



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Stephen Nix

Regional Program Director, Eurasia - International Republican Institute

Mr. Chairman, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Commission today. We are on the eve of a presidential election in Belarus which holds vital importance for the people of Belarus. The government of the Republic of Belarus has the inherit mandate to hold elections which will ultimately voice the will of its people. Sadly, the government of Belarus has a track record of denying this responsibility to its people, its constitution, and the international community. Today, the citizens of Belarus are facing a nominal election in which their inherit right to choose their future will not be granted.

The future of democracy in Belarus is of strategic importance; not only to its people, but to the success of the longevity of democracy in all the former Soviet republics. As we have witnessed in Georgia and Ukraine, it is inevitable that the time will come when the people stand up and demand their rightful place among their fellow citizens of democratic nations. How many more people must be imprisoned or fined or crushed before this time comes in Belarus?

Mr. Chairman, the situation in Belarus is dire, but the beacon of hope in Belarus is shining. In the midst of repeated human rights violations and continual repression of freedoms, a coalition of pro-democratic activists has emerged and united to offer a voice for the oppressed. The courage, unselfishness and determination of this coalition are truly admirable. It is vitally important that the United States and Europe remain committed to their support of this democratic coalition; not only in the run up to the election, but post-election as well. The road to a free Belarus may be long, and we must make the commitment to travel with our fellow democrats to the journey's end. Today, my testimony will focus on the history of the Unified Democratic Forces, their progress in spreading their message, as well as the challenges they face.

There has been remarkable growth in the level of participation and involvement by the pro-democratic forces within Belarus in the last six years. In 2000, there was much disunity and disorganization amongst the different pro-democratic parties and organizations. In fact, a majority of the opposition parties boycotted the 2000 parliamentary elections.

Real potential for democratic growth in Belarus became evident during the Belarusian local elections held on March 2, 2003, when approximately 600 pro-reform candidates participated in the elections. One-third of these candidates (approximately 200) won seats on city councils.

Despite these targeted successes in 2003, the overall campaign environment for pro-democratic political parties continually deteriorated. Repression against the pro-democratic political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) intensified and increased. In the face of continued crackdowns on their operations, in January 2004, six of the seven leading political parties in Belarus – the United Civic Party, the Belarusian People's Front, the pro-reform Belarusian Social Democratic Gramada, the Belarusian Party of Communists, the Belarusian Labor Party, and Belarusian Green Party – along with more than 200 NGOs and associations formed the People's Coalition "Five Plus." This was a major step for all pro-democratic forces in Belarus. The coalition of ideologically different parties is based on the fundamentals that any civilized political force should support: human rights, basic freedoms, the sovereignty of Belarus, and democracy. The political parties agreed that

they must bring democratic change and the rule of law to Belarus before they can argue about policy differences. The coalition came out with a common list of 220 candidates who ran for the parliamentary elections in 2004. The coalition ran campaigns in each of Belarus' 110 constituencies as well as one national campaign to promote its common platform.

According to exit polling conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys, the results showed that President Alexander Lukashenko's proposal to change the Belarusian Constitution to allow him to seek a third term (a proposal which was also included on the ballot that day) did not have the support of a majority of the voters. Moreover, based on the exit polling, Belarusians did not simply vote against Lukashenko, but voted demonstrably for pro-democratic candidates running for parliament. Ultimately, the lesson of the 2004 parliamentary elections for democrats in Belarus was that with a unified democratic opposition, united behind a single candidate, they would have not only an opportunity to compete, but would have the opportunity to win the support of a majority of Belarusians.

Instead of being demoralized by the rigged election results, the pro-democracy forces of the Five Plus remained invigorated and confident of their eventual success. In November 2004, four additional political organizations including the largest parties from the European Coalition/Free Belarus (the Belarusian Social Democrats National Gramada and the Women's Party), the Young Belarus Bloc, as well as activists who previously were unregistered joined together with the parties and organizations currently in the Five Plus coalition. Since that time, an additional number of prominent individuals, NGOs, and former parliamentary candidates from all pro-democratic coalitions have joined this effort. This large coalition, now referred to as the Unified Democratic Forces (UDF), is determined to remain united until it achieves its goal of creating a truly democratic Belarus.

Following the success the Five Plus achieved during the elections in 2004, the UDF set their sights on the presidential election to be held in 2006. The coalition realized that in order for maximum success, all pro-democratic activists needed to unite behind one single leader who would represent all the pro-democratic forces. Meetings and discussions were held between party leaders, human rights organizations and youth groups; and as a result, the coalition created a comprehensive and detailed democratic process for selecting the coalition candidate.

From June to September 2005, caucuses were held in 121 of the rayons of Belarus with 4,371 Belarusian citizens participating. At each of these meetings, local delegates were selected to represent their district at the national nominating congress. These caucuses culminated with a National Democratic Congress held in Minsk, Belarus on October 1-2, 2005. More than 800 voting delegates, along with accredited press, distinguished guests and representatives of foreign embassies and diplomatic missions, were present at the Congress. After two rounds of voting, Aleksander Milinkevich narrowly won the nomination from the Congress of Democratic Forces to be the single opposition candidate for the Belarus presidential election. The conference itself was capably organized and implemented. Besides choosing the single candidate, the coalition also presented its platform entitled "Belarus: Path to the Future." This platform was an important document which sought to prove to the congress' attendees that the coalition has given serious thought to its message and goals that it would present to the Belarusian people.

Immediately following the congress, Milinkevich put together a team consisting of people from all of the political organizations. Starting in November, Milinkevich and the UDF party leaders began traveling around Belarus meeting with the citizens of Belarus to spread the UDF's message of unity and support for democracy. The UDF has also focused on the production and distribution of materials to promote their cause.

Following his registration as a candidate, Milinkevich has begun campaigning in earnest. Currently he and his team are attempting to spread the message of the UDF throughout Belarus. Because of the difficulties they face, this campaign is employing the most fundamental skills of democratic politics: person-to-person contact and grassroots activism. Before the March 19 election, Milinkevich will have visited the major cities in every oblast to meet with voters face to face, to hear their concerns, and to share his message of a peaceful, prosperous, and free Belarus.

Recent polling in Belarus confirms that Mr. Milinkevich and his team have made great strides in spreading the coalition's message to the citizens of Belarus. More than 55 percent of people in Belarus report having seen, read or heard about Milinkevich in the past few weeks. Among those people, 15 percent admit that what they have heard makes them feel much more positive about him, and 37 percent admit that what they have heard makes them feel somewhat more positive towards him. These statistics are monumental when considering the fact that Milinkevich's entire campaign is run by face-to-face meetings with voters, as he has no access to television or radio.

Despite the foregoing, Mr. Chairman, the regime shows no intentions of playing into false delusions for a fair playing field for this election.

On February 2, all precinct commissions had been formed for the March presidential vote. There will be a total of 6,627 precinct commissions, including 41 abroad.

Unfortunately, out of the total of 74,104 members on the precinct commissions, only 122 are representatives of political parties. And of these 122 political representatives, only two members represent pro-democratic opposition parties.

These abuses came on the heels of several damaging decrees which the regime had instituted over the past six months:

On August 17, 2005, the President of Belarus issued an edict which imposed new restrictions on foreign technical assistance to Belarus. The edict prohibits organizations and individuals from receiving and using assistance for "preparing and conducting elections and referenda, recalling deputies and members of the Council of the Republic, staging gatherings, rallies, street marches, demonstrations, picketing, strikes, producing and distributing campaign materials and for other forms of mass politicking among the population," according to the Belarusian president's press office. Under the edict, international technical assistance includes seminars, conferences and public discussions.

On November 1, a new law on political parties in Belarus came into force. The law sets forth new procedures for the creation of political parties, and their work and strengthens the government's control over their activities. Also, a provision relating to the suspension of political parties' activities was introduced. The activities of parties can be suspended by a decision by the Supreme Court given the appropriate application of the Justice Ministry. This new restriction has been used to astonishing affect against both the Union of Belarusian Poles and the youth umbrella organization RADA. Both have been closed and declared illegal by the government for their political activities.

Also in November, the National Academy of Science of Belarus took over the control of organizing opinion polls. This decision was formalized by the Decree of the Council of Ministers of Belarus on November 8, 2005. The council authorized a special panel under the National Academy of Science of Belarus to exercise control over the activities of accredited legal entities at any stage of opinion poll conducting. The panel has the right to revoke accreditation if it detects irregularities in the activities of a pollster or if released poll results are regarded as "biased and unreliable."

On December 20, President Lukashenko signed into law a controversial bill that would introduce severe penalties for activities deemed to be fomenting a revolution in the country. The bill amends Belarus' Criminal Code by introducing prison sentences for training people to take part in street protests, discrediting Belarus' international image abroad, and appealing to countries and international organizations to act, "to the detriment of the country's security, sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Mr. Chairman, in light of these repressions, the UDF have shown tremendous courage and tenacity. To quote Aleksander Milinkevich, "We hold no false illusions. We are in this for the long run." We owe the coalition our continued support. It is imperative that the United States and the European Union pay close attention to both the conduct and the results of the March 19 election. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe election observation mission findings will be crucial. Voting irregularities and embellished voting results must not be tolerated. It is our duty and the duty of the international community to hold Lukashenko and his regime accountable. Immediate repercussions must be put into place if the election is stolen; such as economic sanctions and visa bans on the leaders of this regime.

However, the election is only the beginning. To quote President Bush in his State of the Union Speech, "Elections are vital, but they are only the beginning. Raising up a democracy requires the rule of law, and protection of minorities, and strong, accountable institutions that last longer than a single vote." The United States and the European Union need to strategize and focus on a long-term strategy on Belarus. This long-term strategy must include discussion with Belarus' neighbor and ally the Russian Federation. We cannot afford to let European and American policy on Belarus be undercut by Russia's support of Europe's last dictator.

The UDF are determined to maintain the coalition and their work. It is imperative for us to aid their resolve. More assistance is needed. Currently the UDF has no permanent headquarters. In order for the coalition to maintain its credibility, a permanent headquarters must be organized and established. Accordingly, assistance will be needed to fight the information vacuum and to spread their message.

The UDF also need long ranging training in many aspects of democratic governance. When these activists succeed in creating democratic change in Belarus, they will be faced with challenges of governance not seen since the fall of the Soviet Union. Among the many problems they will inherit include an economy under near total state control, a corrupt judiciary and police force, and a legislature stripped of nearly all its power. It is important that the new leaders of a free Belarus have the training needed to navigate the difficult waters of economic reform and liberalization, judicial reform, and other challenges that they will face.

The coalition has proven their willingness to unite and campaign against all odds. We owe it to them to acknowledge their dedication and to see their goals of a free Belarus come into fruition.