



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Sam Brownback

Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Welcome to the Commission's hearing on Belarus.

Presidential elections will be held next week on March 19th. Today, we will hear from the Administration and expert witnesses on how Belarus is doing with its freely undertaken OSCE election commitments in light of the upcoming elections. These commitments include respect for human rights and democratic principles.

The picture there is not encouraging. Last week, security forces beat up and arrested one of the two opposition candidates. Just yesterday, security forces detained a top opposition leader for holding a meeting with voters in Minsk.

Daily reports of arrests, KGB raids, and the closure of independent newspapers and NGOs have become commonplace as Belarus prepares to hold presidential elections on March 19th capping off a decade of dictatorship under Alexander Lukashenka.

Beginning with an illegal referendum 10 years ago aimed at consolidating political power in his hands, Europe's last dictator has led his country into increased isolation as Belarus' neighbors, excluding Russia, have consolidated democracy through free and fair elections.

By contrast, Belarus has held a series of fundamentally flawed elections at both the parliamentary and presidential levels, seriously undermining the legitimacy of the country's political leadership. Regrettably, this pattern is already evident as the 2006 elections get underway in earnest. It is instructive to assess current developments in Belarus in light of the four criteria agreed by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and European Parliament nearly six years ago. These are: (1) ending a climate of fear; (2) granting equal media access; (3) empowering parliament with meaningful authority; and (4) enacting meaningful electoral reform.

On each of these critical points the regime no longer even feels compelled to pay lip service, let alone take meaningful action. The leadership has yet to explain the disappearances of leading opposition figures even as it perpetuates a climate of fear by directing the levers of state power against independent voices it seeks to silence. Belarus is the only country in Europe where there are political prisoners. The regime maintains such a stranglehold over the flow of information that even some broadcasts from Russia are blocked, while the handful of remaining independent newspapers are squeezed, and most have already been shut down.

Opposition candidates, given token time on state-run media, are in turn the subject of a constant barrage of vicious attacks by

the state apparatus for agitation and propaganda.

This is a country where mere criticism of Lukashenka deemed defamation, has landed several activists in prison.

Meanwhile, the National Assembly remains a largely rubber stamp institution going through the motions on measures already decided by the Presidential Administration.

The electoral apparatus at all levels, much like the country's media outlets, remains firmly in the hands of the regime. In a country where the state is the dominant employer and most workers are kept on short-term contracts as a control mechanism, pressure to support Lukashenka cannot be dismissed.

The same holds true for university students subject to expulsion for dissent. Tragically, educators responsible for training the younger generation in Belarus also make up the bulk of those administering the elections through commissions often headed by the school principal.

At the end of Election Day, these teachers are then presented with results that they must confirm or face the obvious consequences. Not surprisingly, of the over 74,000 commission members, two – two in the entire electoral apparatus -- represent opposition candidates.

Based on the evidence thus far, there are few grounds to believe that the elections will be free or fair. And, in the end, it is the Belarusian people, long denied their freedom and dignity, who suffer.

One of our witnesses today was featured in a Washington Post profile regarding her activities as a dissident. I've read her testimony, and as difficult and bleak as the situation in Belarus may seem today, Ms. Iryna Vidanova has an optimistic message. According to her, the young people of Belarus today will change the fate of Belarus tomorrow. We must support their efforts and we must give them hope.

I look forward to the testimony.