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I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Helsinki Commission, especially Co-Chairmen Senator Brownback and Congressmen Smith, for inviting me here today to discuss the situation in Belarus in view of the upcoming presidential elections in March, and to focus on what actions are currently being taken – and not taken – by the European Union; and in particular what actions *should* be taken.

What brings me here today is the strong belief in the freedom to choose one's political leadership in a free and open manner. At the moment in Belarus, this freedom is non-existent. Current Belarusian President, Alexander Lukashenka has once again demonstrated that he will not allow his country to be free and democratic. Last year we were preparing to keep an exceptionally close eye on all of Lukashenka's activities in the run up to the next elections expected to be held in June, 2006. Now the Belarusian parliament has re-scheduled the elections for March 19th-- just over 6 weeks from today. This manipulation of election dates is just another tactic by Lukashenka, the last dictator in Europe, to deny free and fair elections and political freedom to the citizens of Belarus.

The recent situation in Belarus is grim. The European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with Belarus, and I personally are in very close contact with the NGO's and Belarusian democratic forces. Unfortunately, our delegation is not welcome in Belarus.

Lukashenka and his cronies have increased their manipulation of the Belarusian political system and their intimidation of the opposition as the elections draw closer. As the opposition candidate Aliaksandr Milinkievic travels the country meeting with voters, his rights are violated by Belarusian KGB operatives and police forces in the pocket of Lukashenka. In the Brest region, Milinkievic's convoy was pulled over on the way to deliver cartoons to orphans, and the videos were confiscated along with blankets and other supplies. There are similar searches before nearly every political appearance he makes. Milinkievic campaign staffers have been arrested and had hundreds of thousands of posters, handouts, and buttons confiscated in suspicious raids by police forces. Furthermore, Lukashenka's puppet parliament adopted his proposal to amend the criminal code to provide harsh penalties for anyone found to be spreading information critical of the Republic of Belarus and anyone training for or organizing political demonstrations. These laws are meant to stifle the opposition in advance of the elections, and NGO's, human rights groups, and Christian missionaries have already been targeted.

Lukashenka's attempt to further crush any opposition within Belarusian politics has led to the unlawful arrests of dozens of political leaders and dissidents, whose only crime is the desire to choose the destiny of their country. The most well known political prisoner is Mikhail Marynich, the former ambassador of Belarus to Latvia who was Lukashenka's opponent in the 2001 Presidential election. He is in jail on the dubious charge of stealing computers from the NGO that he runs, though the computers actually belong to the American Embassy and the US

government has stated they don't have any claims against him. He has been labelled a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, and is the inspirational leader of Zubr, a student opposition group that met with Secretary Rice last year in Lithuania. The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the "Free Belarus" movement, Valery Levaneusky and Aliaksandr Vasilieu have been imprisoned on charges of public insult to the President and for organizing mass protests. Political prisoners such as these are sadly common in Belarus today as Lukashenka tries to break the back of the opposition before the March elections.

In October, Vasil Hrodnikau, a journalist from the opposition paper Narodnaya Volya was murdered and the case remains un-investigated let alone unsolved. Last year, Veranika Charkasava, a reporter for another opposition paper, was stabbed to death. She had been working on various government-critical issues including the possibility of Belarus arms sales to Iraq during Saddam Hussein's rule. The prosecutor has refused to look into a possible connection between the articles and her death. Further, there are cases of not only deaths but disappearances. Anatoly Krasovsky, an entrepreneur who provided financial support for the opposition one day did not return home after visiting a sauna in the Belarusian capital Minsk. There are dozens similar reports of prominent individuals, all opposed to the Lukashenka regime that have disappeared since 1999. To date, Belarusian authorities have not provided any accounting of the whereabouts of these individuals. Lukashenka is covering every possibly angle to stifle the free flow of information within the country.

The efforts of Europe, the United States, and of the whole international community must be coordinated and not contradicting when standing up for freedom in Belarus. Therefore, it is now more important than ever that the European Parliament and the United States Congress formulate a position that is well-defined, united and far ringing.

In order to elaborate such a well-defined position, one should take a look at the Belarus Democracy Act and the resolution of 2005 passed by the U.S. Congress in relation to the human rights situation in Belarus, and the resolutions of the European Parliament. In this respect I would like to note the contribution of this Commission in keeping the Belarus issue high on the international agenda. These resolutions are the most recent expression of specific, definitive and innovative motions in regard to the Belarusian issue. For the sake of a solid, unified position, it is utterly important that the EU Members and the various international bodies, which are involved in Belarusian issue, establish uniform principles and act according to those principles.

Another essential aspect to an effective response to Lukashenka's actions is to be **united** in taking a serious stance against his dictatorship. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has denied Belarusian politicians even informal access to meetings in Strasbourg

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has also taken a strong stand against the Belarusian dictator. But the Belarusian parliamentarians continue their work at the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE. This situation must change. Only truly democratic parliaments should sit as equals in democratic forums.

The joint US – EU parliamentary position must be far ringing. The goal should be to ensure that the Belarusian issue is at the forefront of both European and global agendas. For that to happen, our democratic voice must also be heard within Belarus.

That won't be easy. Of the 1,500 different media outlets in Belarus today, only a dozen or so retain any form of independence. Even that small number is diminishing, as Lukashenka keeps up political, financial, and legal pressure on them. Indeed, Belarus' last independent daily newspaper recently went out of business.

Further, I would like to point out that the activities of the European Union, and specifically the European Parliament, are much broader oriented.

Currently, the European Union has implemented a two-track assistance strategy targeting democratization and human rights while working to improve the needs of the population at large. Two programs have been funded by the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, and the programs are currently operational, educating the Belarusian electorate about their fundamental rights and freedom to choose. Lastly, the Tacis National Initiative Program has allocated resources to Belarus to promote sustainable development, higher education and training, and continues help to alleviate the health problems from the Chernobyl catastrophe which persist to this day.

The total level of funding from the European Commission for Democratization and Civil Society in Belarus is over 11.1 Million US Dollars for the current fiscal year. This does not include macro project funds, which are reviewed case by case and provide program subsidization of up to 1.8 Million US Dollars to each recipient.

Dear colleagues, An American writer Archibald Macleish said that "Freedom is the right to choose: The right to create for yourself the alternatives of choice. Without the possibility of choice a man is not a man but a member, an instrument, a thing."

It is our duty to get involved by using all the diplomatic instruments available. So that each citizen of Belarus should have the right and the responsibility to actively participate in the political life of their country, and not be sidelined by rigged elections. Therefore, I am proposing concrete steps that should be taken before the elections, during the elections and after the elections.

In the view of the upcoming elections in Belarus, I would like to invite the members of the European parliament and U.S. Congress to work together to consolidate our voices into a well-defined, united, and far ringing parliamentary position in support of freedom in Belarus.

More specifically, on behalf of the European Parliament's delegation for relations with Belarus I propose to hold a meeting between the members of the EU Parliament and members of the US Congress and issue a joint political statement condemning human rights violations in Belarus and expressing our joint demand for free and fair parliamentary elections in March 2006. In particular, this message would underscore unified measures by the international community, in particular the European Parliament, the U.S. Congress, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Dear colleagues, During and after the elections we should be watching Lukashenko and reacting to his actions immediately. It is our duty to do everything possible to ensure that they take place in full correspondence with the international commitments of Belarus and the OSCE norms.

However, based on previous experience, prospects for a free and fair parliamentary election in Belarus in March are slim. If during the elections we see that not only human rights and freedoms have been sacrificed, but also human lives, we should take joint efforts to remove Belarusia from the OSCE, and bring Lukashenko to the Court of Justice.

Only with these well thought and coordinated actions will we be able to make a difference in Belarus. A united voice of all parliamentarians can make things happen. Belarus deserves the freedom to choose.

Thank you, and I would be happy to later on answer all your questions.