

# DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS



February 1, 2006

Briefing of the  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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## ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Helsinki process, formally titled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, traces its origin to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in Finland on August 1, 1975, by the leaders of 33 European countries, the United States and Canada. As of January 1, 1995, the Helsinki process was renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 55 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <[www.osce.org](http://www.osce.org)>.

## ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is a U.S. Government agency created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <[www.csce.gov](http://www.csce.gov)>.

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## **Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC**

The briefing was held at 2:06 p.m. in room 2325, Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC, Ronald McNamara, International Policy Director, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, moderating.

*Commissioner present:* Mike McIntyre, Commissioner, Commission on Cooperation and Security in Europe.

*Participants present:* Ronald McNamara, International Policy Director, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Aldis Kuskis, MEP (Latvia), Vice Chairman, European Union Parliamentary Delegation for Relations with Belarus; Barbara Kudrycka, MEP (Poland), Member, European Union Parliamentary Delegation for Relations with Belarus; and Harald Gunther, Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Austria (European Union Presidency).

Mr. MCNAMARA. Good afternoon. My name is Ron McNamara. Welcome to this briefing of the Helsinki Commission on developments in Belarus. I am currently serving as International Policy Director for the Commission.

In the format of our briefings, after the presentations are delivered this afternoon, we'll have an opportunity for any questions from the audience. We ask is that you identify yourself, any affiliation that you may have, and please try to keep your question fairly succinct and to the point. Also if there's a particular panelist that you're interested in having respond, please indicate that as well.

Our Co-Chairman, Congressman Christopher Smith, had hoped to attend this afternoon—some of you may be aware that he was the sponsor of the Belarus Democracy Act—but his responsibilities in the House prevent him from participating this afternoon.

Another point is that within 24 hours a full transcript of today's proceedings will be available on the Commission's Web site, which is [www.csce.gov](http://www.csce.gov).

Again, welcome. As you likely know, Belarus will hold Presidential elections in a little over 6 weeks. Just a few days ago, four candidates submitted their 100,000 voter signatures—a requirement for registration.

Authorities interfered in the signature collection process, harassing activists gathering signatures for opposition candidates. The pre-election environment thus far has not been conducive to a free and fair election process, but this comes as no surprise if we look

at the conduct of the Belarusian authorities in recent elections, in 2001 and 2004, or for that matter if one reviews the nearly 12-year history of the rule of Aleksander Lukashenka, Europe's last dictator.

"Decade of dictatorship" is probably more apt a description of Belarus under Lukashenka, a ruler who has disposed of past opposition, literally, silenced independent voices and manipulated the political system to illegally maintain his hold on power in Belarus.

Belarus has increasingly displayed contempt for its freely undertaken OSCE and other international commitments on human rights and democracy.

In anticipation of these elections, the repression in Belarus has intensified, particularly over the last several months. By monopolizing the media and stifling the independent press, political opposition, non-governmental activity, minority and religious organizations, Lukashenka aims to make certain that no meaningful challenge emerges to his continued rule.

By doing so, he reveals a profound level of mistrust for the Belarusian people and affronts their dignity. But the leader of that outpost of tyranny, as Secretary Rice termed Belarus a year ago, doesn't have much to worry about as about every level of the apparatus of the electoral process remains firmly in the control of his faithful followers.

Just a few days ago, in the latest round of repressive actions, the strong man himself warned activists that any protests over the upcoming Presidential elections would meet with harsh government response. This comes from a man who a few months ago encouraged the Belarusian KGB to look at the Cheka, the notorious Bolshevik secret police, for inspiration.

Bearing all this in mind, we can only salute the courage of the beleaguered Belarusian democratic opposition and admire their persistence in the face of great adversity and personal risk.

Particularly relevant for today's briefing is the significant common ground in policy toward Belarus on both sides of the Atlantic.

We're pleased to welcome two distinguished members of the European Parliament who are active on matters pertaining to Belarus and who represent two of Belarus' neighbors.

We are also pleased to be joined by Harald Gunther of the Austrian Embassy, representing the presidency of the European Union held currently by Austria.

As I indicated earlier, Congressman Smith had undertaken a specific initiative in the U.S. Congress, the Belarus Democracy Act, and some of you may be familiar with the elements of that program.

We welcome the European Parliament and EU's strong interest and attention to Belarus, including the very recent broadcasting initiative, which we'll hear more about shortly.

It is vital that Europe and the United States stand shoulder to shoulder in promotion of freedom worldwide. It is especially important with respect to Belarus, which borders the EU and NATO states, yet which due to the nature of the Lukashenka regime remains for the time being an anomaly in Europe.

Therefore, I welcome the U.S.-EU cooperation in promoting freedom for the long-suffering people of Belarus and look forward to even stronger cooperation to advance democracy there and in the region.

Our first speaker this afternoon will be Aldis Kuskis. He's a member of the European Parliament from Latvia, representing the group of the European People's Party and European Democrats. He is a vice chairman of the Delegation for Relations with Belarus, member of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and the Committee on Transport and Tourism.

Prior to that, Mr. Kuskis was a member of the Latvian Parliament during the eighth parliamentary term. At the Latvian Parliament, he was a member of the European Affairs Committee, Human Rights and Social Affairs Committee and the vice chairman of the New Era Parliamentary Party.

Before he started his political career, Mr. Kuskis worked in the private sector in the field of telecommunications and advertising, and certainly as one who's followed developments in Belarus, the thing that impresses one is the near monopoly in the information and control of the media by the regime.

Following Mr. Kuskis, we will hear from Barbara Kudrycka. She, likewise, is a member of the European Parliament, in this case from Poland, representing the group of the European People's Party and the European Democrats. She's a member of the Delegation for Relations with Belarus as well and member of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs.

Ms. Kudrycka holds a doctorate in law and is a professor of law at the Department of Law and Administration at the University of Warsaw. She is head of the Department of the Administrative Law at the University of Bialystok—hopefully I didn't mispronounce that too badly.

And our final panelist this afternoon, again, is Mr. Harald Gunther who is serving as the deputy chief of mission at the Embassy of Austria here in Washington. Austria currently holds the presidency of the European Union. Mr. Gunther has served as deputy director, Press and Information Department at the Austrian Foreign Affairs and at various posts, including Austria's consulate in Los Angeles, the Embassy in Tokyo and Embassy in Algiers. He holds a law degree from the University of Vienna.

So without any further ado, I'll turn the microphone over and welcome your presentations. What I'd suggest is that we have each of the three panelists give their presentations and then at the end of all of the presentations we'll open up to questions. Thank you.

Mr. KUSKIS. Thank you very much. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Helsinki Commission, especially Congressman Smith and Chairman Brownback for inviting me here today to discuss the situation in Belarus in view of the upcoming Presidential elections in March and to focus on what actions are currently being taken and not taken by the European Union and particular what actions should be taken.

What brings me here today is a strong belief in the freedom to choose one's political leadership in a free and open manner. At the moment, in Belarus, this freedom is non-existent. Current Belarusian President, Aleksander Lukashenka, has once again demonstrated that he will not allow his country to be free and democratic.

Last year, we were preparing to keep an exceptionally close eye on all of Lukashenka activities in rescheduled the elections for March 19, just over 6 weeks, as was said.

This manipulation of election dates is just another tactic by Lukashenka, the last dictator in Europe to deny free and fair elections and political freedom for the citizens of Belarus.

The recent situation in Belarus is grim. The European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with Belarus, and I personally, are in very close contact with the NGOs and Belarusian democratic forces. Unfortunately, our delegation is not welcome in Belarus.

Lukashenka and his cronies have increased their manipulations of the Belarusian political system and the intimidation of the opposition as the elections grow closer. As the opposition candidate, Aliaksandr Milinkevich, travels the country meeting the voters, his rights are violated by Belarusian KGB operatives and police forces in the pocket of Lukashenka. In the Brest region, Milinkevich's convoy was pulled over on the way to deliver cartoons to orphans, and videos were confiscated along with blankets and other supplies. There are similar searches before nearly every political appearance he makes.

Milinkevich campaign staffers have been arrested and had hundreds of thousands of posters, handouts and buttons confiscated in suspicious raids by police forces. Furthermore, Lukashenka's puppet parliament adopted his proposal to amend the criminal code to provide harsh penalties for anyone found to be spreading information critical of the Republic of Belarus and anyone training for or organizing political demonstrations. These laws are meant to stifle the opposition in advance of the elections, and NGOs, human rights groups and Christian missionaries have already been targeted.

There's a saying in Belarus: "You can do whatever you like, but we would find the law in criminal code always to punish you on that."

Lukashenka's attempt to further crash any opposition within Belarusian politics has led to the unlawful arrests of dozens of political leaders and dissidents whose only crime is desire to choose the destiny of their country.

The most well-known political prisoner is Mikhail Marynich, the former Ambassador of Belarus to Latvia who was Lukashenka's opponent in the 2001 Presidential elections. He's in jail on the dubious charge of stealing computers from the NGO that he runs, though the computers actually belong to the American Embassy, and the U.S. Government has stated they don't have any claims against him. He has been claimed and labeled as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, and he's an inspirational leader of Zubr, a student opposition group that met with Secretary Rice last year in Lithuania.

The chairman and vice chairman of the "Free Belarus" movement, Valery Levaneusky and Aliaksandr Vasilieu, have been in prison on the charges of public insult to the president—I remember one of them just said something about his skiing habits that was insulting—and for organizing mass protests. Mass protests usually in Belarus is 100, 200 people as the mass protests against Lukashenka.

Political prisoners such as these are suddenly common in Belarus today as Lukashenka tries to break the back of the opposition before the March elections.

Further, there are cases of suspicious deaths and disappearances. Anatoly Krasovsky, an entrepreneur who provided financial support for the opposition, one day did not return home after visiting a sauna in Belarusian capital, Minsk.

There are dozens of similar reports of prominent individuals, all opposed to the Lukashenka regime, that have disappeared since 1999. I will name just a few of them: Yuri Zakharenka, Viktor Gonchar, Dmitry Zavadsky.



To date, Belarusian authorities have not provided any accounting of the whereabouts of these individuals. Lukashenka is covering every possible angle to stifle the free flow of information within the country.

The efforts of Europe, the United States and the whole international community must be coordinated and [inaudible] when standing up for freedom in Belarus. Therefore, it is now more important than ever that the European Parliament and U.S. Congress formulate a position that is well defined, united and far-reaching.

In order to elaborate such a well-defined position, one should take a look at the Belarus Democracy Act and the resolution of 2005 in the U.S. Congress in relation to the human rights situation in Belarus and the resolutions of the European parliament. In this respect, I would like to note the contributions of this Commission in keeping the Belarus issue high on the international agenda.

These resolutions are the most recent expression of specific, definitive and innovative motions in regard to the Belarusian issue. For the sake of the solid unified position, it is important that the EU members and the various international bodies which are involved in the Belarusian issue establish uniform principles and act according to those principles.

The European parliament has consistently denounced Belarus as Europe's last dictatorship and taken the lead in other respects as well. Since the EU enlargement, it has been enlisting people with historic knowledge and understanding of the totalitarian regimes to help guide its response to events in Belarus. This advice helped shape the parliament's strong stance.

The parliament passed resolution 3663 last year, which stated that parliament, "considers that the sanctions against President Lukashenka's regime should also include the freezing of assets of Belarusian authorities abroad." This pattern of outspoken leadership ought to be continued.

Another essential aspect to an effective response to Lukashenka's actions is to be united in taking the serious stance against his dictatorship. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has denied Belarusian politicians even informal access to meetings in Strasbourg. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, has also taken a strong stance against the Belarusian dictator, but the Belarusian parliamentarians continue their work at the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE. The situation must change. Only a truly democratic parliament should sit as equals in democratic forums.

The joint U.S.-European Union parliamentary position must be far-reaching. The goal should be to ensure the Belarusian issue is at the forefront of both European and global agendas. For that to happen our democratic voice must also be heard within Belarus. That won't be easy. There are 1,500 different media outfits in Belarus today. Only a dozen or so retain any form of independence. Even that small number is diminishing as Lukashenka keeps a political, financial and legal pressure on them. Indeed, Belarus' last independent daily newspaper recently went out of business, but Mrs. Kudrycka will tell you more about the media situation in Belarus.

Further, I would like to point out that the activities of the European Union and specifically the European parliament are much broader oriented. Currently, the European Union has implemented a two-track assistance strategy targeting democratization and human rights while working to improve the needs of the population at large.

Two programs have been funded by the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, and the programs are currently operational educating the Belarusian electorate about their fundamental rights and freedom to choose.

Last, the Tacis National Initiative Program has allocated resources to Belarus to promote sustainable development, higher education and training and continues help to alleviate the health problems from the Chernobyl catastrophe which persists to this day.

The total level of funding from the European Commission for Democratization and Civil Society in Belarus is over \$11.1 million U.S. for the current fiscal year. It does not include macro project funds which are reviewed case by case and provide program subsidization of up to \$1.8 million U.S. to each recipient.

Dear colleagues, it is our duty to get involved by using all the diplomatic instruments available so that each citizen of Belarus should have the right and the responsibility to actively participate in the political life of their country and not to be sidelined by rigged elections.

Therefore, I am proposing concrete steps that should be taken before the elections, during the elections and after the elections. In the view of upcoming elections in Belarus, I would like to invite the members of the European parliament and U.S. Congress to work together to consolidate our voices into well-defined, united and far-reaching parliamentary position in support of freedom in Belarus.

More specifically, on behalf of the European parliament's Delegation for Relations with Belarus, I propose to hold the meeting between the members of EU parliament and members of U.S. Congress and issue a joint political statement condemning human rights violations in Belarus and expressing our joint demand for free and fair parliamentary elections in March 2006.

In particular, this message would underscore unified measures by the international community, in particular the European parliament, the U.S. Congress and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Dear colleagues, during and after the elections, we should be watching Lukashenka and reacting to his actions immediately, and it's our duty to do everything possible to ensure that they take place in full correspondence with the international commitments of Belarus and OSCE norms. This is already too late, but there are more parts in the election process. One is before the election date, another is election date, and then the counting process and all the announcements and legal actions. We could keep the eye on all three and try to make close to our understanding about democracy at a minimum election day or the day after.

However, based on the previous experience, prospects for a free and fair parliamentary election in Belarus in March are slim. If during the elections we see that not only human rights and freedoms have been sacrificed but also human lives, we should take joint efforts to remove Belarus from the OSCE and bring Lukashenka to the Court of Justice.

Only with these well-thought and coordinated actions we will be able to make a difference in Belarus. A united voice of all parliamentarians can make things happen. Belarus deserves the freedom to choose.

Thank you, and I would be happy to later on answer on all your questions.

Mr. McNAMARA. Thank you.

Ms. Kudrycka?

Ms. KUDRYCKA. Thank you very much. First of all, I would like to say that it is my honor to be here and share with you my thoughts about [inaudible] for the European Union's policy toward Belarus as the main problem for democratization of this society.

Independent journalists in Belarus have faced increasing difficulties in recent years. The state-owned electronic and print media are under tight administrative control. The directors of TV and radio stations and [inaudible] and of state-run newspapers are appointed by the president. They transmit programs which we can call only as a massive propaganda for President Lukashenko and permanent criticism of EU countries and the USA.

The programs are watched and listened to by the Polish population living in eastern Poland, especially by Belarusian citizens of Poland. Such a situation can raise the specter of national and regional countries in this region as well as divide Polish citizens of Belarusian descent, especially that in 2006 more than \$60 million will be allocated from the Belarusian state budget for the allotment of state-run mass media. It is \$20 million less than in the last year, and it's twice as much as the sum allocated for the mass media in 2004.

In recent months, the pressure on the free media has increased alarmingly in Belarus. In September, the state's printing house canceled its contracts to publish the independent Narodnya Volya, forcing it to move to a printer in neighboring Russia.

Two weeks later, on 18 October, Vasil Hrodnikau, a freelance correspondent, was found dead in his house in Minsk. He died of a traumatic brain injury. His brother told the media that Vasil Hrodnikau has been constantly harassed by the authorities over the past year and that he believed his brother was killed for the criticism of President Lukashenka.

Last October, freelance journalist, Veronika Charkasova, was stabbed to death in her apartment. She had been investigating alleged arms sales between Belarus and Iraq.

In November, Belposhta, the state-owned newspaper distribution company, which has a monopoly on distribution, decided to stop publishing privately owned papers as of January 2006. This will prevent coverage of the elections for March.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists has called on journalists and media groups around the world to come to their aid. The BAJ was awarded by the European parliament's Sakharov prize in 2004 for defense of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

What is the role of the European parliament and the European Commission in the field of free media in Belarus? In August 2005, the European Commission granted contracts to Deutsche Welle Radio to broadcast via radio and Internet into Belarus. These programs are in the initial stage primarily in the Russian language. Broadcasting takes place over 12 months, as of 1 November, 2005. Fifteen minutes daily broadcast, Monday through Friday, especially dedicated to Belarus information about political, social, and economic matters.

Following this initiative, the European Commission has announced on the 26th of January its decision on the selection of a consortium led by media consultants from Germany with partners from Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia.

The 2-year project for 2 million euro will cover radio and TV broadcasts, internet support to the Belarusian written press and training for journalists. The radio and TV broadcasting programs will start in February before the Presidential election in Belarus and start 2 hours daily broadcast.

In the next month, Poland's Foreign Ministry plans to open a radio station broadcasting to Belarus. The programs will be broadcast in Belarusian and Polish by the independent radio station, financed with NGO and government funds and mainly addressed to [inaudible] regionally using [inaudible] bandwidth and in the whole Belarus territory in the medium bandwidth.

This will also be aimed at the Belarus minority in Poland. All members of the Polish parliament in the Committee of Foreign Affairs and the Media Committee agree to support politically and financially such a radio station based on Radio Station Racyja, which was in the past supported by non-governmental organizations from the United States.

My conclusions and recommendations. In my opinion, systematic exchange of information and views between the European parliament and the U.S. Congress is very much desired and needed. It concerns both projects which are currently running, future projects as well as long-standing priorities and possible future cooperation between the United States and the European Union in relations with Belarus.

Currently, Deutsche Welle broadcasts programs in Russian and forthcoming programs by the Media Consulta consortium are going to be in a mixed Russian and Belarusian version. On the one hand, such programs in Russian will give greater accessibility to listeners within Belarus, but on the other hand it will decrease their visibility among other radio and TV stations, which are at present exclusively available in Russian.

The lack of clear criteria to the exclusiveness of the Belarusian language in media projects as organized by the European Commission weakens our ability to support and strengthen the Belarusian national identity as distinct from Russian, which is crucial to the political independence vis-a-vis Russia.

The resources for support of media projects directed to Belarus are not sufficient, and given the reluctance of many European governments to fully engage in terms of financial assistance and problems of peace [inaudible].

It would be of additional asset if the United States participated in the financing of such projects, delivering also technical and know-how assistance. We should therefore exchange information about actual demands for support of media projects.

And the issue of freedom of expression and the problem of independence of media in Belarus should become one of the priorities and go in higher place on the agenda at the EU, the United States and high political level and the level of working groups cooperation.

In my opinion, this should also be present in contacts between U.S.-Russia and EU-Russia relationships.

Thank you very much.

Mr. McNAMARA. Thank you very much.

Mr. Gunther?

Mr. GUNTHER. Thank you very much. First, thank you to the Helsinki Commission to organize today's briefings and especially to Senator Sam Brownback, Ron McNamara and others, and thank you very much for your initiative to contact the Austrian Embassy in Washington DC as Austria is holding at the moment the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

I thought that my place in this context would maybe be best to report to you what the overall policy of the European Union versus Belarus is. And, actually, just this Monday, at the beginning of this week, Belarus was on the agenda of the European Union's Council for External Relations. The ministers adopted conclusions, a commonly agreed

position with regard to Belarus. So I would like to give you a read out of these conclusions so you have the broader picture where the European Union aims to go.

In the conclusions of this Monday, the council especially referred to its conclusion of November 7. Those conclusions were very comprehensive and were reiterated on Monday, so I will start out to outline those conclusions of last November 7 when the Council expressed its deep concern at the deteriorating situation of human rights and political freedoms in Belarus, in particular the harassment of political parties, independent media, NGOs and the reluctance to conduct independent investigations into disappearances of prominent opponents of President Lukashenka.

The Council noted the importance of the Presidential elections for 2006 and in particular called on the Belarusian government to reverse the current deteriorating trend in respect of democracy and human rights to ensure that the electoral process is conducted in a free and fair manner in accordance with international standards and to abide by its commitments in the OSCE and the U.N.

The Council in November also called on the Belarusian Government to issue an early invitation to a full OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission and to allow it to operate unimpeded. And it noted the willingness of EU member states to contribute to that mission.

It also called on the Belarusian Government to ensure that all eligible candidates are allowed to register for the election, to campaign freely and to enjoy equal access to state-controlled media.

It also referred to the parliamentary elections of October 17, 2004 and the referendum in Belarus which were not conducted in a free and fair manner. And the Council recalled its lack of confidence that the results truly reflected the will of the Belarusian people of these elections.

The Council noted the view of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission that the referendum was unlawful. It expressed its concern that the 2006 Presidential elections should be conducted on a legal and democratic basis, and the Council therefore called on the Belarusian Government to fully implement the recommendation of the respective reports of the OSCE/ODIHR in time for the Presidential elections in 2006.

The Council also confirmed its determination to intensify the EU support for democracy and human rights in Belarus. In this context, the Council encouraged the EU's political parties to strengthen links with their counterpart in Belarus and welcome the selection of a united opposition candidate.

The Council confirmed its willingness to continue to work through a range of channels to support Belarusian civil society. It welcomes the Commission's significant allocation for support for independent media in Belarus and its commitment to designate Belarus a priority country for the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights and decentralize corporation instruments in 2005–2006.

On support for independent media, in particular, the Council requested the Commission to consider taking further action. The council also stressed the importance of a flexible use of existing instruments and of the European neighborhood partnership instrument serving as a more flexible source for funding, for building and promoting democracy from 2007 to 2013, the next financial framework of the European Union.

The Council underlined the willingness of member states and the institutions of the EU to promote shared democratic values between the people of the EU and Belarus by

intensifying people-to-people contacts, meaning through students, scientific exchanges, scholarships, youth travel, contact between small- and medium-sized enterprises, training local authority officials, et cetera.

In seeking to convey its positions clearly to the Belarusian authorities and maximize the impact of its policies, the Council reaffirmed its policy on limited ministerial contact but highlighted its willingness to engage with Belarusian officials. It welcomed the decision of the Secretary General/High Representative to nominate for his part a point of contact under his authority in Belarus and his decision to send his personal representative for human rights to Belarus before the end of the year to engage with civil society and to express EU concerns to President Lukashenko's government.

The Council welcomed the Commission's decision to open a regionalized delegation in Minsk by the end of the year, and it stated its willingness to maintain and intensify engagement cooperation and coordination with international partners in order to promote democratization in Belarus.

The Council will continue to monitor the situation in Belarus closely and will revert to it in January 2006. It also underlined its concern at the harassment of civil society organizations, including the Union of Poles of Belarus. Council stated its readiness to take further appropriate restrictive measures against the responsible individuals in the event of failure to uphold international standards, in particular commitments made in the OSCE context.

As the council took up the topic of Belarus this Monday and adopted shorter conclusions because they expressively referred to the conclusions I was just outlining to you, I just want to highlight here what has been added or more emphasized this Monday was that the Council again called on the Belarusian authorities to ensure that the Presidential elections on March 19 are conducted in a free and fair manner in accordance with international standards and in line with Belarus' commitment in the OSCE and the U.N.

In this context, the Council welcomed the invitation by the Belarusian authorities to the OSCE or the election observation mission and noted the willingness of the member states to make timely and adequate contributions to such a mission. In that respect, the Council urges the responsible Belarusian authorities to allow the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission to operate unimpeded in Belarus to ensure that all eligible candidates are allowed to register for the election, campaign freely and to enjoy equal access to state-controlled media, to allow domestic and international media to report freely on the electoral process, to fully implement the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR report on the 17 of October, 2004 parliamentary elections in time for the Presidential elections of 2006.

And the Council is continuing closely to monitor the situation in Belarus and has restated its readiness to take further appropriate restrictive measures against the responsible individuals in the even of failure to uphold international standards in the electoral process, in particular those of the OSCE.

The Council reiterated its support for initiatives aimed at supporting democratization in civil society in Belarus and encourages the intensification and facilitation of contacts between the people of the EU and Belarus. And it recalls that the EU wishes to have closer and better relations with Belarus, including within the framework of the partnership and cooperation agreements and the European neighborhood policy, once the Belarusian authorities clearly demonstrate their willingness to respect democratic values, human rights and the rule of law.

I wanted to outline this to you and would like to add that in the framework of EU–U.S. cooperation there is strong cooperation in the context of democracy promotion. This cooperation was specifically agreed at the last EU–U.S. summit here in the United States and therefore there is also a constant dialogue between the EU and U.S. with regard to concrete, joint measures and actions that can be taken toward Belarus.

Thank you very much.

Mr. McNAMARA. Thank you very much.

Just to perhaps bring a historical note, it's almost 6 years ago that a troika of the OSCE, the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe agreed on four criteria for assessing the freedom of elections in Belarus.

Just summarizing those very briefly, there was a structure, a transparent structure, a legal structure that met international standards in terms of the conduct of the elections, free and fair access to the state media for opposition candidates, an end to the climate of fear in Belarus and a normally functioning parliament.

So folks can draw their own conclusions in terms of what, if any, progress has been made over the last 6 years, and I certainly wouldn't want to editorialize too much.

I did note this morning when I turned on my computer that President Putin addressed the questions of the Belarus elections yesterday when he indicated that his support of Lukashenka was not unlimited but was really guided by a spirit of fraternalism, and, certainly, we know what the implications of fraternal Russian approaches to some of these matters may be. But he also has declared that he has no question that the conduct of the elections on the 19th of March will certainly be free and fair. So we have his endorsement already.

I also would note that an observation mission of the Commonwealth of Independent States was recently opened somewhat before the OSCE was invited to Belarus. And we're also aware of the record of CIS assessments of elections in the former Soviet space.

As I indicated at the outset, we'll be happy to entertain any questions that you have. Please, if you could provide your name, any affiliation you may have and keep your question directed to one of the panelists. That would be great. There's a microphone at this end, and you can also use the microphone at this end of the dais for those people on this part of the room.

So the floor is yours.

Go ahead. There was a lady, actually, who asked first.

Go ahead, Kathy.

QUESTIONER. It seems that most of your testimony and recommendations have to do with ensuring a free and fair election, but given the track history and given what you're saying, it sounds like we can't expect that at all.

So could we hear some more concrete recommendations about after the elections when we can pretty much ensure that given Putin's endorsement and given all of the record that Lukashenka is likely to come to power again. What will be the response? Will there be something as drastic as expelling them from the EU? What would be the consequences, in other words, of that windfall that's likely to occur? Thank you.

Mr. KUSKIS. This is one of the objectives of our trip to the United States, to discuss this together with the colleagues and representatives of the United States to prepare these actions, not starting from the day when the election date is, starting from the 20th

of March, but to start work and discuss these actions already now to be prepared and already sending the message to the Belarusian authorities, to Lukashenka, that our action is already prepared.

For example, as I mentioned in my testimony, as serious as the exclusion of Belarus from the OSCE. But, as I said, this is the long way, but we should be prepared, because the European Union is 25 countries. Even the European parliament where it is only 732 members of the European parliament is divided into political groups, and to find the common ground between 25 countries and three or four major political groups it takes time.

And our proposal is to start to invest this time already now to be prepared for the more serious actions of the visa ban extending, of the identifying and freezing of the personal assets of the rulers, Governors of Belarus, and this is why we need to start now.

And Lukashenka would be happy if European Union is the European Union ideas and United States was the United States ideas. He would not be happy and he should be seriously thinking about our joint position, because if European Union and the United States are united, then Lukashenka should face the reality. Thank you.

Ms. KUDRYCKA. I would like to add, of course this financial support from European Union for the free media is not enough. Two million euro is not enough, especially with regards to 60 million per year in Belarus.

Then following some kind of joint activity and joint support for developing of free media broadcasting for Belarus will be crucial. We in Poland remember the Radio Free Europe which was incredible and influential to change Polish people's thinking about politics, internal politics.

And also some kind of support of editorial activities, translation of different books on democracy, human rights, public administration, and democratic state for Belarus in Russian language. It could be really important. In my opinion, it could be good to support as much as possible student scholarships from Belarus. We know about Minsk university which was closed 1 year ago, and there is a lot of very young talented students who need some support to learn and to have not limited knowledge in countries abroad.

Mr. GUNTHER. Just to add because you were asking what would be my concrete actions, so to say, I presented you the conclusions and I think what the countries now want is to observe how this process of elections will go on and how it evolves. In principle, the invitation to OSCE is I think this time earlier. It's 6 weeks before the elections. It was 2 weeks the last time, I think. It's a longer time period, so it will be looked at how this evolves.

The support for civil society will go on, and the Presidency has invited the High Representative Solana and then the Commission to work intensively in their field and then report back.

There is a threat of sanction within the conclusions, and I've just looked up a press release by the Commissioner for External Relations, Mrs. Ferrero-Waldner, who said that if the elections should not run sectorally, the union could go on and have further sanctions. And she just cites as there could be economic measures or visa restrictions against representatives of the regime. But this, of course, has not been concluded yet and would be another discussion among the 25 countries who have to decide that.



QUESTIONER. Thanks. I'm Vladimir Kara-Murza with RTVi Television Russia. This is a question for Ron McNamara and for Mr. Kuskis.

Mr. Milinkevich was in Brussels a few days ago and he suggested that people may be prepared to take to the streets if there's an obvious rigging as in the case of Ukraine and Georgia. What do you wish the U.S. position or the U.S.-EU joint position to be in case people do take to the streets in Minsk?

Mr. KUSKIS. If this happened, first we'd call to Lukashenko, "Be civilized." Lukashenka is the only one who could decide in Belarus what measures would be taken by the military, by the police, by the militia. We believe the European Union and the United States would be united in its stance where everybody has the right to express their thoughts and political ideas. If the people after the elections want to speak loud and go to demonstrations, these are their rights, and there is no other possible stance for the democratic countries, as the United States and the European Union, which I would like to repeat.

Lukashenka should think twice before he uses his force or other means of his understanding how to rule the country. Thank you.

Mr. McNAMARA. Certainly, from our perspective, it's important to keep in mind the experience of the 2004 elections, and that was that there were peaceful demonstrations in the aftermath of the elections and referenda in the late fall of 2004. And, basically, what the regime did was it tolerated, if you will, on the Monday after the elections some manifestations took place in the main square, and then pretty much when most of the international observers had cleared out the next day, that's when the authorities started sort of knocking heads in.

And I think we have to take Mr. Lukashenka at his word. He's already issuing quite strong indications of what his intentions are. Certainly, our hope would be that there would be respect for the rights of individuals to peacefully demonstrate their views and that those would be met peacefully on the other side as well.

But, again, when I heard Lukashenka's pronouncements the other day it sounded a bit ominous, frankly. And I'm sure that that's what is meant to have its effect. So we'll be watching this very closely, that's for sure.

You can use this microphone, because the other one doesn't seem to be working.

QUESTIONER. [inaudible] To followup on that last question, are there any concrete scenarios in place both in the EU and the United States to react should Lukashenka decide to crack down in a way that you described as not permissible for international standards?

And along those same lines, are either of these organizations in the EU and the United States, whether government-affiliated or not, supporting organizations like Zubr that you mentioned or other groups working to ensure democratic elections or secure democracy in the country in general?

Mr. KUSKIS. I'd like to start with the second question and the work with the NGOs and the civil society is how to communicate with Belarus, and NGOs from the European Union countries are communicating and cooperating with the NGOs in Belarus, and this is the way how we work and how we receive the information and how the NGOs and the civil society of Belarus learn and study democratic principles and how they're preparing their campaigns.

But, basically, European Union is very careful in promising whatever political support, probably by the reasons which I mentioned before, 25 countries, and there is a difference in Europe—and I think it could be said also about other countries—there is a difference between the parliamentary politics and executive politics.

And this is our job to bring these two understandings closer, not moving away from protecting human rights, which is our basic issue, but talking with the government to ensure we could prepare real scenarios. As I said, we are here for starting to work together for the joint scenarios, not to leave and create our scenarios at home and our colleagues in the United States create their scenarios. No, we are here to be together and prepare them for the 20th of March.

Mr. MCNAMARA. Certainly, the United States has had a long-running support for independent media in Belarus and other elements of civil society and democracy. I know Ambassador Krol has been a strong advocate of Internet access and things like that, which some may consider somewhat modest, but, again, trying to help to provide some independent access to information, because it is quite impressive. Even some elements of Russian television are not acceptable to the Lukashenka regime.

I feel confident that at fairly senior levels within the U.S. Government there's a lot of consideration and discussion going on in terms of a post-election situation and not only what reaction the regime may have to any demonstrations that might take place but a whole series of policy options that may be taken up depending on what the situation or the circumstances are.

And, certainly, one of the quite impressive things is the degree of commonality in terms of approaches by various European entities and the United States. These days there are not too many areas of common ground, but this is certainly one of them.

So from our perspective, President Bush, in his second inaugural address a little more than a year ago, talked very eloquently about freedom and support of freedom. And Secretary Rice, as I indicated, is very mindful of the situation in Belarus herself, so our message and our interaction with the colleagues from the State Department and other agencies has been to sort of back up those words with some concrete actions. So that's what our contribution can be.

Any other questions?

Oh, sure. We'll allow you another one. You have freedom to ask questions.

QUESTIONER. If you could comment on the significance of these elections to an eventual or potential unification between Belarus and Russia, how this would impact on that.

Mr. KUSKIS. In European parliament, Foreign Affairs Committee and in Delegation for Relationships with Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, we discussed these issues, and one of the points, we can't rule out the possible plan for Mr. Putin to gain the official constitutional right to run third time for the president, and this unification is the possible scenario for it.

I would say Lukashenka won't like the idea for joint country if he is not the president of the joint country. It means he has some problems because if he is the competitor for Mr. Putin, he dreams on both the potential scenarios but his relationships—we should understand that Belarus could become the last undemocratic neighbor of Russia. And the question is, is Russia interested in the one last undemocratic neighbor or is Russia interested in democracy? That's their choice.

But this is our choice of priorities because the week after the Belarusian Presidential elections there is the Verkhovna Rada, the parliamentary elections in Ukraine. And who said that Lukashenka doesn't understand that? That's why he moved the election date to the week before, meaning this is our possibility and this is our chance to prioritize things.

It seems like the United States and European Union are taking as a priority Ukraine if this is a game where you could choose one or another. I think this is not this kind of game, and the international society and all the politicians and the observers must finish their work in Belarus, draw their conclusions, prepare their actions and only then move to the next point on our agenda.

These are two similarly important priorities, and the further development in Belarus would show also the stance and the understanding, how did Mr. Putin say, "It's our specific understanding of specific democracy." That would be also the good realization of how the Russians would react on the situation in Belarus after the elections.

Mr. McNAMARA. Just a personal observation: I think the question really gets to the point of legitimacy, and I almost misspoke and called Mr. Lukashenka, president, but, certainly, he has maintained power through illegal means. And that's a point that I very much keep in mind in the discussion of the future relationship between Belarus and the Russian Federation. Because it should be up to the Belarusian people to freely be able to express their views as to what they would like the relationship between themselves and the Russian Federation to be.

But, unfortunately, you have a situation because of the fundamentally flawed nature of the Presidential elections, the referenda, and the elections to the National Assembly, that raise serious questions regarding the legitimacy of executive and legislative power in Belarus. So the people who are undertaking these discussions, some would suggest, do not have legitimacy.

And, therefore, I think it's important that we keep in mind as these discussions go on, it's sort of interesting because our Polish colleague was talking about the importance of preserving the Belarusian language and culture. We have in Belarus today a very strange dynamic of a leader of a country who actively works to suppress the culture and language of his own country, sort of an oddity, if you will.

Ms. KUDRYCKA. I would like to add only that of course there is noted that in Russia international situation is not good and there's relative problems they are causing their governmental organizations lately. And the problem is if they don't want to keep Russian dictatorship as sample to see what they can do inside Russia where they are leaning to turn their society from democracy to some kind of totalitarian regime.

Mr. McNAMARA. If you could just hold for 1 second, having had a senior moment there. The point that I actually wanted to make was, as much as Lukashenka has worked against the indigenous culture and so forth, he certainly became a nationalist very quickly when at a given point in this ongoing sort of minuet between Moscow and Minsk President Putin said, "Well, OK, let's move ahead on this." Does Lukashenka want to be the, the 90th Governor in the regions of the Russian Federation? Suddenly Lukashenka, sort of, became quite interested in maintaining national sovereignty.

So the relationship has been a sort of drama going back and forth. But, again, this question of legitimacy of who is involved in these kind of talks is something that we should keep in mind.

QUESTIONER. [inaudible] One of the things I would ask is, if you will, commenting about the EU's positive initiatives that you wanted to help Belarus as it moves toward democracy. And knowing the experience of the last year from a personal standpoint about Poland of how you've made it in the last decade transition from really the old [inaudible] to actually now a participating member of the EU. Maybe you could tell us something positive how you—a positive way of working that change out rather than all confrontational [inaudible], maybe from your own life experience.

Ms. KUDRYCKA. It is not easy to answer that question in a short way, but, first of all, what was very important for Polish reforms and democratic revolution, in my opinion, my own opinion, Polish church played a huge role for some kind of transmission of the people's thinking. And those are the special leaders for Poles, which was John Paul II, and his meetings with Polish people a few times during communist times were incredibly influential to build for people not only a, not identity, but to be active and believe that we can change the system. And it was very important, build some kind of belief. Then leadership is very important for such reforms, in my opinion.

And also what I said before that the media, free media, and open borders. Polish people traveled a lot even during the communist times to Germany and could compare their situation, also economic situation, inside the country and abroad.

And also immigration. Emigrants from Poland who are in United States and in western European countries, they came back and they shared their own experience from the time. It was some kind of knowledge which was growing from year to year and in the situation where solidarity was born it was incredible support from whole country, because we can say that society was made true enough to understand that we need huge reforms.

Also, probably in that time the Communist system started to be not enough good from inside even, because Communist politicians and administrators, in 1980s, they didn't believe that the system is right and had to develop economic situation in Poland, not political but economic situation in Poland. And it was from the society and also from inside of the system that some administrators understood that.

Mr. KUSKIS. And I could add Ms. Kudrycka was right that there are hundreds and thousands of small things. The good things are as good news is very difficult, and the bad news and bad things are big and easy. The good things are small and great, but they are more difficult to explain.

But one of the biggest and I think the most important examples, which could be from the Baltic states and from Poland, the peaceful revolution. This could be our best possible example, peaceful, peaceful change to the democracy.

Then another thing which united our country was the language, and Barbara mentioned the topic of the language, but for the fate of development every country should be very careful in implementing the language policies.

And the third one is actually the economy, the small and medium enterprises and finding the potential investors for Belarus who are not interested in the wild, wild west type privatization but who would be willing to invest in a free and democratic country, not to pay bribes and corrupt today's government.

And if the Belarusians with our help could find these kind of investors in Latvia and in Poland, in France, in the United States who would be ready to work toward democratic country and not taking today's dollar through bribing and corrupting the Lukashenka government but working for tomorrow's bigger investments and more transparent and profitable relationships.

QUESTIONER. Mark Bazalev, Spiritual Diplomacy Foundation, founding member. On December 1, as you well know, President Lukashenka signed a very important document relieving religious organizations from tax, and we know for sure that this step was considered as a very important step forward on his part, and it gave him a very good appearance in front of public and especially religious people.

And I would like to know how does your committee view this step, and don't you think that this is a big step out of the present position? Thank you.

Mr. MCNAMARA. Certainly, in terms of the religious life in Belarus I was sort of intrigued and wouldn't want to venture into what the political dynamics are of various churches in the country, but the thought had come to mind when you were talking about the role of the church in Poland as a vehicle for reform.

We do occasionally receive ourselves some concerns regarding particularly elements within the non-Orthodox community in Belarus regarding some difficulties with respect to places of worship and so forth. So our engagement or our attempts at engagement have mostly focused on trying to bring those types of matters to the attention of the relevant authorities.

Lukashenka has been quite active with a number of decrees and so forth, perhaps this on a positive one, other ones almost mirroring the Soviet era of, sort of, anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. Somebody in the audience probably remembers what the code of the Soviet penal code was. OK. Thank you very much. But things in Belarus are often more reminiscent of what we thought, frankly, was a bygone era.

Our approach, we tried to avoid too much of a comparison of one country to another, but if you take a sober approach in terms of the democratic development in Belarus, I think many would conclude that it has been largely a decade of dictatorship, frankly, because the space for civil society has become more limited, not only the information space but the space for other kinds of independent activity.

One of the things I'm always impressed with when I go to Belarus is that you can walk down the street and the situation seems quite normal, but it's when you venture off the main thoroughfare, if you will, and start getting into questions of independent political thought and action that you really come into a completely different side of the situation in the country. Frankly one that is, I think, quite a dark side of the country.

So we are very hopeful that—well, I mean, we would actually look at the conduct on election day. One of the things that I come away with, and maybe not to editorialize too much—and I should also indicate that Congressman McIntyre, one of our Commissioners, has joined us, so we appreciate your coming here.

Mr. MCINTYRE. Thank you very much.

Mr. MCNAMARA. Is that at the end of election day—and most of the commissions are made up of teachers. I visited many great, wonderful schools throughout the country. I've tried to—most observers like to go in Minsk. I like to go out into the heartland.

So I've had a chance to go out and at the end of the day, though, each of those teachers has to sign the official protocol. And there's a foregone conclusion in most instances there, and to me it's a little sad that those individuals who have to answer to the director of the school who is the head of the commission it already sets up a very difficult, on a human level, dynamic, and it's very sad to me that these people in a state that is the principal employer of the vast majority of the work force, that those people are put in that position where they have to sign off on a result that do or do not comport with what the actual results were.

So that's a little personal thought on a human level, because it's important to keep in mind sort of the human dimension of the situation in that country. And I know our Co-Chairman and some of our other members have met with the widows of disappeared activists and so forth. So we keep those aspects of it in mind as well.

Yes, please.

Ms. KUDRYCKA. Only one sentence because I have some materials from Belarusian Association of Journalists and they report information in November that a church in Belarus loses its property and also repressions on the Muslims in Belarus and a lot of things like that, that there is still problems with churches in Belarus.

Mr. MCNAMARA. If there are no further questions—yes?

QUESTIONER. Last year, there was a caucus formed on U.S.-EU relations. I cannot agree with you more about having dialogue between the U.S. and the EU parliament and Congress. Is there any discussion going on with the caucus here on Capitol Hill or anything as far as having a dialogue or anything like that or can anybody comment on that? Or what steps you could see that need to be taken to improve the dialogue between U.S. and Europe so we can come out with one policy statement with the issue of Belarus?

Mr. MCNAMARA. Certainly, there is a standing group of members of the House of Representatives who have regular interaction with the European institutions in Brussels with the idea of, sort of, just, again, on a personal level, establishing those kind of linkages and contacts and so forth.

In terms of the questions of today's briefing and the subject of Belarus, as I said at the outset, there's a lot of, sort of, common ground, if you will, and I think there are like-minded members here, and we're quite interested to see what the opportunities for cooperation in joint statements. Joint action is a little bit more difficult, but, again, I know at the executive branch here there's also open lines of communication regarding Belarus, for sure.

So that's sort of the form that it takes at this point. But we very much appreciate the presence of our European guests this afternoon as a demonstration of our joint concerns regarding the situation in Belarus, and hopefully we won't have to issue statements regarding unfortunate things. We'll really have to see.

Yes?

Mr. GUNTHER. You mentioned the EU caucus was, I think, installed last year, so I think that's very welcome by the European countries because it shows that there's a group here that is especially interested in the EU, and there's a constant contact between the EU caucus and the European member states.

And the other point is it's a transglobal cooperation. I think I mentioned this at the last EU-U.S. summit, this democracy promotion as the subject was introduced. And

Belarus is one of the countries where the EU and United States work together and our working was at the time being on joint statements.

Mr. MCNAMARA. Thank you very much. I would indicate that the Helsinki Commission will be having a hearing a week from today on human rights developments in the Russian Federation. We just got word that Assistant Secretary Fried will be participating among a number of experts on developments in Russia. That announcement should be distributed this afternoon. Unfortunately, I don't have the specific time or location, but if you visit our Commission Web site, [www.csce.gov](http://www.csce.gov), you can access that information as well as the transcript of today's proceedings.

So thank you very much.

[Whereupon the briefing ended at 3:33 p.m.]



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