



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Statement of Honorable Christopher H. Smith

Chairman - Helsinki Commission

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Opening Statement of Hon. Christopher H. Smith,

Chairman

Belarus - Stalled at the Crossroads

March 9, 2000

Last April, the Commission held a hearing on Belarus, at which we examined Belarus' track record with respect to human rights and democracy. Most of the testimony was not encouraging, although, at that time, there appeared to be some basis for thinking that there might be possible solutions to the constitutional impasse that has so damaged the democratic development of Belarus. Unfortunately, today there appear to be even fewer grounds for optimism and Belarus appears to be stalled at the crossroads. Alyaksandr Lukashenka remains in power, beyond the expiration of his legal term on July 20, 1999. Not surprisingly, he did not acknowledge last May's alternative opposition-organized presidential elections. Instead, several individuals associated with that election have paid the price for organizing elections according to the 1994 constitution. Former Prime Minister Mikhail Chygir, the leading candidate in the alternative elections, was detained for eight months ending November 30, and is now in the midst of a questionable trial that strongly smacks of being politically motivated. Viktor Gonchar, who chaired the Central Election Commission for those elections, along with his friend Anatoliy Krasovsky, and former Minister of Internal Affairs Yuri Zakharenka, a close associate of Chygir's, have mysteriously disappeared. There is understandable anguish and fear on the part of family, friends, and the democratic opposition in Belarus, and grave concern from the international community. And, other individuals who have opposed the regime, such as Andrei Klimov and Vladimir Koudinov, continue to suffer in detention.

Lukashenka's regime continues to clench the reigns of power, stifling fundamental freedoms and violating the human rights of Belarusian citizens. Despite several false starts, it has refused to engage in meaningful dialogue with the opposition. Instead, he has played lip service to dialogue, or has used the tactics of delay and obfuscation, so reminiscent of the communist past. To cite an example: disregarding the OSCE-mediated dialogue process, the flawed electoral code - recently approved by Lukashenka - ignores key OSCE recommendations. By-passing the dialogue process contradicts both the July 15, 1999 agreement with the opposition and the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group, as well as paragraph 22 of the Istanbul Summit Declaration which calls for progress in that dialogue. More importantly, the flawed electoral code dramatically reduces the chances of a free and fair parliamentary election this Fall.

I would like to think that real dialogue will begin, based on last week's round-table conference in Minsk between the Belarusian Government and the opposition and NGOs, with the participation of a joint delegation of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly and European Parliament. I look forward to the testimony of Mr. Severin and Mr. Lebedka, who participated in this meeting. However, given the record of Mr. Lukashenka's broken promises, and the continued climate of repression, I am somewhat skeptical,

although I would be very pleased if it turns out that my skepticism were unwarranted. In the meantime, frustration and discontent with Lukashenka and his regime continue to grow, both domestically and internationally. Unfortunately, the regime's reaction to criticism has been to downplay, ignore or rationalize its own violations of freely undertaken OSCE and other international commitments.

Meanwhile, the situation for the long-suffering people of Belarus gets worse. Living standards are dropping, inflation is spiraling. The legacy of Chernobyl still hangs like a dark cloud. According to a March 1 Reuters article, Belarus is experiencing soaring levels of infertility and genetic changes. Belarusian citizens, led by the democratic opposition, will be holding large rallies in the next few weeks. We expect that there will not be a repeat of the events of last October's Freedom March in which some demonstrators were brutally beaten, and we would hope that the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association will be unequivocally respected.

Another issue of growing concern is the Russia-Belarus Union. How can one talk about a Union when a mockery is made of democratic processes? When freedom of expression is severely limited; when a legitimate parliament reflecting the electorate is cast aside; when the judiciary is controlled by the executive; when freedoms of association and assembly are constrained, how can one talk of a Union? Can a genuine debate exist under these circumstances? For that matter, can you speak of a Union when the decks are stacked against those who deeply care about Belarus' independence, and when the head of the country actively works against open debate on the subject? A momentous decision such as whether or not to unify with another country, with all the implications for Belarus' sovereignty, should - as perhaps no other decision - reflect the genuine will of the people.

I am pleased to welcome our distinguished witnesses and to hear their views on the situation in Belarus and prospects for the future, with a view for possible solutions to the continuing constitutional impasse.