

## **Anatoly Lebedka**

Chair of the opposition United Civic Party and Co-chair of the United Democratic Forces (UDF)

It is a great honor for me to speak in the US Congress. The hearings today are a direct testimony of the fact that Belarus is still on the international agenda. I represent the team of political optimists in Belarus. Possibly, pessimists' appraisals will be more accurate, but I am convinced that only optimists will be able to bring changes to Belarus. For the sake of objectivity, I suggest considering all arguments and perspectives.

### **I will start with the existing risks and threats**

1. Belarus continues to remain a test laboratory for production and distribution of a neo-authoritarian ideology of "lukashism" in Eurasia, and Lukashenka remains the leader of revanche forces in the former USSR. This situation is a central underestimation of the situation in Belarus by the international community.
2. The authorities continue to stake their power on repression and violent solutions to problems. We have clearly declared that UDF is in support of dialog with the authorities. But we cannot shake a hand which is balled into a fist. We cannot shake a hand that holds the keys to the prison cells of Alexander Kazulin, Andrei Klimau, Dzmitry Dashkevich and other political prisoners. We maintain that a real dialog about concrete issues of political prisoners and free and fair elections is substituted for never ending "talks." There is a danger that the international community will be stuck in these conversations, which have neither time limit nor agenda.
3. The regime demonstrates certain signs of mimicry. The evidence is the newly created pro-presidential political structure "Belaya Rus" and the formal transfer of power to Lukashenka's son Viktor in 2011, while the real ruler continues to rule. The consequence of such a scenario will be continuation of the situation in Belarus for another 5 years.

### **Factors that reflect an optimistic future outlook:**

1. There is a distinctive new feature to the situation. People demonstrate readiness to listen and to hear the positive alternative proposed by the United Democratic Forces. The demand for an alternative grows. It is connected with energy problems, with the atmosphere of deteriorating relations with Russia, with a cut on social benefits, and with guarantees for 5.5 million of Belarusian citizens. As a consequence, the popularity of Lukashenka after the presidential campaign declined 21 points.
2. Despite the forecasts of the pessimists, and contrary to the efforts of the authorities, the UDF did not split after the presidential election. The Congress of the Democratic Forces which took place in May this year passed the New Strategy. According to the adopted strategy the coalition is to implement three campaigns: The European campaign, the Social campaign, and the campaign "for Free Elections". Eight political entities signed an agreement about preparation for the election campaign, according to which the single list of UDF candidates is formed, and the single message to the voters is worked out.

The National Committee of UDF is preparing a package of positive alternatives for Belarus and its citizens, including 12 concrete proposals to the European Union.

3. Lack of the former consolidation in the circles of the ruling nomenclature.
4. Existence of serious contradictions between the Kremlin and the Red House.

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### **Proposals for Action:**

1. Political prisoners and Europe are two notions that are incompatible both geographically and politically. This problem demands unity of efforts of both supporters of change in Belarus and the international community. We expect an increase in activity through the diplomatic channels using all different means of influence on the Belarusian authorities. While there are still political prisoners in Belarus, while it is not possible to hold free and fair elections, and while Belarusian newspapers have to be printed abroad, there are no grounds for withdrawal of sanctions against certain Belarusian officials.

2. Investment in democracy is the most useful and effective investment of the capital. Today we speak about the necessity to significantly increase assistance to the structures of the civic society and independent mass media. The “Democracy Support Act” will have a long-term effect.

3. Efforts of the US, EU, OSCE, and European Council need to be joint. Only through a combined diplomatic effort can we hope to win over the regime and see change occur; such as elections by OSCE standards, release of political prisoners, etc. In particular, Lukashenka needs to understand that if 2008 parliamentary elections are not free and fair, there will be more consequences—in addition to those actions already taken and sanctions currently in place. Lukashenka should have a choice: either a special conference on Belarus that creates conditions necessary for holding elections under OSCE standards, or international tribunal over the Belarusian regime and ideology of “Lukashism”.

4. The situation demands strengthened coordination of a common strategy of the United States and the European Union regarding Belarus. Our recommendation is to return to the practice of joint visits of representatives of the European commission and the US State Department to Minsk. It is better to have a common voice and a coordinated position when speaking to the official Minsk.

I am ashamed that Belarus remains the last enclave of dictatorship on the map of Europe. I know that Belarus and its people deserve better. This “better” is democracy, and European values and standards. The solution of the Belarusian problem is in Minsk, not Washington D.C., Moscow, or Brussels. No one will solve our problems for us. We do not expect a miracle to happen in 2008. This year is very special for us. This is the year is 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Belarusian People’s Republic and the year of the parliamentary election in Belarus. It lays special responsibility on all change supporters. As the leader of political optimists, I believe in the inevitability of changes and in the future of Belarus.