



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Iryna Vidanava

Editor-in-Chief - Students' Thought

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about the difficult situation concerning young people in my country, Belarus. I am the editor-in-chief of *Students' Thought*, the only independent youth publication in Belarus. My publication is produced by students, for students. But our team does much more than produce a magazine; it is also closely connected to the democratic youth movement in Belarus, and its election-related programs.

Young people have the potential to play a key role in the March 19th presidential election. In Belarus, young people, especially those in cities and towns, remain the most open-minded, tolerant, and pro-European segment of the population. They have no connection with the country's Soviet past and look to the future, unlike older generations with their communist nostalgia. As a result, young people are less satisfied with the current economic and political situation in Belarus. For example, in mid 2005, almost half of all those officially registered as unemployed were young people. It should come as no surprise that, in a December 2005 survey, more than one third of those interviewed who supported Alexander Milinkevich, the candidate of the united democratic opposition, were under 30.

Belarus has a very young society. About one fourth of the population is 15 to 31 years old. About six percent of the population is students. Next week, many of these young people will vote for the first time. But a significant percentage has not made up its mind for whom to cast their ballot. The largest segment of undecided voters is among youth: 41 percent of those aged 18-24 and 38 percent of those aged 25 to 34. And they are skeptical that their choice will be respected. Three quarters of young people doubt that the election will be fair.

Alexander Lukashenka, Belarus' head of state, understands these demographics and trends. As a result, his government has tried to win the hearts and minds of youth by creating the state-run Belarusian Patriotic Union of Youth, sometimes known as the Lukomol, because it is based on the model of the old Komsomol, or Communist Youth League. The government has also targeted independent youth groups that it cannot control. Mr. Chairman, the focus of this hearing is "Freedom Denied," and I would like to report on the freedoms denied young people in today's Belarus.

Young People are Denied Freedom of Association:

Over the course of the last few years, especially after the 2004 parliamentary elections and referendum, the government has dramatically increased repression against youth NGOs and publications. Leading youth groups, such as the Belarusian Students Association, were denied state registration and now operate with no legal status. Paval Seviarynec, leader of the Young Front, was sentenced to two years of forced labor for organizing a peaceful protest in October 2004. Last week, Aleh Myatselitsa, a Zubr coordinator, was imprisoned on a false charge of petty hooliganism.

NGOs and other civil society initiatives cannot operate at universities. New regulations deny “strange elements” access to campuses. Contacts with Western universities are banned.

Young People are Denied Freedom of Speech:

Independent youth publications have been shut down and their print runs confiscated. Last fall, an issue of my magazine was seized by the authorities. According to eyewitnesses, the seizure was justified by the claim that “dangerous ink which threatened readers’ health was being used to print the magazine.” In August 2005, a criminal action was brought against members of the youth initiative “The Third Way” for slandering the head of state with political cartoons on their Internet site. After a concert during a July 2004 opposition rally, all the participating musicians—among them some of the most popular Belarusian rock groups—were banned from the airwaves.

Students living in dorms are being searched on a daily basis by security officers looking for any type of independent information. For example, after a police search of her dormitory room and the seizure of opposition posters, Lubov Kuchinskaya was thrown out of university.

Young People are Denied Freedom to Travel:

New regulations forbid institutions of higher learning to grant students and professors leave of absence to travel abroad. Students planning to travel, work or study abroad must obtain special permission from the Ministry of Education. Such permission is now rarely granted.

In November 2005, Tatsiana Khoma, a fourth-year student at Belarusian State Economic University, was expelled for making an unauthorized three-day trip to France, where she attended a meeting of European students organized by the ESIB, the largest European student organization promoting students' rights, and where she was elected to the organization’s executive committee.

Young People are Denied Freedom of Thought:

In 2003, an elite high school in Miensk was closed down for teaching a “wrong version” of national history and for promoting Belarusian language, culture, and democratic values. The school was condemned by Lukashenka as a “nest of opposition.” One year later, the authorities shut down the European Humanities University, the leading private university in Belarus that provided a Western-style higher education.

All first-year college students are required to take a course on “State Ideology,” whose syllabus was drafted by Lukashenka himself. Middle and high school students also have ideology classes, where they are shown films portraying Lukashenka as the Father of the Nation.

Young People are Denied Freedom of Choice:

All graduates of state universities are required to work for two years in locations and fields decided by the government, or must pay back the entire cost of their education. Students are often sent to work in the still-polluted Chernobyl Zone and are paid miserable salaries. Students refusing to follow state assignments have been denied their diplomas.

All political activities, debates or meetings with pro-democratic candidates are forbidden at universities. This year, students were forced to sign election petitions for Alexander Lukashenka prior to taking their exams. In an address at Belarusian National Technical University, the Minister of Education, Mr. Radkov called on the country's students not to allow themselves be deceived by the democratic opposition and urged them to vote for the incumbent head of state. Finally, four young activists of the country's leading independent election monitoring effort were arrested by the KGB and are currently imprisoned.

The state's youth policy has made an impact on young people. Lukashenka is Europe's longest serving head of state. A new generation of Belarusians, who are now 18 to 21 years old, have grown up with Lukashenka and do not know anything other than his regime. These youngsters do not necessarily support Lukashenka, or even respect him, but they also do not believe that anything can be changed, or that their voices and aspirations matter. Increasingly, the country's best and brightest young people are choosing to leave Belarus (80 percent of those who leave Belarus to work abroad are students). Others have retreated into "inner emigration," focusing on underground subcultures such as video-gaming and religious cults.

But Mr. Chairman, despite attempts to establish a monopoly over the minds of young people and cultivate a fear of punishment for any act of disobedience, the authorities cannot isolate them from the rest of democratic Europe. Young people in Belarus want to be free and many are struggling for their freedom. Youth are clever and creative; they are using modern technology to bypass the regime and openly express their opinions. On Internet forums such as studenty.by, thousands of students gather daily to discuss political, social, cultural, and educational issues. Denied the right to publish, my magazine was transformed into the first compact-disc edition in Belarus and, using this new format, will continue its mission to inform and activate young people. Young activists in Independence Square used their cellphones to send text messages and pictures to the international community informing them about the peaceful demonstrations of March 2nd. Numerous youth groups continue their civil society activities despite increasing repression, and are working to inform and mobilize young people to take part in the March 19th elections. Echoing two youth mobilization campaigns, they say "Enough!" to Lukashenka and wear their jeans proudly as a symbol of freedom. Thousands of young people are meeting and supporting Milinkevich.

These young people, the future leaders of Belarus, need our and your assistance. I would like to offer three recommendations which should be a priority for helping youth in my country:

- As an editor, I know that young people are desperately seeking objective information about Belarus and the outside world. Support for independent youth publications should be continued. More assistance should be provided to alternative forms of media, which appeal to youth, such as the Internet and broadcast mediums, such as crossborder radio with a strong focus on youth.

- As Lukashenka attempts to isolate Belarus, we must keep the world open for young people through study abroad and exchange programs, so that they can see Europe and America, compare it with reality at home, and tell others about life in the West.

- Finally, we must continue to help those brave young people who are involved in the democratic movement. Their civil society efforts should continue to be supported, no matter what will happen on or after March 19th. In particular, we must assist students and young people who will lose their jobs, be expelled and otherwise be repressed for their pro-democratic activities. Legal and humanitarian support is a sign of solidarity. We cannot let them suffer on their own.

Mr. Chairman, the demographics of Belarus tell us that time is on our side. The older, sovietized generation that forms the bedrock of Lukashenka's support is passing away. I ask you to stand with the pro-democratic young people who are the future leaders of Belarus.

Thank you.