

Statement of the Honorable Alcee L. Hastings, Chairman, Commission on Security  
and Cooperation in Europe

Briefing  
on  
“The Future of Belarus: Democracy or Dictatorship?”  
December 4, 2007

Welcome 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 the worst human rights and democracy record in the European part of the OSCE region.

I am 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 appreciate IRI’s 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 those deeply flawed elections. Welcome.

Our first speaker, Alexander Milinkevich is leader of the Belarusian non-governmental organization “For Freedom.” He was candidate for president of the United Democratic Opposition parties in the 2006 elections, and was a recipient of the European Parliament’s 2006 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Our second speaker, Anatoly Lebedka, heads the United Civic Party and co-chairs the United Democratic Forces. We first met in 1999 at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Annual Session. An outspoken defender of democratic rights, Anatoly has been harassed, imprisoned and beaten by the authorities.

I’m also pleased to welcome Enira Bronitskaya, a human rights advocate, civil society activist and former political prisoner who was jailed for six months last year for her work as co-leader of the elections monitoring NGO “Partnership” which was banned by the Belarusian authorities after it wrote a report that 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, please pick up a copy of all of our speakers’ biographies on the table.

At the post-election press conference the day after the 2006 elections, I stressed that “the Belarusian people deserve better” than the status quo. Regretfully, in light of the intervening twenty months of continued repression and stagnation, this remains my message today. Lukashenka has missed opportunities to liberalize the economy and the political system, but 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 in Belarus, are struggling for democracy, freedom and respect for human rights under very trying circumstances. Indeed, some of their colleagues, including Alexander Kazulin and Andrei Klimov, continue to languish in prison, while others 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.