



# HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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## Testimony :: Celeste Wallander

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Mr. Chairman, and members of the Commission,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you about U.S. foreign policy and the implications of the upcoming elections in Belarus for our national interests. On Wednesday, the U.S. House of Representatives passed House Resolution 673, expressing support for the efforts of the people of the Republic of Belarus to establish a full democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and urging the government of Belarus to conduct a free and fair presidential election on March 19, 2006. This resolution, along with a number of important hearings, statements, and legislative acts authorizing programs and funds for democracy promotion efforts for the people of Belarus demonstrate the deep commitment and sustained interest of the American people through their elected representatives. Beyond the actual support for change in Belarus, change that must and will come some day, the support of the U.S. Congress is a tangible example of how foreign policy is rooted in democratic processes, rule of law, and the accountability of government officials to the country's citizens. So beyond specific policies on Belarus, we should remember that ultimately the U.S. leads by example, and this hearing is part of that leadership.

I would like to focus today on how support for democratization in Belarus fits U.S. security policy, the challenges of working with friends and allies for effective change in the post-Soviet region, and an argument that it is time to act very decisively if, as many expect, the elections on March 19 do not meet the clear and widely accepted international standards for free and fair elections. My colleagues on this panel are leading experts on Belarusian politics and society, and deputy assistant secretary David Kramer is a skilled leader on U.S. policy in the region. I hope to contribute by putting Belarus in a larger picture, and by making the case for a more vigorous transatlantic response to continuing repression and the trivialization of the democratic process in Belarus.

The fundamental foreign policy challenge for the United States is to build national security through democratic transformation across the globe in a way that serves immediate security requirements while not undermining long term strategy for a more prosperous and secure international system. Although in the short term, American security policy must address immediate threats such as the spread of advanced military capabilities, regional powers that threaten American allies, and radical movements that strike at American interests at home and abroad, there is no question that investment in liberal democracy and market-based economic development in a globalized world serves long term American interests in security and prosperity. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice noted in January 2006, the greatest threats to security emerge from within states, and the "fundamental character of regimes now matters more than the international distribution of power." We see this throughout the Middle East and Asia, where repression, violation of human rights, and the denial of the rights of citizens to choose their leaders in free and fair elections so often breed radicalism, instability, and transnational terrorism.

In Europe, democratic political systems rooted in liberal values enable citizens to express their aspirations and choose leaders

who will pursue national interests as defined by society, because the leaders are accountable to the citizens. The result is a continent where peace, security, and prosperity are the norm. However, the aspiration for a “Europe, whole and free” at the center of a successful transatlantic security policy remains unrealized. In the very heart of Europe, the authoritarian regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka has re-forged chains on the citizens of Belarus, amidst post-Soviet neighbors who have (with a few notable exceptions) shed repressive state control in exchange for opportunity, freedom, and choice.

As long as Belarus remains the “last dictatorship in Europe”, Secretary Rice’s call for a transformational diplomacy in support of security must apply as much to Europe as to the Middle East and Asia. Indeed, an American global transformational strategy has little credibility as long as the United States fails to directly confront the problem of a regime in Belarus that continues to repress Belarusian society and periodically stage show elections. If the United States is serious about democratic transformation as the centerpiece of its security strategy, the United States needs to get serious about democratic transformation in Belarus.

However, because Belarus is a European country, the United States cannot sustain an effective transformational strategy in Europe as long as the European Union does not take responsibility for the political and human rights of its fellow European citizens. The U.S. strategy can be successful only if it is transatlantic, as the effective unity of the United States and European Union in refusing to accept the fraudulent result of Ukraine’s elections in November 2004 demonstrates. The United States and EU must face that their previous policies on Belarus have failed, and be willing to abandon tacit acceptance of the course that regime has taken. While there may be costs to a transformational strategy, the costs of appeasing dictatorial regimes are ultimately greater.

### **U.S. and European Policies**

U.S. and European policies have combined criticism of the regime’s repressive actions with the promise of engaging the country if the leadership changes its ways. As the Belarusian leadership continued to close independent media, harass and persecute political opposition figures, and launch pre-emptive policies to silence civil society groups, the transatlantic community has shifted assistance from state-to-state programs to support for nongovernmental and independent groups. In early 2005, Secretary Rice pledged that the U.S. government would help the Belarusian opposition in four areas: promoting independent media, supporting pro-democracy activism, encouraging an alliance of political parties and civil-society groups for seeking free government, and unifying the opposition around a single candidate to challenge President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 2006. The U.S. Congress has increased funding for democracy promotion in Belarus to nearly \$12 million, including substantial new funding for independent media. The Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 provides support for long-term democracy promotion, as well as sanctions against the Belarusian regime and leaders responsible for violations of international law.

Following fraudulent parliamentary elections and a rigged referendum in 2004 that allows Lukashenka to run for a third term in 2006, the EU imposed a visa ban on select officials, and shifted its funding to nongovernmental groups. The EU has increased its funding for independent radio broadcasts into Belarus to 2 million Euro in an effort to break the information monopoly of the Belarusian government, and reports a total of 8.7 million Euro for financing democracy and human rights in Belarus. Significantly, the EU changed its standard requirements on assistance which normally require prior agreement with the target government, a promising sign of the EU’s determination not to accept the Lukashenka regime’s policies.

The U.S. and Europe have consistently called for free and fair elections in Belarus, and have sharply criticized the regime when it repeatedly violates those standards. Individual politicians have at times noted that the government is not legitimate, having been installed and maintained through actions inconsistent with both the Belarusian constitution and the country’s international obligations as a member of the OSCE. Yet official U.S. and EU policy nonetheless recognizes the regime as the legal government of the Republic of Belarus.

## **Belarusian Foreign Policy**

The foreign policy of the Lukashenka regime is focused exclusively on preserving the current state of affairs within the country. European or global integration are not objectives of the Belarusian government, because they would require reform, modernization, and political-economic openness that would weaken the sources of the regime's control within the country. Isolation from Europe and the modern international system entails significant costs, including lack of foreign investment and limited foreign trade. However, since the regime's priority is political control and self-enrichment rather than substantially improving living standards or focusing on modernization and growth of the economy, the benefits of integration hold little attraction.

Most recently, through its control of the media the regime has increased its rhetoric on external threat and the need for control and vigilance at home to counter alleged foreign plots against the country. NATO enlargement, NATO use of force in Kosovo, and the U.S. war in Iraq have in the past year been seamlessly woven with the peaceful democratic revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia into a picture of external threat justifying measures such as the closing of NGOs and criminalization of free speech. On the one hand, this can be understood as a cynical use of external threat to justify internal repression, much as the Soviet leadership used the threat of capitalist hostility to justify Stalinism and later periods of political control. But it is worth recognizing that in the Lukashenka regime there is an element of genuine fear that the refusal of citizens in Serbia in 1999, Georgia in 2003, and Ukraine in 2004 to accept the results of fraudulent elections could happen in Belarus. Citizens in those countries were informed, educated, organized, and motivated, in part because they were partially integrated with global informational, economic, and political networks. They had the knowledge and ability to oppose the declaration of fraudulent election results, in part because they were not isolated from the outside world.

So it is important to understand that for the Lukashenka regime, self-isolation is not a price it must pay for its internal dictatorship: it is the foreign policy required to sustain control at home. It is unlikely that the strategy is sustainable over the long-run: the Belarusian economy cannot produce and grow enough to meet even very basic and low-level standards of living without the investment and dynamic trade that comes from global integration. But in the short run, self-isolation is in the regime's interests, if not the interests of the country.

## **The Russian Factor**

However, Belarus' isolation is far from complete, and there is an important external source of support for the regime which enables it to reap the benefits of self-isolation without fully suffering the costs. Partly due to structural affinities in their two countries' economies, partly due to historical and cultural ties, and partly due to the coincidence of the narrow interests of their political leaderships, Belarus and Russia are one another's closets allies. Russia is Belarus' largest trade partner, accounting for over 45% of its exports and some 68% of its imports. Belarus' next largest trading partner is the European Union as a whole, which accounts for about 36% of Belarusian exports and almost 20% of Belarusian imports. Perhaps more importantly, Russia and Belarus trade in vital goods and services: energy primary among them, with substantial trade in manufactured goods, including advanced weapons production.

More than the volume of trade, however, is the fact that there are numerous important implicit and explicit subsidies from Russia to Belarus in the terms of trade. Although the price is due to increase, Belarus pays just \$46 per 1000 cubic meters (cm) for Russian gas, compared to \$230/1000 cm for Europe and the recently renegotiated \$95/1000 cm for Ukraine. Combined with low interest loans, favorable terms of barter trade, and currency subsidies, it is estimated that Russia subsidizes the Belarusian economy by \$2 billion per year. As long as these subsidies continue, there is less incentive for the Lukashenka regime to face the need for reform and end its global isolation.

What does Russia get for its \$2 billion? On the economic front, genuine integration in the defense industrial spheres has meant that Russian defense industries can produce and sell more than they could if they were a disruption in production lines. Belarusian pipelines carry 20% of the natural gas Russia sells to Europe. The Russian and Belarusian militaries are highly integrated, and have increased their degree of cooperation and integration as NATO enlargement brought the western alliance to Russian and Belarusian borders: the two countries conduct a number of annual joint exercises and the Belarusian air defense system is fully integrated with Russia's, with countering NATO as the explicit objective. In early 2006, the Russian military announced that it will soon open a Russian air base in Belarus as well, as an explicit forward capacity for coping with NATO's proximity.

Politically, Belarusian support reinforces Russian efforts to build a set of close political and economic relationships in the post-Soviet space. Belarus, along with Uzbekistan, is the anchor of Russian initiatives for economic and security cooperation. Belarus is also a source of diplomatic support globally, as it can be counted on to support Russian initiatives on China, Iran, Syria, and other difficult issues in Russia's relations with the U.S. and Europe.

But perhaps most important of all in 2006 is the perceived identity of regime survival interests in Russia and Belarus. Both the Russian and Belarusian political elites reacted very negatively to the Orange, Rose, and Tulip Revolutions in which corrupt and undemocratic regimes were overthrown by motivated societies. The Russian leadership and even Putin himself have expressed barely concealed distaste for Lukashenka and the Belarusian regime, and Russia faces considerable disadvantages on many issues in the bilateral relationship. Nonetheless, for the short to medium term the Russian leadership has clearly decided that the survival of the Belarusian regime helps to reinforce its own neoauthoritarian consolidation.

In a sense, those leaderships are right: each helps to reinforce the other against the global trends toward integration and openness in economic and political systems. From the point of view of American national interests, all the more reason why the elections in Belarus have an importance for security beyond the country itself. A Russia surrounded by democratically elected leaderships governing countries that are increasingly integrated globally is a Russia that will have to face the costs of its own failure to reform. It is a Russia that will have to someday see the value of subjecting its leaders to democratic elections and control by Russian citizens.

### **The 2006 Presidential Election**

Support for democratic institutions, independent media, and a healthy civil society are vital components of a long term strategy on the transformation of Belarus and its integration as a fully European country. Current U.S. and EU policies are for the most part on the right track. Peaceful democratic revolutions throughout the post-Soviet space have occurred only where civil society is active and demands change, where independent media are able to report on the views and policy proposals of the entire spectrum of political parties, and where credible independent election monitoring programs either certify the results of free and fair elections, or expose fraudulent elections to domestic and international audiences.

It is no surprise that in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus, the Lukashenka regime has eliminated independent media, criminalized free speech, and shut down independent civil society groups. The Belarusian regime has learned (as has the Russian government) the lessons of the Orange Revolution quite well: to retain their grip on power, they must eliminate independent political and social forces, and restrict information that might lead citizens to question their government's policies. Indeed, a perfectly repressive regime would not need to commit fraud on Election Day itself: by restricting information and eliminating or enfeebling competitive political forces and civil society during an unfair election season, truly effective authoritarian regimes can conduct elections in which they win because the voters have no genuine or informed choice.

While the United States and Europe should expand their support for long term democracy promotion in Belarus and other non-

democratic countries, we should also understand that such efforts have virtually no chance of affecting the conduct or outcome of the Belarusian presidential show elections in March 2006. The elections are already unfair, and they are very unlikely to be free. Efforts to support civil society and break the information blockade within Belarus are vital long term policies that will enable Belarusian citizens someday to hold the regime accountable, and chose the leadership that they believe will pursue the country's true aspiration. But we have to be hard-headed about the limited prospects for change in the short term. Because of the self-isolation of Belarus under the Lukashenka regime, because of Russian subsidization of Belarus' Soviet-style economy and social welfare system, because the regime has been brutally efficient in eliminating sources of independent political discussion over that past 12 years, the U.S. and EU must be committed to a long-term and patient strategy for supporting democratic change in Belarus.

The question is what the transatlantic community can do in the short term in order to create the conditions for success of the long term strategy, and how not to let short term expediency undermine a wise long -term strategy.

### **Policies for 2006**

The international community, with the leadership of the U.S. and EU, should cease providing legitimacy to the show elections conducted by the regime in Belarus by recognizing their results. The purpose of elections is competition and choice: without competing political parties, free and diverse sources of information, and the presumption that citizens have the right to voice questions and their preferences, there are no true elections.

The international community is able to document when a country meets internationally recognized standards for free and fair elections. Credible international monitoring organizations such as the OSCE, Council of Europe, or United Nations issue reports identifying cases of failure to meet those standards when warranted. However, such statements are usually thoroughly irrelevant to the conduct of subsequent foreign relations, because important countries note their disappointment in diplomatic language and then conduct business as usual with regimes that have, in fact, no legal standing or legitimacy.

In the case of Belarus, violations of international standards for free and fair elections and of the country's obligations to its citizens have been thoroughly documented over nearly a decade. Violations of the requirements for a fair election campaign in the months leading up to the March 2006 election have already been documented. Last week, government security forces beat and detained one candidate (Alyaksandr Kazulin) and tried to prevent another (Alyaksandr Milinkevich) from meeting with his supporters. It is reasonable to expect that in the next week we will see many more violations of the processes of a fair election campaign, and that the actual conduct of the vote on March 19<sup>th</sup> will be fraudulent.

The Foreign Ministry of Belarus has announced that it will allow international monitors, including those from the OSCE, to observe the elections, which is a welcome development. Unless credible international organizations are allowed to monitor the conduct of the elections, and they will not be able to certify that the results reflect the free choice of Belarusian citizens. The presence of credible international monitors and their ability to observe the conduct of the polling freely and according to international standards should be a no-compromise baseline demand of the international community on the Belarusian authorities. If the OSCE observers cannot report that they were able to do their job, then the elections cannot be certified to have been free and fair.

### **Recommendations**

In the context of Secretary Rice's call for democratic transformation as integral to

U.S. foreign policy, it is time to make elections meaningful, and to end the practice of complicity in recognizing blatantly fraudulent elections.

- If after March 19th it is clear that the presidential election in Belarus does not meet those well-established standards for free and fair elections, the United States and the European Union must publicly declare that they do not recognize the results as the expression of Belarusian citizens, and that therefore they do not recognize the winner of such fraudulent elections as the legitimate head of state of the Republic of Belarus.
- They should call upon the government to hold free and fair elections before the end of the year, and declare that they will take targeted measures against officials responsible for conducting yet another round of show elections.
- As long as an illegitimate regime continues to isolate the country's citizens and deny them their basic political and human rights, the U.S. and EU should impose individual sanctions against those officials, such as denial of visas and seizure of assets, responsible for denying Belarusian citizens their rights.
- The transatlantic community should also launch an international investigation into the unexplained disappearances of Belarusian politicians, businessmen, and journalists who had challenged the Lukashenka regime.
- If the regime uses force against peaceful demonstrators protesting fraudulent elections, the international community should be prepared to lay the groundwork for an international tribunal that would someday hold guilty officials accountable for any orders to harm citizens exercising their rights under European and international law.

Furthermore, there should be an economic dimension to a transatlantic policy response to fraudulent elections in Belarus, given how vital are economic resources to bolstering the regime's arguments that it is providing economic security at the price of political freedom.

- The United States, in cooperation with Europe, should suspend negotiations on Belarusian membership in the World Trade Organization, until a legitimate government is elected.
- The United States, in an effective partnership with Europe, should implement targeted trade sanctions to deny the regime access to the resources it needs to fuel its unreformed Soviet-style political-economic system.

If transformational diplomacy fails in Europe, where transatlantic relations have a long and successful record of cooperation, and where shared values and interests are strong, it has little chance for success on a global scale. If 15 years after the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the U.S. and EU tacitly recognize a regime which retains its grip on power by using methods to eliminate political opposition and control society that the Soviet regime relied upon, it seems premature to offer to support democracy in regions where societies are less modern than in Belarus. If the U.S. and EU do not take a stand against the trivialization of elections in Europe, the hope for democratic transformation is a slogan, not a strategy for peace and

security. It is time for the term “free and fair elections” to carry the weight they deserve in transformational diplomacy, and Belarus is a primary test.