



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Rodger Potocki

Senior Program Officer for East Central Europe - National

Endowment for Democracy

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission:

I welcome the opportunity to be here today to comment on the situation in Belarus, the last dictatorship in Europe, prior to the March 19th presidential election. And I would also like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and all of the members of the Commission for your continuing support for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) over the years.

Today I will talk about the situation and role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Belarus on the eve of the presidential elections. Before starting, it is important to keep in mind that although the terms I use—NGOs, third sector, nonprofit, and civil society—may sound academic or theoretical, they represent real people who are struggling against great odds to improve citizens' lives in Belarus. The groups which I will talk about include the teacher educating pupils in their native language, the social worker helping Chernobyl children, the trade unionist seeking greater protection for workers, the local government official trying to improve his community, the minority advocating for equal treatment under the law, and the editor whose magazine inspires young people. In a decade of work with Belarusians, I've come to know these individuals, and hundreds like them, who are the face, the heart, and the soul of civil society in Belarus. It is incomprehensible to me that Belarus' head of state, Alexander Lukashenka, calls these people "hooligans," "extremists," "criminals," "saboteurs" and "terrorists."

NED is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that helps other NGOs to promote freedom around the world. I can report that this work has become extremely difficult in Belarus, where the regime of Alexander Lukashenka has declared war on NGOs. This policy dates back to the 2001 presidential election campaign, during which the Belarus' third sector played a leading role in helping to inform citizens, mobilize voters, and monitor the electoral process. Since then, hundreds of independent youth groups, human rights organizations, social service nonprofits, think tanks, independent newspapers, and NGO support centers have had their legal registration revoked, been evicted from their offices, had their equipment confiscated, and seen their publications closed down. New organizations are being formed, but if they are independent from the state, they are refused legal registration.

The third sector has borne the brunt of the regime's repression over the past five years. The majority of Belarusian democratic activists who have been arrested and imprisoned come from NGOs. And the situation is getting worse. Understanding that NGOs played a key role in exposing falsified elections and mobilizing citizens in Georgia and Ukraine, Lukashenka pushed through a law in 2005 authorizing criminal penalties against representatives of NGOs for "activities directed against the people and public security." The recent arrest and jailing of independent election monitors was the first time this law has been used, but certainly not the last.

Mr. Chairman, despite repression that has reduced its ranks by 70 percent, Belarus' third sector continues to struggle for democratic reform. Its death has been greatly exaggerated. Today, more than 70 NGOs throughout the country are working with political parties and trade unions in the unified democratic opposition, known as the "10 Plus Coalition." Alexander Milinkevich, the candidate of the united democratic opposition, is himself from the third sector. He founded *Ratusha*, the largest and most successful NGO in western Belarus, which assists local cultural historians, religious and ethnic minorities, young journalists and community initiatives. His wife Inna heads up a leading NGO in Brest region. Both have been NED grantees.

Other NGOs are working independently to promote a free, fair and transparent election. As the March 19th contest nears, they are making a key contribution to promoting democratic reform in Belarus. In a democratic country, nongovernmental organizations play an important and recognized role in the electoral process—they inform citizens, turn out voters, and observe the electoral process. In Belarus, NGOs are trying to carry out these activities. And Belarusian citizens want them to be involved in the process. An independent survey in February found that 81 percent respondents supported the idea that NGOs should inform citizens about independent or opposition candidates; 85 percent thought it appropriate that NGOs monitor the electoral process so that it is free, fair and transparent.

Mr. Chairman, the focus of this hearing is “freedom.” This word, the same in Belarusian and Russian—“*svaboda/svoboda*”—is also the slogan of one of the major third sector campaigns working to mobilize Belarus’ electorate. Organized by the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs, “For Freedom” is designed to bring together the disparate election-related work of the third sector under a common banner. Other civic campaigns include the 16 Solidarity and Jeans Campaigns. Overseen by Charter 97, We Remember and Zubr, the first campaign asks that Belarusians light a candle in their windows on the 16th of every month. The date signifies the day seven years ago when the first of a series of opposition figures “disappeared” in Belarus, presumably abducted and executed by the government. The second encourages citizens to wear and display denim as a symbol of freedom. Both campaigns aim to build social solidarity and reduce the climate of fear in the country. The Hopits!, or “Enough!,” campaign is contrasting the ideal social, political and economic image of the country as painted by official propaganda with the ugly reality of hidden unemployment, corruption, and repression in Lukashenka’s Belarus. The slogan “Enough!” comes from a speech that Lukashenka made in which he declared that he would leave office when Belarusians told him “enough!” This NGO coalition is trying to hold him to his promise. Two other important civic initiatives that also should be mentioned include the “People’s Election” campaign, which nominated 1,120 representatives of civil society to serve in polling stations around the country, and a media monitoring effort to document the unbalanced and unfair coverage of the state-run media.

Despite the threat of criminal persecution, these civic campaigns are making an impact on the electorate. In a January 2006 survey, only 11 percent of respondents had been aware of NGO election-related activities or campaigns. By the end of February, the number had grown to 48 percent. Citizens are being informed and the electorate is being energized. Despite almost no access to the media, Milinkevich is speaking to capacity crowds. The recent March 2nd rally in the center of Minsk was the largest civil society gathering in two years. Polls indicate that Milinkevich’s rating and name recognition are growing dramatically. Two thirds of the population does not believe that the election will be free or fair. Of the 1,120 civil society representatives of civil society nominated to serve in polling stations, the government selected zero. The last media monitoring exercise demonstrated that Belarusian State Television devoted 60 percent of its total election coverage time to Mr. Lukashenko, while the three other candidates together accounted for just five percent.

It is clear, Mr. Chairman, that “Europe’s Last Dictator” has no intention of permitting a free, fair or transparent election to take place. In Lukashenka’s authoritarian state, there is no room for civil society. So it should come as no surprise that NGO activists are arrested for holding “unsanctioned meetings,” their offices are harassed by coincidental “fire inspections,” their apartments are ransacked in searches for bombs, their cars are stopped because they might be stolen, their meetings are disrupted by skinheads, their publications are confiscated as insults, and their election-related materials are ripped from officially designated spots. In contrast to political parties, which continue to be legally recognized, NGOs, and virtually every election-related activity carried out by the third sector, are declared to be “illegal” by the authorities. As Milinkevich has put it, the regime has transformed the election into a “farce.”

What will happen to the third sector after March 19th? If Lukashenka is successful in stealing the election and maintaining power, he has promised to get rid of the opposition “in a tough way.” The hard times of Belarus’ NGOs are about to get much harder. In recognition of this possibility, I would like to offer the following recommendations:

- Civil society must continue to be supported after the elections. The political opposition in Belarus remains weak. Democratic reform can only come to Belarus through the active participation of NGOs in a broad-based civic moment. A key message for and means of supporting civil society would be the reauthorization of the Belarus Democracy Act.
- Everything that can be done to sustain, strengthen and expand the “10 Plus” Coalition of Democratic Forces, which includes a significant number of NGOs, should be done. NGOs and political parties must continue to work together and expand their cooperation.
- One of the greatest impediments to the development of civil society in Belarus is the lack of legal status of NGOs. The international community should pressure the Lukashenka regime to restore the legal right of NGOs to exist and respect international standards for the third sector.
- In the event of a crackdown after the elections, support and assistance must be directed helping NGOs to survive and operate in what will surely be a more underground fashion.
- Finally, we must demonstrate our solidarity with our brave Belarusian partners by making sure that resources are available for legal and humanitarian assistance to those who will be imprisoned, hospitalized, expelled or unemployed after the crackdown.

Mr. Chairman, although our testimonies today focus mainly on impediments to a free and fair election next week, we must also not forget the day-to-day human rights abuses being perpetuated by the Lukashenka regime against civil society. Only last week, for example, a Protestant priest was jailed in Minsk for conducting unauthorized religious services, the Belarus Union of Writers was threatened with closure, and the NGO tasked with developing contacts with the Belarusian diaspora was kicked out of its offices. This is business as usual in Belarus, with or without an election.

And today, as we discuss specific names, dates and examples of human rights and election-related violations in Belarus, I also ask that we not forget the tens of thousands of other victims of this regime who remain unknown: those who have been harassed, beaten, arrested, and fined; those who have lost their jobs or been expelled from school; those who have been forced into exile, or chosen to emigrate; those who have lost their dignity and hope. Lukashenka has described his authoritarianism as benevolent and has declared that “the main thing is not to ruin peoples’ lives.” But this is precisely what his regime is doing. Therefore civil society continues to oppose his dictatorship. Lukashenka may prevail in the election battle next week, but he has already lost the war.