



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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STATEMENT TO THE U.S. COMMISSION

ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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Washington, DC

March 9, 2000

Belarus in the System of the International Cooperation and Security

Geopolitical interests of Russia are the main obstacles on the path of making Belarus a democratic, law-abiding, neutral nation, an important element for stability and security in Europe.

The independence of Belarus was restored de jure in December 1991. Belarus has removed nuclear weapons from its territory, declared its desire for neutrality, and attempted to follow a path toward democracy, a market economy and open society.

Supporters of the Belarusian independence in Belarus are no enemies of Russia. They understand that Russia is more democratic than Belarus is today and that Russia's economy is more liberal. But they also realize that to follow the path of reforms together with an unpredictable Russia is similar to that of following a herd of horses, speeding along without knowing where they might turn next.

Russia does not conceal its intentions that it wants to swallow Belarus under the guise of "unification". The Russian Federation Council on Foreign and Defense Policy declared openly that the unification must be used "to oppose the expansion of NATO to the East;" "remove the potential threat of creating the so-called Black-and-Baltic Sea Belt which would isolate Russia"; "improve our military potential by integrating with the Belarusian army"; "remove the Kaliningrad special defense region from military and strategic isolation"; "ensure the integration of the two armies into a single system with a single command and control structure"; and "develop a unified, powerful military industrial complex". Even more cynically, the Council also declared that there "should not be any delay in this matter" and that "one should even pay a certain economic price for such a profitable geopolitical union". And "since the processes of restoring national self-consciousness are being accelerated in Belarus, time is working in favor of the opponents of "integration". So, the unification process should be sped up". It has also been suggested to utilize the main sources of anxiety among the Belarusian people, such as the low economic security, increase in crime, and the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster, because they "divert the attention of the people from the essence of the integration process."

In short, it is necessary to expand the Russian empire by suppressing the national self-awareness of the Belarusian people, and utilizing the state of poverty in Belarus. There is no mention of the fact that one of the causes of poverty in Belarus is Russia itself, because it supports the illegitimate regime, a regime that ruins the economy by employing its communist methods of management.

Russian politicians are convinced that they represent an empire, or superpower, and that they have the right to dictate the direction that other countries should follow. They "forget" that Russia's "grandeur" today is based solely on nuclear weapons, not on its economic power and that the maintenance and modernization of these weapons at the mutually assured destruction level robs the Russian taxpayer at the expense of the economy.

In his New Year's article, Vladimir Putin admitted unconditionally that the standard of living of the average Russian is ten times less than that of the average American, that the Russian GDP is five times less than that of China, and that under the most favorable conditions the average Russian will reach today's standard of living of the average Portuguese in 15-20 years. But, at the same time, on January 10, 2000, Putin approved the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, according to which Russia will oppose both the domination of the international community by Western countries, led by the United States, and the attempt of ignoring Russia's interests which "can undermine the international security and stability". To put this statement into clearer language: Russians are lagging behind economically, but they are great in spirit and, therefore, they can teach others. And those who do not understand this, undermine international security.

A government, which relies on such controversial postulates while maintaining the political stability in the country can only be a dictatorship.

Unfortunately, there is very little hope that, after securing his power by going through the election process, Mr. Putin will follow the path of developing a peace-time economy for the benefit of the ordinary Russian. The Belarusian experience demonstrates quite the opposite. A fairly sensible people installed a dictator in Belarus, thinking that they will serve as a "brain center" for him and that, because of his personal narrow-mindedness, he will, with a strong hand, carry out their sensible policy. It turned out to be the opposite.

The regime established in Belarus is a dictatorship in spite of the fact that the so-called "1996 Constitution" speaks about the "parliament", "legal opposition", "freedom of speech" and even "the principle of the existence of different branches of government".

The political opposition and the independent mass media are allowed to exist nominally in Belarus, but they cannot affect the situation because the regime suppresses the democratic opposition by force, intimidation and open political terror. Belarus has become a police state. It has the largest number of members of the police per capita in Europe - 125,000 militiamen in a country of 10 million people. Popular political leaders are disappearing without a trace; members of the parliament with the parliamentary immunity are being arrested; independent lawyers lose their right to defend their clients in courts, and the courts have become nothing but a farce.

The Russian leadership, in spite of its own economic difficulties, supports all this. The activity around the absorption of Belarus became only one factor that united the opposing Russian political forces. A set of six treaties which, in effect, were statements of intent and were signed between April 1996 and December 1999, on the unification as well as on the creation of a confederation, and, finally, on the union between Belarus and Russia, demonstrates that Russia supports the illegitimate regime. The treaties also blunt the suffering of the Russian population caused by the war in Chechnya and economic hardships.

The economy of Belarus is in crisis. In 1999, inflation was higher than 220%. The Belarusian ruble, with respect to the Russian ruble, dropped in value by 225 times. The statements issued by the regime about the rise of its GDP and the reduction in the number of people with the required minimum living income are nothing but a bluff. The minimum monthly income per capita was \$2.00 in 1998, while the average income was \$37.00; in comparison, in neighboring Lithuania, these figures were \$105.00 and \$256.00 respectively.

Opinion polls confirm that there is a drop in confidence for the government. The government bureaucracy also understands that the vain economic attempts made by the regime have no future. The bureaucracy does not feel that it is being protected. At the whim of the dictator any bureaucrat can be handcuffed or lose his job and all

means for his survival. The regime promotes its international isolation and without any outside aid, Belarus will not be able to get out of the crisis. The majority of the government bureaucracy is, therefore, interested in the collapse of the dictatorship. This is also true for members in the power authorities. If the opposition would stir up the active part of society while the bureaucrats realize that the regime is unstable and begin to think about their own future, then, with their help, the situation may change drastically. Under these conditions, it would be very important for Belarus to receive help from the international community in its democratic transformation.

The OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) has been operating in Minsk since January 1998. OSCE countries have agreed that the elections in Belarus should follow the development of the climate of confidence and the approval of the election code based on the dialogue between the government and the opposition. The international community does not recognize the elections if there are no independent election commissions, which can also be created as a result of negotiations.

But the authorities, supported by Russia, have become even more impudent. As a result, on February 22, 2000, 12 opposition parties refused to participate in the so-called elections. They considered the election law, created by the puppet parliament, antidemocratic

However, the OSCE rules do not permit the organization to effectively influence the regime, which does not want to carry out any democratization. The AMG efforts have resulted in the development of a single, acceptable approach by the opposition to negotiations. These efforts, however, have diverted the attention of the opposition parties from other types of resistance and, in that sense, have thus become counterproductive.

The formation of a nation, which has its own language, its own culture, literature, traditions, including the tradition of statehood, cannot be stopped. Belarus will become a law-abiding democratic nation. It will achieve the status of a civilized society. However, the process of democratization and liberalization will be rather long without the help from the countries abroad, in particular, without the support of the enlightening and educational programs by the outside world.

Belarusians are aware of the length of time required for them to get out of this dead end. They understand that the rapid development of the country can only be accomplished with the aid of foreign investments. From the excellent geographic location to its inexpensive, highly qualified and disciplined labor force, Belarus has plenty of factors favorable for making profitable investments. The political forces inside the country supported by the enlightening and educational aid from the West and, most of all, from the United States, should ensure the transition to democracy and political stability in Belarus. We may then try to convince the United States and Europe to initiate a new Marshall Plan.