



On Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Commission, I am honored to appear before you today to discuss the state of democracy and human rights in Belarus and commend the Commission for its engagement on this important subject. Your active interest has ensured that a strong message of solidarity has been sent to the Belarusian people from both the legislative and executive branches of the U.S. Government. The Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act, which some members and staff of this Commission have been instrumental in moving forward, has given the Administration a key tool in formulating policy toward Belarus. I also wish to applaud the vital work that the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute have done to help support democracy in Belarus from the grassroots.

Mr. Chairman, given the recent release of all political prisoners and the upcoming parliamentary election September 28th, this hearing comes at a time of opportunity for Belarus. If the Government of Belarus shows that it is truly committed to democratic reform, we will have the possibility to develop a more robust relationship between our two countries. As we have said many times, we would like to have a different relationship with Belarus -- one that is based on mutual respect for internationally recognized norms and the human rights of the people of Belarus. For an improved relationship to be possible, Belarus must truly abide by its commitments as a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and democratic norms.

The release of all political prisoners in Belarus is an encouraging step in this direction. Former presidential candidate, Alviaksander Kazulin, was freed from prison on August 16th, over two years after his arrest and conviction on charges of alleged hooliganism at a protest after the fraudulent March 2006 presidential election. The Administration, from President Bush on down, including our Embassy in Minsk, pressed hard for his release and met numerous times with his late wife and daughters. I truly regret that Irina Kazulina, herself a brave fighter for human rights, did not live long enough to see her husband freed. And on August 20th, Belarusian authorities released the last two political prisoners: businessman Syarhey Parsyukevich and youth activist Andrey Kim. Mr. Parsyukevich and Mr. Kim had been imprisoned on charges stemming from a demonstration held in January 2008 to protest new government restrictions on businesses. Earlier this year, the Government of Belarus released five individuals, internationally recognized as political prisoners -- Andrey Klimov, Dmitry Dashkevich, Artur Finkevich, Nikolay Avtukhovich and Yuriy Leonov. Freeing all eight prisoners is a meaningful step forward. Of course, we also are looking to Belarus authorities to respect the human and civil rights of all Belarusian people, in particular the freedoms of assembly and expression, including respect for an independent media. We hope the Government of Belarus shows a true, sustained commitment to democratic reform and respect for human rights.

As we have discussed many times with the Belarusian authorities, the release of Mr. Kazulin and the other two political prisoners provides the opportunity for the United States and the European Union to start a dialogue with the Belarusians about ways to improve relations. My colleague, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, David Merkel, traveled to Minsk August 21 to 23 to explore the possibilities for a real dialogue between our two governments, as well as to deepen our contacts with the democratic opposition. Merkel's was the first visit at this level by a U.S. official since my last trip to Minsk in April 2007, when I held that same position. Following Merkel's visit, the Department of State, in coordination with the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), approved a six-month suspension until March 2009 of sanctions against two subsidiaries of Belarusian state-owned-enterprise Belneftekhim. We will watch Belarus closely to determine whether to extend this suspension and take other such steps.

The release of political prisoners shows that the United States and the European Union can be effective in bringing about change when we are united. We regularly coordinate with our European allies on the situation in Belarus (in fact Deputy Assistant Secretary Merkel has been in Brussels yesterday and today doing just that) and have been united in our desire for the unconditional release of political prisoners in Belarus and for the authorities to respect the human and civil rights of the Belarusian people. While we have had occasional tactical differences on how best to approach Belarus, there is no question that the United States and the European Union share the goal of seeing a democratic Belarus assume its rightful place as a fully integrated member of the international community.

The United States and the European Union have had a dual-track approach to Belarus. We strongly support civil society, NGOs, and other democratic forces in Belarus, while we take action against those whom we hold responsible for electoral fraud, human rights abuses, and corruption. We also are working closely with the European Union to urge Belarus to live up to its obligations to its people to allow an open and transparent electoral campaign process and hold free and fair parliamentary elections later this month.

Free and fair elections depend only in part on the conduct of the actual balloting and vote tabulation. Both we and the European Union have emphasized the need for Belarus to make significant progress in improving conditions throughout the electoral process. Key concerns include full access for OSCE observers, including to the voting process and ballot count, registration of opposition candidates, access to the voters and media for all candidates, and participation of the opposition in electoral commissions at all levels.

In previous Belarusian elections, OSCE concluded that fundamental freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression were disregarded. During its initial assessment of this election environment OSCE has found no evident progress in these areas. OSCE has numerous times also provided recommendations to the government to improve the conduct of elections in Belarus in line with OSCE commitments. However, the authorities have not taken any significant steps to address these recommendations.

The lack of opposition representation on precinct election commissions, and allegations that employees of regime-named candidates serve on the commissions, are of serious concern to us. Candidate registration offers a somewhat better picture, with approximately 78 percent of opposition candidates being registered, albeit below the 83 percent opposition registration rate in the 2004 elections. However, the registration appeals process added only eight more registered parliamentary candidates out of a possible 52 denied registration.

In addition to the conduct of elections in Belarus, another key issue in improving the relations between the U.S. and Belarus is Belarusian authorities' treatment of imprisoned U.S. citizen Emanuel Zeltser. Mr. Zeltser was arrested in March of this year and later convicted in a secret trial on charges of using false documents and economic espionage. Despite our many repeated requests, we have been allowed consular access to Mr. Zeltser only five times and were denied access to his closed trial. And despite our many efforts, including facilitating an exam by an American doctor and even bringing his medications to prison officials, Mr. Zeltser reports he has not been allowed access to all his prescription medicines or their comparable Belarusian equivalents. Our consular officer and the American doctor reported such a severe deterioration to his health since his imprisonment that we have requested Mr. Zeltser's release on humanitarian grounds. With a real possibility for a significant improvement in the relationship between U.S. and Belarus, we hope there will be a quick, humanitarian resolution in Mr. Zeltser's case. We will continue to request consular access to Mr. Zeltser to monitor his welfare as well as press for his access to his prescribed medicines. And as long as Mr. Zeltser's welfare remains endangered, we will continue our call for his humanitarian release.

No matter what relationship we have with the Government of Belarus, we have and will continue to provide assistance to empower the Belarusian people so that they may determine their own future. We strive to build NGO capacity to increase public participation; bolster the capacity of democratic political parties to unify, strategize,

organize and connect with constituents; and strengthen independent media and expand access to objective information. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Belarus Service remains a leading international broadcaster, providing programming in the Belarusian language. The Service's new television program has recently been placed on a Polish-led, satellite television channel. In addition, Voice of America broadcasts are available in Russian to audiences in Belarus. Recent assistance successes include our work with five Belarusian umbrella organizations, and our programs supported the development of an NGO "map" to analyze civil society trends, improve strategic planning and enhance donor coordination. We also have supported the ability of an external radio project to improve its program content and expanded its internet audience to over 16,000 hits per month – that represents a four-fold increase in the number of unique visitors each day to the site since 2006. And we are supporting a Polish-led effort to broadcast television to Belarus via satellite. It is with this assistance that the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute and our other non-governmental partners have been so critically helpful.

In closing, as President Bush has said, "The United States will continue to stand with the people of Belarus and all those who are working to help Belarus take its rightful place in the community of democracies." Our policy toward Belarus has never been driven by Minsk's relationship with Moscow, whether warm or cold. Instead, our policy has been driven by the Government of Belarus's treatment of its own people. We have shown our determination to take action against Belarus officials responsible for human rights abuses, assaults on democracy, and state corruption. The targeted sanctions and penalties we have imposed are not directed against the people of Belarus. With the release of all political prisoners by the Government of Belarus, we have begun a review of these sanctions and are allowing certain transactions to move forward. We never have sought regime change per se, merely a change in regime behavior, and we hope we are seeing positive signs of such a change. Again, we hope the Government of Belarus shows a true, sustained commitment to democratic reform and respect for human rights, so that we have the opportunity to move our relationship forward. It is my hope that we will look back on this year as the time when relations between Belarus and the United States got back on track.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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