclusions

The political situation in Belarus is currently a virtual stalemate. The opposition by itself has little ability to influence or have an impact upon the current political situation. However, by boycotting the current dialogue process, the opposition can condemn the process itself and the results to be one-sided and exclusive. The Government, on the other hand, has the ability to involve the opposition and to make the political development process in Belarus inclusive and democratic. This would send a strong signal to a number of governments and international organizations. Both sides stand at a crossroads and must decide whether it is more beneficial to create and participate in a truly democratic process, or to maintain their separate positions and thereby guarantee that the electoral process will not be inclusive, democratic or internationally acceptable.

In the long term, the democratization process in Belarus and its evaluation will be complicated and will require time to evaluate the actual results. With the current political situation as fluid and subject to change as it is, it is difficult to assess and interpret events in terms of their ultimate impact on the overall development process. Is an isolated event an indication of a positive or negative shift by the Government or the opposition? Time is needed to evaluate each development, and knee-jerk responses by governments or international organizations can and have been counterproductive to the conflict-resolution process currently being undertaken by the OSCE.

To those who have been involved in seeking to find a way out of the political stalemate, there is no other way to achieve democratization goals except through an internal, political dialogue and with non-violent political action. Sensitivities are high on all sides of the political spectrum, and trust is difficult to achieve. Past human rights violations have clouded and jaded many as to the possibilities for any positive democratic development in the country. However, only through a stable and gradual process of dialogue can the necessary trust be secured, and individual issues be addressed.

The current situation in Belarus does not give much reason for enthusiasm. There have been a number of setbacks to the democratization process and to the efforts of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Working Group and the OSCE AMG to create an inclusive political dialogue on elections. The date for these elections is drawing near with many necessary issues yet to be resolved. However, some hope still remains. The Government has recognized the need for a national dialogue and has instituted its own process. The opposition has expressed a willingness to participate in any meaningful dialogue which will work towards the resolution of their differences with the Government. Whereas confidence and trust are still lacking in this new process, it is imperative that all sides try to make the effort a successful one.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Working Group encourages the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group to observe the development of this dialogue and to provide such assistance as it is able to on a daily basis, in order to facilitate a meaningful exchange of ideas and a consensual outcome. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly ad hoc Working Group on Belarus will maintain its commitment to the process and provide support and assistance as needed. The Parliamentary Troika of representatives from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament has expressed its commitment to the process as well, and will also add its political support to a positive outcome. The key issue is that time is short and much needs to be done in order for free, fair and recognizable elections to take place in Belarus this year.