FREEDOM DENIED: BELARUS ON THE EVE OF THE ELECTION

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BEFORE THE

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SECOND SESSION

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COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

WASHINGTON, DC

The hearing was held at 2:03 p.m. in room 138 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, DC, Hon. Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Commissioners present: Hon. Sam Brownback, Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; and Hon. Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Witnesses present: David J. Kramer, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, U.S. Department of State; Iryna Vidanava, Belarusian Activist, Editor-in-Chief, Students' Thought; Stephen B. Nix, Regional Program Director, Eurasia, International Republican Institute; Patrick Merloe, Director of Programs on Election Processes, National Democratic Institute; Rodger Potocki, Senior Program Officer for East Central Europe, National Endowment for Democracy; and Celeste A. Wallander, Director of the Russia and Eurasian Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies.

HON. CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH, CO-CHAIRMAN, COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Mr. SMITH. The Helsinki Commission will come to order. I want to thank all of our distinguished friends and witnesses for coming out this afternoon.

Let me begin by saying that exactly 6 years ago to the day on March 9, 2000, the Helsinki Commission held hearings on Belarus, focusing on the already bleak human rights and democracy situation under the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Numerous witnesses, including some of the leading opposition members from Belarus, testified at the time, highlighting concerns and outlining steps on how democracy and that country's integration into Europe could best be fostered. Six years later, we find ourselves examining an even more precarious situation in Belarus than we encountered then.

Unfortunately, the Lukashenka regime has only become more dictatorial with the passage of time. The assault on civil society, NGOs, independent media, democratic opposition and increasing pressure on unregistered and minority religious organizations has only intensified, becoming daily occurrences.

Despite innumerable calls for Belarus to live up to its freely undertaken OSCE election commitments, elections in 2000, 2001, and 2004 were neither free nor fair. It follows along a downward trajectory that began a decade ago when Lukashenka, through an illegitimate referendum, took control over the legislature and the judiciary and manipulated the constitution to remain in power.

Belarus, which borders on EU and NATO nations, has become a stark anomaly in an increasingly democratic Europe. The Belarusian people have become even more isolated from the winds of democracy following neighboring Ukraine's Orange Revolution. Lukashenka's fear that the people would follow the Ukrainian example has led to his further clamping down on those who dare to speak out for freedom and fundamental human rights.

Among the numerous examples that can be cited, just last week, one Belarusian opposition candidate running for next week's elections was detained by security forces and severely beaten. Yesterday—or the day before, I should say—we received reports that five members of the campaign of the United Opposition candidate, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, were held by police and driven away.

In recent weeks, Lukashenka has launched an intensive campaign to encourage a climate of fear and to stoke hostility among the Belarusian people through a Soviet-style propaganda campaign against the opposition, Europe and the United States.

As the prime sponsor of the Belarus Democracy Act, I indeed welcome the administration's growing engagement with the people of Belarus. I am pleased that President Bush and other high-ranking administration officials met with Irina Krasovskaya and Svyatlana Zavadskaya, two of the wives of opposition figures believed to have been murdered with the complicity of Belarusian senior officials.

I would note parenthetically that I had the privilege of meeting with them and others over the last 6 years on a number of occasions, including a press conference we held when we called on the Belarusian authorities to provide an accounting for their whereabouts, and I have always admired their determination and courage. They are truly remarkable ladies.

Given the disturbing pre-election environment, where meaningful access to the media by opposition candidates is denied, where independent voices are stifled, and where the regime maintains pervasive control over the election process, it is very hard to imagine that next week's elections will be free. They are already not fair.

In the event that protests are held in response to electoral fraud, we remind Belarus' authorities that the right to peaceful assembly is a fundamental human rights issue and a basic tenet of the OSCE. Any violent suppression of peaceful protests will have serious repercussions, and only deepen Belarus' self-imposed isolation.

Over the course of the last century, the Belarusian people have endured great suffering at the hands of murderous dictators such as Stalin and Adolf Hitler. Twenty years ago they endured, and

continue to endure, Chernobyl's dark cloud. I believe that the Belarusian people deserve—and I know people in this room believe likewise—the freedom and the dignity long denied to them. Belarus deserves its rightful place in a free and a prosperous democratic Europe.

I'd like to welcome our first witness to today's hearing, David Kramer, who is the Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs. He is responsible for Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus affairs, as well as regional nonproliferation issues.

Previously, Mr. Kramer served as a professional staff member in the Office of Policy Planning at the U.S. Department of State. Before that, he served as senior adviser to the Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs. Before joining the government, Mr. Kramer was Senior Fellow at the Project for the New American Century, Associate Director of the Russian and Eurasian program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and assistant director of Russian and Eurasian Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies—all here in Washington, DC.

Mr. Kramer, the floor is yours and I yield to you.

DAVID J. KRAMER, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR EUROPEAN AND EURASIAN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Mr. KRAMER. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you here today. And let me also thank you for your leadership on the issue of Belarus, bringing freedom and democracy there, and for your leadership on the Belarus Democracy Act. We are grateful for what you've done.

Mr. Chairman, without objection I'd like to ask that my written statement be entered into the record.

Mr. SMITH. Without objection, your full statement will be made a part of the record.

Mr. KRAMER. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, this hearing comes at a critical moment with the Belarusian election less than two weeks away. The policy of the United States toward Belarus is defined by our support for the Belarusian people in their aspirations for democracy.

As President Bush stated when he signed the Belarus Democracy Act in October 2004, at a time when freedom is advancing around the world, Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his government are turning Belarus into a regime of repression in the heart of Europe, its government isolated from its neighbors and its people isolated from each other. We will work with our allies and partners to assist those seeking to return Belarus to its rightful place among the Euro-Atlantic community of democracies. There is no place in a Europe whole and free for a regime of this kind, the president said.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has stressed the importance of, quote, shining a bright spotlight on the Lukashenka regime's shameful record of denying basic human rights and freedoms to its citizens on what is—as she succinctly said—the last outpost of tyranny in Europe.

She and the president met just over a week ago with the widows of two of the disappeared persons believed to have been murdered by the Belarusian authorities for their political views. The presi-

dent then gave these women his personal support for their efforts to seek justice for the disappeared, and for all those who seek to return freedom to Belarus.

Just today, our U.S. Ambassador in Lithuania, Steve Mull, read a statement from the President at a ceremony marking the European Humanities University, which was kicked out of Belarus, in which the President highlighted the great courage and determination of so many Belarusians, who are overcoming enormous challenges to show the world that, quote, the love of liberty is stronger than the will of tyranny.

As Belarus approaches the Presidential election March 19, the regime has given itself broad new legal powers to silence dissent and targeted representatives of independent civil society with a dramatic increase in politically motivated detentions, prosecutions, beatings, harassment, and property seizures, under the cover of laws passed by a parliament that does not have a single opposition member in it.

Nonetheless, despite this government repression, it is possible to see significant positive developments within Belarusian civil society, and to find active support for them in the international community.

Mr. Chairman, Alyaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994, is running again for office, having engineered, as you put it, a fraudulent referendum in 2004, to change a constitutional provision that would have otherwise limited him to two terms.

Clearly rattled by the recent democratic breakthroughs in the region, he and his government have ratcheted up pressure on the opposition, nongovernmental organizations and the independent media. They have rewritten the laws to criminalize, quote, discrediting Belarus. And they have used these and other legal provisions to punish and intimidate the people of Belarus.

There has been a surge of detentions and harassment in the last two months, designed to intimidate opponents of the regime and to create a climate of fear in the run-up to the election.

On February 21, the Belarusian KGB detained four civil activists, and they continue to hold them on charges under a new criminal code provision forbidding activity in an unregistered organization, threatening the interests and duties of the citizens of the Republic of Belarus—a crime that carries a prison sentence of up to 3 years.

The KGB has publicly claimed that these individuals were involved in a bizarre coup plot, allegedly directed by a U.S. NGO—a truly absurd claim.

On March 2, the authorities beat and detained an opposition presidential candidate, Alyaksandr Kazulin, as well as a number of his supporters and journalists. Reportedly, one of Kazulin's assailants was none other than Dmitry Pavlichenko, the notorious special forces colonel implicated in international investigations as being directly involved in the cases of the disappeared in 1999 to 2000.

This week there have been more disturbing incidents. On March 7, police arrested Anatol Lyabedzka and other members of Alyaksandr Milinkevich's campaign after a rally. Lyabedzka was fined $750 for an illegal demonstration, and Vladimir Shantsev,

Milinkevich's regional campaign head, was sentenced to 15 days in jail.

On March 7, police in Gomel seized 28,000 Milinkevich leaflets. Last Saturday, police seized 250,000 copies of independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya. And just yesterday, police detained senior Milinkevich campaign worker Vintsuk Vyachorka, also head of the Belarusian Popular Front, as well as a number of other campaign people.

Today, Vyachorka and others were sentenced to 15 days for holding an unsanctioned rally.

Mr. Chairman, I would be happy to yield to Senator Brownback, if you'd like.

Mr. BROWNBACK. No. Please proceed at this point in time. And I apologize for being late. We just had a vote that was up, but I'm delighted that Congressman Smith got this up and going. Let's just go ahead with that, and then I'll do my opening statement afterwards.

Mr. KRAMER. Appreciate that. Thank you, sir.

Let us not forget other political prisoners currently serving lengthy sentences in Belarus, including Mikhail Marynich, Valery Levaneuski, Nikolai Statkevich, Pavel Severinets, and Andrei Klimov.

It is clear that the regime has created a climate of fear that it hopes will intimidate opponents during the election campaign. At the same time, the government has failed to adequately investigate the deaths of two independent journalists, Veronika Cherkasova and Vassili Grodnikov.

Because of the government's tight control of the mass media in Belarus, few Belarusians are probably aware of reports linking Lukashenka and his inner circle to corruption. His Presidential administration owns a large and ever-increasing amount of property in Belarus, including hotels and other real estate.

Lukashenka and his immediate family reportedly enjoy residences and other facilities throughout Belarus. Distinctions between his personal and state property are blurred, and a large Presidential reserve fund remains separate from, and unaccountable to, the main state budget.

Lukashenka once admitted that this account amounted to $1 billion. These funds, earned from the sale of military equipment abroad do not enter the state coffers. Lukashenka himself has said that it is hidden so well that no opposition member will find it.

And according to Lukashenka, the Presidential fund receives money from secret arms sales, the total profits of which have not been recorded in the state budget, and are beyond public scrutiny.

Despite all the obstacles and uncertainties thrown up by the regime, many Belarusians have chosen to work for a democratic future for their country. These include brave independent journalists, NGO activists, members of pro-democracy political parties and many ordinary people, who have taken simple steps like signing a candidate's ballot petition or attending a political rally.

These people know they may be risking the loss of their jobs, arrest, trumped up criminal charges, jail time, beatings, or worse. And they have achieved some successes, even in such a forbidding environment.

The pro-democracy opposition in Belarus is more unified today than it has been in recent memory.

Our proper place is standing beside these brave Belarusians, doing what we can to encourage and help them to achieve a better future for their country. Such a future will inevitably come, although we can't predict when that will happen.

Belarus is in the heart of Europe, and its democratization will be a major step in completing the democratic transformation of the continent.

The U.S. Government, in close coordination with the European Union, and with the invaluable help of the Belarus Democracy Act, has been a strong voice against the regime's abuses.

We've sponsored successful resolutions, and the U.N. Commission on Human Rights met repeatedly with Belarusian democracy and human rights activists, and taken concrete actions to hold regime officials accountable, such as the travel restrictions we announced in 2004 against government officials responsible for the disappearances and election-related abuses.

For many years, we have denied most kinds of direct U.S. Government assistance to the Belarusian Government with some exceptions, including continuing humanitarian assistance and educational exchanges.

Our programs have largely been aimed at furthering development of democracy, respect for human rights and market-oriented reform, despite the forbidding environment, and include human rights monitoring and education, access to objective and independent information, democratic political party development, voter education, rule of law, electoral reform, and independent oversight.

After the elections, we intend to continue our outreach efforts and our work to help pro-democracy forces build support to push for change. Whatever happens in the upcoming election, we intend to remain engaged in Belarus for a long time to come.

Mr. Chairman, I have been very pleased with the cooperation we've had with the European Union in developing a unified approach to the upcoming election. At the beginning of this year we tried a joint pre-election message to deliver to officials in Minsk with the European Union.

As it turned out, unfortunately, the Belarusian authorities turned down the request for the joint mission, exposing as hollow their claims that they seek dialogue with the international community. This was just the latest evidence demonstrating that the government in Minsk has isolated itself and the country. We have not isolated it; it has isolated itself.

We have coordinated our various types of assistance through a series of donor coordination meetings with the EU, and we welcome the European Union's decision to support media programs in Belarus, including external broadcasting through the European Radio for Belarus and others, and we have coordinated closely to be sure that these efforts mesh with our own efforts in this area.

Getting objective information flowing into Belarus has been one of our top priorities as a way to break through the government's stifling control over most media. Top officials of the EU and several EU member states have also received opposition candidate

Milinkevich, and have used that occasion to underline their support for democracy in Belarus.

Mr. Chairman, I traveled to Minsk 2 weeks ago, and I went for several reasons. I wanted to reinforce the sense among the people of Belarus that the United States is very closely following developments there and remains very engaged.

I also wanted to get a feel first hand, albeit only for 2 days, for the situation in Minsk, and to give a boost to those fighting for democracy and freedom. I also wanted to convey directly to Belarusian officials in Minsk, rather than simply through their ambassador here, that there will be serious consequences if the election, including the process leading up to the actual voting, remains as seriously flawed and tainted as it has been thus far.

I also underscored that there will be major consequences for the government forces, if it resorts to violence against protesters, who—as you pointed out, Mr. Chairman—have a right to assemble and protest peacefully, if they so choose.

Fourth, I wanted to make clear to Belarusian officials that the United States and European Union are completely united in our approach to Belarus, that the concerns about developments there are not simply based in Washington, but are shared in Brussels and in all European capitals.

Fifth, I wanted to reach out to civil society representatives, students and the independent media, as well as to those in the opposition—and what's left is brave and vibrant—to let them know that the United States is a friend of the people of Belarus, and that the isolation of their country is the result of the decisions made by the paranoid regime there.

Sixth, and finally, I wanted to give a boost to our terrific Embassy employees in Minsk, who face increasing and outrageous harassment from thuggish authorities and state television.

In Minsk, Mr. Chairman, I was as clear as I could be that we in the West are prepared to respond in a most serious way to fraud, abuse and violence perpetrated by this regime. It would be a grave mistake by those in the Lukashenka regime to underestimate American and European resolve.

Both the United States and the EU have made clear publicly that we are ready to take further measures against individuals responsible for committing fraud and violating international standards in this election. A dialogue is already underway on what these measures will be and whom we'll target, although obviously, final decisions and public announcements will wait until after the results are known and the OSCE and ODIHR election observation mission have offered its assessment.

Unfortunately, the election process has already been deeply flawed, as I mentioned. And past experience gives us very little hope that things will get better.

Mr. Chairman, the United States will be ready to respond to any result, holding accountable those responsible for abusing the rights of their fellow citizens and continuing to help the people of Belarus in any way we can to support the transition to a free society and to consolidate democratic gains when they come. We are already making plans with the Europeans for our post-election policies toward Belarus and for continuing donor coordination meetings.

We look forward to the day when Belarus takes its rightful place as a democracy in a Europe whole, free and at peace. We appreciate continued congressional support and interest in Belarus. Whatever happens March 19th, we should not and will not give up on our support for the people of Belarus.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

Mr. SMITH. Chairman Brownback has been kind enough to let me go first, because I do have to testify, myself, at 2:30. And I thank him for graciously yielding.

Just to ask a couple of very quick questions.

One is—and you alluded to it—what happens if Lukashenka sends out the thugs to beat up—and you mentioned Mr. Lyabedzka. I've met him a number of times at OSCE parliamentary meetings, and he is an absolute—a real democrat. He believes in democracy, believes in transparency, believes in fundamental human rights. He's a good friend of all us on the Commission and he has been targeted before.

Thank you for undertaking that trip to send that clear message on behalf of the United States.

But what do we do with regards to this, if what is unthinkable, regrettably, does indeed happen?

And second, with regards to the broadcasts, we know that the EU began broadcasting in Belarus on February 26. What is the impact of that broadcasting and Radio Liberty, as well as Voice of America? Are there plans to beef up our efforts?

Because, again, as I learned as a kid growing up—and I'm a great fan as a member of Congress for these last 26 years—the Iron Curtain isn't sound-proof. And certainly, surrogate broadcasting and Voice of America type broadcasting, as well, is a great way of getting that message through to give people hope, but also real information that's factually based.

Mr. KRAMER. We are trying to do all we can to make sure that force and violence do not occur, whether before the election or after the election. We have already seen the beating up of Mr. Kazulin and the beatings of others, as well, in Minsk.

We are trying to send a clear message, in full coordination with the European Union, that force and violence will be met with serious consequences for those who condone it, authorize it or engage in it.

We are trying to reach out as much as we can to make clear that force and violence are completely unacceptable.

We have also conveyed that message to neighboring states.

Mr. SMITH. [Inaudible.]

Mr. KRAMER. We have been in touch with Russian officials and asked them to convey the very same message, yes, sir.

Concerning broadcasting, you are absolutely right. This is critical. Getting information flowing into Belarus, objective information that is not state controlled is key to this.

The starting up of the European Radio for Belarus February 26—it's still a little early to come to a judgment on the impact. Our hope, clearly, is that it is having an impact, and word is getting out that it exists and is out there as a resource.

We're also trying to provide support for other information posts. You mentioned Voice of America, which has increased its Belarus

coverage. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is continuing its extensive coverage. And it's also, I think, very important that all of you, and all of us in the administration, continue to speak out loud and clear, so that word gets out. And we are working with our European allies to do the same thing.

As I mentioned before, we've been very pleased with the response we've gotten among EU officials, as well as European capitals directly.

Mr. SMITH. I would just note in closing that we're joined today by a number of distinguished visitors, including Solomon Passy, the Foreign Minister of Bulgaria, who was the OSCE Chairman-in-Office and did a superb job. And thank you, Mr. Chairman, for joining us.

Mr. BROWNBACK [presiding]. Thanks, Congressman Smith, and for being here.

Secretary Kramer, I've got several questions I want to ask. But I guess I just want to start on a broad and a bit of a philosophical basis.

Belarus is such an outlier in the region. What—where's Lukashenka headed with this? I mean, he's got to see the flow of history as clearly not moving back to these sort of very heavy dictatorial types of regimes.

What does he hope is going to take place? What's the plan here on his part?

Mr. KRAMER. Mr. Chairman, getting into the mind of Alyaksandr Lukashenka may be a losing proposition. But I think it is safe to say that paranoia is one of the words that could be used to describe him. Megalomania, certainly. And as I also mentioned, corruption.

He came to power in an election that was fairly decent by international standards, in 1994. But unfortunately, ever since then, it has been a downhill trajectory.

Where he's headed, I think, is trying to stay in power at all costs. Dictators don't like to give up power freely. And in this case, Lukashenka is no exception.

So, I think what he would like to do, and feels that the only way he can stay safe and secure, is by staying in power by any method. And our hope is that the people of Belarus will call him on that.

Mr. BROWNBACK. What's the Russian role on this with Lukashenka? You alluded to some of it, that they've been helpful? Or are they being helpful of Lukashenka?

Mr. KRAMER. It's not black and white. We have been in discussions with our Russian counterparts to talk about Belarus, to explain to them that the spread of freedom and democracy to Belarus is in everyone's interest, including in Russia's interest. That having Belarus run by a dictator serves neither the people of Belarus' interests, nor the people of Russia, their interests, either.

So, we have been in discussions with them about what's going on there. Mr. Lukashenka certainly has made trips to Sochi and to Moscow. But I would also note that Alyaksandr Milinkevich has made two trips to Moscow, and those, I think, have been noteworthy, as well.

So, it's a bit more complicated than simply full support. And we have tried to impress upon our Russian counterparts that support for a free and fair process, which is where we stand, and support

for freedom and democracy in Belarus are where we would hope to find our Russian allies.

Mr. BROWNBACK. They haven't exactly been moving that way themselves, the Russians.

What—I mean, it sounds like, to me, really, they're in many respects, from what you're describing, they're blocking for Lukashenka in Belarus, and not being very helpful in the process. But you seem to describe more of a mixed bag of what they're doing.

What are they doing on the positive side to encourage freedom and democracy in Belarus?

Mr. KRAMER. In the situation with the Russians, there certainly have been a number of officials—Russian officials—in the Duma and elsewhere, who have spoken out in support of Lukashenka.

There have also been a number of people, both in and outside the Duma, and outside the Russian Government, who recognize that having a dictator in Minsk is not in Russia's interests.

I've traveled to Moscow numerous times since I've been in this job and have been struck at the range of people I've met with in Moscow, who have agreed that Lukashenka is not just a problem for Belarus or a problem for the West, but he's also a problem for Russia. We have tried to reach out to those people, to convey to them that we share their concerns, and we will continue to do so.

The view of the Presidential administration of the Kremlin is more difficult to discern. But it certainly goes without saying that Lukashenka has been in meetings with President Putin, and there are pictures of the two together. And those—sometimes pictures can speak very loudly.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Are the Russians propping him up with energy supplies?

Mr. KRAMER. Belarus, unlike the other countries in the region, is paying roughly $47 per thousand cubic meters, whereas, as you will recall, Mr. Chairman, the price for Ukraine went up considerably, where it had been, on January 1st, when the Russians decided to increase prices for all the neighbors, except for Belarus. So, Belarus is receiving subsidized energy from the Russians.

And I would note, however, that Foreign Minister Lavrov a few weeks ago did mention that removing subsidies for the neighbors would apply across the board, and that Belarus would be no exception. However, an exception continues to be made for Belarus, and likely will remain the case up until the election.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Well, you're confusing me a little bit here. You seem to be saying the Russians kind of have a mixed record or an unreadable record on Belarus, and yet the specific actions seem to be very supportive of Lukashenka.

Are we putting sufficient pressure on the Russians that—you know, look at what this guy is doing. He is right next door to you. He is very dependent upon you, and he may, indeed, even be looking to you for inspiration or aspirations or a way out. And you should be putting much more pressure on him.

Mr. KRAMER. In part, I guess—and I don't mean to confuse or to cloud the issue. There are different views in Moscow. There's not one common view.

Now, the view that matters most, obviously, is that of Mr. Putin. And indications are that the Presidential administration has been supportive, though has not warmly embraced Lukashenka.

But as I mentioned, there are a number of people who have influence inside the Kremlin—not necessarily in the Kremlin, but influence with the Kremlin—who do recognize that Lukashenka is a problem. And so, they have been reaching out to the opposition in Belarus and, I think, have done more than might be expected inside Russia.

Mr. BROWNBACK. This reminds me a bit of China and North Korea, where the Chinese have the most influence over North Korea, and once in a while are helpful, but most of the time not.

Mr. KRAMER. Rest assured, we are raising this with our Russian colleagues on a regular basis, including on the recent visit.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Secretary Rice has been very outspoken on Belarus, and I very much appreciate her statements. She's called Belarus an outpost of tyranny. The administration has been very vocal. I appreciate that. I appreciate the clarity of your testimony here today.

Yet our assistance to Belarus has remained very flat. Are we going to be making more aggressive actions on our direct assistance to Belarus? Are we going to follow this up with some additional action on the basis of these statements we've been making?

Mr. KRAMER. Well, Mr. Chairman, I think we've been making very effective use of the aid that we've—of the money that we've received. In FY 2005, the total was $11.5 million, and that included $5 million from the supplemental. In 2006, the level is $11.88 million.

So, we have been pleased to maintain the level of support. We hope to continue that. We, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, are looking at staying engaged in Belarus for the long term, not simply to focus on this election—though that is a major part of our focus right now—but we want to sustain assistance and support for a whole range of programs and activities in Belarus.

So, we'll look forward to certainly working with you and the Congress on foreign assistance issues with Belarus.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Is Belarus impacting things in Ukraine or any of the other countries outside of Russia in the region in a negative fashion? Or have their actions been mostly contained inside the country?

Mr. KRAMER. Certainly with Poland—the Poles have run into problems with the ethnic minority inside Belarus and have had significant tensions in their relationship with the Lukashenka regime.

It is no one's interest for there to be a dictatorship there in Europe. And so, it is negative for the regime that's in place there to exist and to continue. It does have a negative impact on all of the neighboring states.

There are certain realities that the neighbors have to deal with, bilateral issues that cannot be put aside just because of the regime that's in place in Minsk.

But we have been pleased by the interests and the efforts of the neighbors to work with us in trying to bring greater freedom and democracy in Belarus.

It is a challenge for the immediate neighbors, but I've been very pleased that none of them has backed down from working with us.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Is there any relationship between Belarus and Iran or North Korea? Several of the—or two of the axis of evil nations?

Mr. KRAMER. Mr. Chairman, we have looked into these issues. Nothing, I would say, that we would discuss in this session.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Well, I may try to take that up in another setting, then, as well.

Secretary Kramer, thank you very much, and thank you for your clarity of statement here today. I think it's important that the United States state its position clearly, and particularly on a country that is so undemocratic and such an outlier, as what Belarus is. And so, I appreciate your being here and appreciate the strength of your statement.

Mr. KRAMER. Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Mr. BROWNBACK. We'll call the next panel up. While they're getting in place, I'd like to make my opening statement. Again, I apologize for not being here on time, but we had a vote.

Presidential elections will be held next week, March 19. And we've heard from the administration and we'll hear from other expert witnesses on how Belarus is doing with its freely undertaken OSCE election commitments in light of the upcoming elections. So, there were commitments that were made.

These commitments include respect for human rights and democratic principles. And I have to say, the picture there is not encouraging.

Last week, security forces beat up and arrested one of the two opposition candidates. Just yesterday, security forces detained a top opposition leader for holding a meeting with voters in Minsk.

Daily reports of arrests, KGB raids and the closure of independent newspapers and NGOs have become commonplace as Belarus prepares to hold Presidential elections on March 19, capping off a decade of dictatorship under Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Beginning with an illegal referendum 10 years ago aimed at consolidating political power in his hands, Europe's last dictator has led his country into increased isolation, as Belarus' neighbors, excluding Russia, have consolidated democracy through free and fair elections.

By contrast, Belarus has held a series of fundamentally flawed elections at both the parliamentary and Presidential levels, seriously undermining the legitimacy of the country's political leadership. Regrettably, this pattern is already evident as the 2006 elections get underway in earnest.

It is instructive to assess current developments in Belarus in light of the four criteria agreed by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and European Parliament nearly 6 years ago.

These are: No. 1, ending a climate of fear; No. 2, granting equal media access; No. 3, empowering parliament with meaningful authority; and No. 4, enacting meaningful election reform.

On each of these critical points, the regime no longer even feels compelled to pay lip service, let alone take meaningful action. The leadership has yet to explain the disappearances of leading opposi-

tion figures, even as it perpetuates a climate of fear, by directing the levers of state power against independent voices it seeks to silence.

The regime maintains such a stranglehold over the flow of information, that even some broadcasts from Russia are blocked, while the handful of remaining independent newspapers are squeezed, and most have already been shut down.

Opposition candidates given token time on state radio media are in turn the subject of a constant barrage of vicious attacks by the state apparatus for agitation and propaganda.

This is a country where mere criticism of Lukashenka is deemed defamation, and has landed several activists in prison. Meanwhile, the National Assembly remains a largely rubber stamp institution, going through the motions on measures already decided by the presidential administration.

The electoral apparatus at all levels, much less the country's media outlets, remains firmly in the hands of the regime. In a country where the state is the dominant employer and most workers are kept on short-term contracts as a control mechanism, pressure to support Lukashenka cannot be dismissed.

The same holds true for university students subject to expulsion for dissent. Tragically, educators responsible for training the younger generation in Belarus also make up the bulk of those administering the elections through commissions often headed the school principal.

At the end of the election day, these teachers are then presented with results that they must confirm or face obvious consequences. Not surprisingly, of the over 74,000 commission members, two—two in the entire election apparatus—represent opposition candidates.

Based on the evidence thus far, there are few grounds to believe that the election will be free or fair. In the end, it is the Belarusian people, long denied their freedom and dignity, who suffer.

One of our witnesses today was featured in a "Washington Post" profile regarding her activities as a dissident. As difficult and bleak as the situation in Belarus may seem today, Ms. Iryna Vidanava has an optimistic message. According to her, the young people of Belarus today will change the fate of Belarus tomorrow. We must support their efforts, and we must give them hope. And I certainly look forward to her testimony and the rest of the panelists.

Now let me introduce the panelists who will be presenting on this panel.

Ms. Vidanava has been active in promoting civil society in Belarus for more than a decade. She's the editor-in-chief of "Student's Thought," an independent publication, which is the only magazine for students in Belarus. She has also served as international coordinator for the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs, Belarus' largest third sector umbrella organization, has held leadership positions in the Belarusian Student Association and Youth Information Center.

While in the United States, she has worked for the Center for Civil Society Studies at Johns Hopkins, and Freedom House. She's a historian by training, is a lecturer and doctoral student at Belarus State University. She currently is studying public policy,

nonprofit management and international relations at Johns Hopkins, where she's a Muskie Fellow.

Next, Stephen B. Nix, International Republican Institute, regional program director for Eurasia. He joined the IRI October 2000 as regional program director for Eurasia. In that position he oversees a number of countries in the region.

We'll also hear from Patrick Merloe, National Democratic Institute, director of programs on election processes. He's been an observer of election processes in more than 25 countries, and later he participated in over 130 NDI delegations and assistance teams to more than 50 countries around the world.

From Rodger Potocki—did I say that right? Good. Got one right—senior program officer for East-Central Europe. He oversees NED programs in Central Europe, the Balkans and Belarus. He's been active in Belarus for more than 15 years.

Celeste A. Wallander, Center for Strategic and International Studies, director of Russia and Eurasian programs. Dr. Wallander directs the Russia and Eurasian program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and is a CSIS senior fellow for—she joined there. She's a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and associate professor of government at Harvard University.

So, a distinguished panel. I look forward to your presentations and your thoughts about what's taking place in Belarus, and what we should be doing.

Your full statements will be placed into the record as if presented, so you're free to summarize. We'll run the clock at 6 minutes to give you some sense of time. And then I would like to have some time for questions afterwards.

We'll start off with you, Ms. Vidanava. I admire you.

IRYNA VIDANAVA, BELARUSIAN ACTIVIST, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, STUDENTS' THOUGHT

Ms. VIDANAVA. Thank you.

Mr. BROWNBACK. I admire your work and I admire your courage. It takes a lot to stand up in a tough place, and you're doing it. Thanks for being here.

Ms. VIDANAVA. Mr. Chairman, members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak about the difficult situation concerning young people in my country, Belarus.

They will play a key role on March 19. In Belarus, young people are the most open-minded, tolerant and pro-European segment of the population. They have no connection with the country's Soviet past and look to the future.

Young people are less satisfied with the current economic and political situation in Belarus. It should come as no surprise that a December survey found that more than ⅓ of those supporting the democratic candidate, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, were under 30.

Belarus is a very young society. About a quarter of the population is 15 to 21 years old. Next week, many of these young people will vote for the first time. A significant percentage has not made up its mind.

The largest segment of undecided voters is among youth. And they are skeptical that their choice will be respected. Seventy-seven percent of young people doubt that the elections will be fair.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka understands these demographics and trends. His government has tried to win the hearts and minds of youth by creating the state-run Belarusian Patriotic Union of Youth, based on the model of the old Soviet Komsomol.

Mr. Chairman, the focus of this hearing is freedom denied. And I would like to report on the freedoms denied young people in today's Belarus.

Young people are denied freedom of association. Since 2001, the government has dramatically increased repression against youth and NGOs and publications. The official registration of youth groups has been revoked. They now operate without legal status.

Pavel Severinets, leader of the Young Front, was sentenced to two years of forced labor for organizing a peaceful protest in 2004. NGOs and other civil society initiatives cannot operate at universities, and contacts with Western universities are banned.

Young people are denied freedom of speech. Independent news publications have been shut down and their print runs confiscated. Last fall, an issue of my magazine was seized by the authorities. The seizure was justified by the claim that "dangerous ink, which threatened readers' health, was being used to print the magazine."

After finding opposition forces in her dorm room, the authorities threw Lubov Kuchinskaya out of her university.

Young people are denied freedom to travel. New regulations forbid institutions of higher learning to grant students and professors leaves of absence to travel abroad. Students wanting to work or study abroad must obtain special permission, which is rarely given.

In November 2005, Tatsiana Khoma was expelled for making an unauthorized three-day trip to France, where she attended a meeting of the ESIB—the largest European student organization promoting students' rights.

Young people are denied freedom of thought. In 2003, an elite high school in Minsk was condemned as a nest of opposition and closed down for teaching a wrong version of national history and culture. One year later the authorities shut down the European Humanities University, the private institution in Belarus providing a Western-style higher education.

All first year college students are required to take a course on state ideology, whose syllabus was drafted by Lukashenka himself as the father of the nation.

Young people are denied freedom of choice. All graduates of state universities are required to work for two years in locations and fields decided upon by the government. Students are often sent to still-dangerous Chernobyl zones. All political activities, debates or meetings are forbidden at universities.

This year, students were forced to sign election petitions for Lukashenka, prior to taking their exams. The minister of education has urged students to vote for the current head of state.

The state's youth policy has made an impact. The country's best and brightest young people are choosing to leave Belarus.

Others are retreating into inner immigration by immersing themselves in underground subcultures.

Mr. Chairman, the authorities cannot isolate us from democratic Europe. Young people in Belarus want to be free. They are using high-tech means to bypass the regime and express their opinions. On Internet forums, thousands of students gather daily to discuss hot topics. Denied the right to publish, my magazine was transformed into the first compact disk edition in Belarus, and continues its mission to activate young people.

Young activists in Independence Square use their cell phones to send text messages about and pictures of the March 2nd demonstrations to the international community. These young people—the future leaders of Belarus—need your assistance.

My colleagues and I offer three recommendations.

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

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

Finally, we must continue to help the brave young people who are central to the democratic movement. The civil society effort should continue to be supported, no matter what will happen on or after March 19th.

In particular, we must continue to express our solidarity by assisting young people who will lose their jobs, be expelled and otherwise be repressed for their pro-democratic activities.

Mr. Chairman, the demographics of Belarus tell us that time is on our side. So, all the sovietized generation that forms the bedrock of Lukashenka's support is passing away.

I ask you to stand with the pro-democratic young people of Belarus. Thank you.

Mr. BROWNBACK. I'd be happy and honored to stand with the young people of Belarus. And I'm pleased that they are standing up and being heard.

Mr. Nix?

STEPHEN B. NIX, REGIONAL PROGRAM DIRECTOR, EURASIA, INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

Mr. NIX. Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to be here today, and I would formally request that my statement be entered into the record.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Without objection.

Mr. NIX. Mr. Chairman, we're on the eve of a Presidential election in Belarus which holds vital importance for the people of Belarus. The Government of Belarus has the inherent mandate to hold elections, which will ultimately voice the will of its people.

Sadly, the Government of Belarus has a track record of denying this responsibility to its people, its constitution and the international community. Today, the citizens of Belarus are facing a nominal election in which their inherent right to choose their future will not be granted.

The future of democracy in Belarus is of strategic importance, not only to its people, but to the success of the longevity of democracy in all the former republics. As we witnessed in Georgia and Ukraine, it is inevitable that the time will come when people will stand up and demand their rightful place among fellow citizens of democratic nations.

How many more people must be imprisoned or fined or crushed before this time comes in Belarus?

Mr. Chairman, the situation in Belarus is dire, but the beacon of hope in Belarus is shining. In the midst of repeated human rights violations, continued repression of freedoms, a coalition of pro-democratic activists has emerged and united to offer a voice for the oppressed.

The courage, unselfishness and determination of this coalition are truly admirable. It is vitally important that the United States and Europe remain committed to their support of this democratic coalition, not only in the run-up to the election, but post election, as well.

The road to a free Belarus may be long, and we must make the commitment to travel with our fellow democrats to the journey's end.

Today, my testimony will focus on the history of the Unified Democratic Forces, their progress in spreading their message, as well as the challenges they face.

Mr. Chairman, in January 2004, six of the seven leading political parties in Belarus, along with more than 200 NGOs and associations, formed the People's Coalition Five Plus. This was a major step for all pro-democratic forces in Belarus.

In November 2004, four additional political organizations joined together with Five Plus. This coalition, now referred to as the United Democratic Forces, or UDF, is determined to remain united until it achieves its goal of creating a truly democratic Belarus.

The UDF set their sights on the presidential election to be held in 2006. The coalition realized that in order for maximum success, all pro-democratic activists needed to unite behind one single leader who would represent all the pro-democratic forces. As a result, the coalition created a comprehensive and detailed democratic process for nominating a candidate.

From June to September 2005, caucuses were held throughout Belarus. At each of these meetings, local delegates were selected to represent their district in a national nominating congress. These caucuses culminated with a national democratic congress held in Minsk on October 1 and 2, 2005, where Alyaksandr Milinkevich won the nomination.

Following his registration as a candidate, Milinkevich began campaigning in earnest. Currently, he and his team are attempting to spread the message of the UDF throughout Belarus. Because of the difficulties they face, this campaign is employing the most fundamental skills of democratic politics—person-to-person contact and grassroots activism.

Before the March 19 election, Milinkevich will have visited all major towns in every oblast to meet with voters face to face, to hear their concerns and to share his message of a peaceful, prosperous and free Belarus.

Recent polling conducted by IRI confirms that Mr. Milinkevich and his team have made great progress in spreading the coalition's message. More than 55 percent of people in Belarus report having seen, read or heard about Milinkevich in the past few weeks. These statistics are monumental when considering the fact that Milinkevich's entire campaign is run by face-to-face meetings with voters, as he has no access to television or radio.

Despite the foregoing, Mr. Chairman, the regime shows no intention of playing into false delusions for a fair playing field for this election.

In 2005, the president of Belarus issued an edict which imposed new restrictions on foreign technical assistance Belarus. That was followed by a new law on political parties in Belarus, which strengthens the government's control over their activities.

In addition, the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus has taken over control of organizing public opinion polls. On December 20, President Lukashenka signed into law a controversial bill that would introduce severe penalties for activities deemed to be fomenting a revolution in the country.

Mr. Chairman, in light of these repressions, the UDF has shown tremendous courage and tenacity. To quote Alyaksandr Milinkevich, "We hold no illusions. We are in this for the long run."

We owe the coalition our continued support. It's imperative that the United States and the European Union pay close attention to both the conduct and the results of the March 19 election. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's election observation mission findings will be crucial. Voting irregularities and embellished voting results must not be tolerated.

It is our duty, and the duty of the international community, to hold Lukashenka and his regime accountable. Immediate repercussions must be put in place if the election is stolen, such as economic sanctions and visa bans on leaders of this regime.

The UDF is determined to maintain the coalition and their work. It is imperative for us to aid their resolve. More assistance is needed to fight the information vacuum and to spread their message to the people.

In summation, Mr. Chairman, the coalition has proven their willingness to unite and campaign against all odds. We owe it to them to acknowledge their dedication, and to see their goals of a free Belarus come into fruition.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Thank you, Mr. Nix.

Mr. Merloe?

PATRICK MERLOE, DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS ON ELECTION PROCESSES, NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

Mr. MERLOE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Without objection, I would ask that my written testimony be made part of the record.

Mr. BROWNBACK. It will be in the record.

Mr. MERLOE. Thank you.

Let me begin my remarks, Mr. Chairman, by thanking you personally for your opening summary, and also thank Congressman Smith for his opening remarks, as well.

I'm pleased to be associated with them and with the testimony that was presented by the others members of this panel.

It's an important opportunity to be able to comment on the trouble of electoral conditions now in Belarus. Indeed, it is a continuing circumstance, this denial of freedom.

And Belarus has yet to organize an election that meets even minimum international standards and OSCE commitments. The run-up to the March presidential poll, unfortunately, has been marked by a large number of violations, many of which have been covered by your comments and by the testimony of others at this hearing.

I will focus my remarks on one critical subject: the importance of the free exercise of the right of citizens to participate in government and public affairs through nonpartisan election observation by NGOs.

This derives directly, as you know, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on provisions of the National Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, the Copenhagen Document, and other instruments.

On February 21, as has been noted, several civic activists were arrested. Their offices and their homes were ransacked. Their computers and other effects were confiscated. These persons who are leaders of the movement of Belarusian citizens to monitor elections remain in detention. They are accused by the KGB of slandering the president and illegally running an unregistered organization.

These are serious criminal offenses in Belarus, which could result in multiple year jail terms.

Belarusian authorities have attempted in other ways to stymie the efforts of citizens to observe their elections. Citizen organizations came together to monitor the fraudulent elections in 2001 and 2004. These observers acted with integrity and professionalism, though their efforts to register an election monitoring organization were rejected by Belarusian authorities.

In 2005, many of the civic activists involved in these efforts once again sought to register a citizen initiative called Partnership, in order to observe the present elections. Their good faith request for registration was denied.

But that basis—denial of registration—is being used by Belarusian authorities as a basis for charging individuals with running an illegal organization.

In fact, Mr. Chairman, this is a Belarusian Catch–22. We won't register you, and you are charged with not being registered, with no acceptable reasons for denying the legal recognition.

In addition, in an ongoing propaganda campaign, Belarusian authorities falsely accuse Partnership of fabricating fraudulent exit polls, to be released after the election, in order to draw protesters to the street where explosions would be detonated to create blood and sacrifices, and mobilize the population to attempt to seize governmental power.

This false and outlandish accusation also implicated NDI in the KGB's fiction.

Mr. Chairman, attempts by Belarusian authorities to foil nonpartisan election observation by its citizens violates rights guaranteed by Belarus' constitution, election (inaudible) and international

obligations—all of which are covered in my written submission to this Commission.

With membership in the United Nations and its succession to the International Fundamental Civil and Political Rights, Belarus is obliged to ensure every citizen's rights and opportunities, without unreasonable restrictions to participate in government and public affairs, and to ensure this, whether acting individually or in association with others.

Through its participation in the OSCE, Belarus admits to this principle through the Copenhagen Document and explicitly commits to invite domestic observers from any appropriate organization to monitor its elections.

Like all OSCE participating States, Belarus is obliged to ensure that its laws, regulations, practices and policies conform with obligations under international law and be in harmony with OSCE commitments, not that they be designed to frustrate [inaudible] rights.

However, the Government of Belarus stands in violation of its OSCE commitments and human rights treaty obligations.

Mr. Chairman, we all believe that sovereignty belongs to the people and flows from the people in the country, and that the legitimacy and the authority to govern flows from the will of the people expressed in periodic and genuine, democratic elections.

It is from these precepts that citizens organize themselves to observe and help ensure the integrity of election processes. The NDI is deeply concerned that the Belarusian authorities are taking overt action to deny this and other civil and political rights to the citizens of Belarus in this electoral period.

NDI chairman, Madeleine Albright, in a statement released by the institute on March 6, which is attached to my written statement, deplores attempts to deny citizens the right to peacefully monitor the March 19 Presidential elections and condemns the recent arrest of citizen activists, as well as the false accusations against Partnership.

In her statement, we call on the Government of Belarus to immediately release those detained and to allow them to continue their rightful monitoring of the election process. We hope that you will join us in this call.

Mr. Chairman, NDI greatly appreciates the role of this Commission in defending and promoting human rights and all aspects of the Helsinki process. The CSCE is a strong voice of Congress and of the American people.

NDI would also like to highlight the effort of the OSCE concerning the electoral situation in Belarus, and in particular, the efforts of the chairman's office and of the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, which are noted, again, in my written statement.

These and other actions by the OSCE are valuable and are consistent with the OSCE's mandate to watch the compliance of the participating states.

It is our hope at NDI that the Government of Belarus will meet its obligations and conduct itself in accordance with international commitments and law, and its constitutional requirements in this election period.

Ensuring that civil and political rights are guaranteed in a free and open manner in genuinely democratic elections are crucial to developing democracy in Belarus, as in all other countries.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Thank you, Mr. Merloe. Very, very strong statement.

Mr. Potocki?

RODGER POTOCKI, SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER FOR EAST CENTRAL EUROPE, NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

Mr. POTOCKI. Mr. Chairman, I welcome the opportunity to comment on the situation in Belarus prior to the March 19 Presidential election. And I would also like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and all members of the Commission for your continuing support for the National Endowment for Democracy over the years.

Today I will talk about the situation and role of nongovernmental organizations on the eve of the election. Before starting, it is important to keep in mind that, although the terms that I will use—NGO, third sector and civil society—may sound academic or theoretical, they represent real people who are struggling against great odds to improve lives in Belarus.

The groups which I will talk about include individuals, like the teacher educating pupils in their native language, the social worker helping Chernobyl children and the editor whose magazine inspires young people.

In a decade of work with Belarusians, I've come to know these people and hundreds like them who are the face, the heart and the soul of Belarusian civil society. It is difficult to believe that Alyaksandr Lukashenka calls these citizens hooligans, criminals and terrorists.

NED is a nongovernmental organization that helps other NGOs to promote freedom around the world. This work has become extremely difficult in Belarus, where the government has declared wars on NGOs.

In contrast to political parties, which continue to be legally recognized, hundreds of independent youth groups, human rights organizations, independent newspapers and NGO support centers, have had their legal registrations revoked, have been evicted from their offices and had their equipment seized.

The third sector has borne the brunt of the regime's repression. The majority of activists who have been arrested and imprisoned come from NGOs, and the situation is getting worse.

Understanding that NGOs play the key role in exposing falsified elections and mobilizing citizens in Georgia and Ukraine, Lukashenka pushed through a law in 2005 authorizing criminal penalties against NGOs for activities directed against the people and public security.

But Mr. Chairman, despite the repression that reduced its ranks, Belarus' third sector continues to struggle for democratic reform. Today, more than 70 NGOs throughout the country are working with political parties and trade unions in the Unified Democratic Opposition. Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the candidate of the united opposition, is himself from the third sector.

Other NGOs are working independently to promote a free, fair and transparent election, and Belarusian citizens want them to be involved in the process. An independent survey in February found that 81 percent of respondents supported the idea that NGOs should inform citizens about candidates. Eighty-five percent thought it appropriate that NGOs monitor the electoral process.

Mr. Chairman, the focus of this meeting is freedom. This word, "svaboda" in Belarusian, is also the slogan of a major third sector campaign working to mobilize voters. Others include the 16 Solidarity and Jeans Campaigns.

The first asks that Belarusians light a candle in their windows on the 16th of every month, signifying the day seven years ago when the first of four opposition figures disappeared Belarus, the second encourages citizens to wear denim as a symbol of freedom—both campaigns aimed to build solidarity and reduce fear in society.

The Hopits!, or Enough!, campaign contrasts the ideal situation of the country, as painted by official propaganda, with the ugly reality of hidden unemployment, corruption and repression in today's Belarus. The coalition's name comes from a Lukashenka speech declaring that he would leave office when Belarusians told him, "Enough!" This group will try to hold him to his promise.

These campaigns are making an impact. In a January survey, only 11 percent of respondents were aware of NGO election related activities. By the end of February, the number had grown to 48 percent.

Citizens are being informed, and the electorate is being energized. Milinkevich is speaking to capacity crowds. His March 2 rally was the largest civil society gathering in 2 years. Polls indicate that Milinkevich's rating and name recognition are steadily growing.

Mr. Chairman, Europe's last dictator has no intention of permitting a free election to take place in the heart of Europe. In Lukashenka's authoritarian state there is no room for civil society. So it should come as no surprise that the regime arrests NGO activists for holding unsanctioned meetings, disrupts their offices with fire inspections, sends skinheads to crash their meetings, confiscates their publications for libel and strips their election materials from officially designated spots.

The regime has declared NGOs and almost all the third sector's election related activities to be illegal.

What will happen to the third sector after March 19? If Lukashenka remains in power, he has promised to get rid of the opposition in a tough way. The hard times of Belarus' NGOs are likely to get much harder.

In recognition of this possibility, Belarusian activists have made the following recommendations.

Civil society must continue to be supported after the election. Reform can only come to Belarus through the active participation of the third sector in a broad-based civic and political movement.

A key means of support would be the reauthorization of the Belarus Democracy Act.

Everything that can be done to sustain and strengthen the 10 Plus coalition should be done. NGOs and political parties must continue to work together and expand cooperation.

One of the greatest impediments to the development of civil society in Belarus is the lack of legal status of NGOs and independent media. The international community should pressure the government to restore the legal right of NGOs to exist, and respect international standards for the third sector and fourth estate.

In the event of a crackdown, support and assistance must be directed at helping NGOs to survive and operate in what will surely be a more underground fashion.

And we must demonstrate our solidarity by making sure that resources are available for legal and humanitarian assistance to those who will be imprisoned, hospitalized, expelled or unemployed after the election.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, as we discuss specific election related abuses in Belarus, I ask that we also not forget the thousands of other victims of this regime who remain unknown: those who have been harassed, beaten, arrested and fined; those who have lost their jobs or been expelled from school; those who have been forced into exile or chosen to emigrate; those who have lost their dignity and their hope.

Lukashenka has described his authoritarianism as benevolent, and declared that the main thing is not to ruin people's lives. But this is precisely what his regime is doing. Therefore, civil society will continue to oppose dictatorship, and we must continue to support its struggle.

Thank you.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Thank you, Mr. Potocki.

Dr. Wallander?

CELESTE A. WALLANDER, DIRECTOR OF THE RUSSIA AND EURASIAN PROGRAM, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Dr. WALLANDER. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you about Belarus and United States foreign policy.

In my written testimony, I address how support for democratization in Belarus fits United States security policy, the challenges of working with Europe for effective change, Belarusian foreign policy and the role of Russia in Belarus. And I'd like to request that be entered into the record.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Without objection.

Dr. WALLANDER. For this hearing today, I would like to focus on the need to act very decisively, if, as many expect, the results of March 19 do not meet clear and widely accepted international standards for free and fair elections.

Although in the short term, American security policy must address immediate threats, such as terrorism, there is no question that investment in liberal democracy and market based economic development serve long-term American security interests.

As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice noted in January of this year, the greatest threats to security emerge from within states, and the fundamental character of regimes now matters more than the international distribution of power.

As long as Belarus remains the last dictatorship in Europe, Secretary Rice's call for a transformational diplomacy in support of

American national security must apply as much to Europe as to the Middle East and Asia.

Indeed, an American 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.

Because Belarus is a European country, such a U.S. policy can be successful only if it's trans-Atlantic. As we saw in the case of Ukraine's Orange Revolution, consistent and unified refusal by the United States and EU to recognize fraudulent results denies non-democratic regimes legitimacy in their claim to rule and provides support to citizens who refuse to have their elections stolen.

The United States and EU must face that their previous policies on Belarus have been inadequate, and make a decisive change in approach that centers on the illegitimacy of the regime.

The United States and Europe have consistently called for free and fair elections in Belarus and have sharply criticized the regime when it repeatedly violates those standards. Yet, official U.S. and EU policy, nonetheless, recognizes the regime as the legal government of the Republic of Belarus.

The United States and Europe should expand support for long-term democracy promotion in Belarus and other non-democratic countries. Efforts to support civil society and break the information blockade within Belarus are vital. They are vital, long-term policies that will enable Belarusian citizens, someday, to hold the regime accountable and choose the leadership that they believe will pursue the country's true aspirations.

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, because the regime has been brutally efficient in eliminating sources of independent political discussion over the past 12 years, it is very likely that we will witness a fraudulent election on March 19.

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

In the short term, the United States and EU should cease providing legitimacy to show-elections conducted by the regime in Belarus. 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.

In the context of Secretary Rice's call for democratic transformation as integral to U.S. foreign policy, it's time to make elections meaningful and to end the practice of complicity in recognizing blatantly fraudulent elections.

If, after March 19, the OSCE does not report that the Presidential election in Belarus was free and fair, the United States and the European Union must publicly declare that they do not recog-

nize the results as the expression of Belarusian citizens, and that they therefore 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. The United States and EU should impose individual sanctions, such as denial of visas and seizure of assets, against those officials who deny Belarusian citizens their basic political and human rights, and who order and execute actions that violate the rules of free and fair elections.

Judges, election officials, and local politicians who follow orders that are illegal should be included on the list, as well as regime leaders at the highest levels.

The trans-Atlantic community should launch an international investigation into the unexplained disappearances of Belarusian politicians, businessmen and journalists, who challenged the Lukashenka regime.

If the regime uses force against peaceful demonstrators protesting fraudulent elections, the international community should 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, as well as any individuals who execute those orders.

The United States, in cooperation with Europe, should suspend negotiations on Belarusian membership in the World Trade Organization until a legitimate government is elected.

And finally, 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 trans-Atlantic 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 United States and EU recognize a regime which retains its grip on power by using methods that the Soviet regime relied upon to eliminate political opposition and to control society, it seems premature to offer to support democracy in regions where societies are less modern than Belarus.

If the United States 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's time for the term "free and fair elections" to carry the weight they deserve, and Belarus is a primary test.

Mr. BROWNBACK. That's very good. A very strong statement.

It's an excellent panel and an excellent panel of experts. And the people that have given their lives for this effort. And I really appreciate—I want to recognize what each of you have done over a lifetime to bring freedom to a group of people, and in some places more successful than others.

I am struck—there's an article in the "Economist" dated yesterday—I think this in an Internet edition. It's titled "Do As I Say, Comrade."

And what I'm struck by is that they're citing Lukashenka and Nazarbaev and Karimov as dictators, I guess of the old mold from

the former Soviet Union. And then there's a group coming in—the new grouping, engaging more democratic values of what we're seeing in Georgia and Ukraine and some other places.

One of you that have studied this the most, tell me, what am I seeing here? What's the bifurcation? They've all come out of the former Soviet Union. And yet, you're seeing some really embracing democracy—messy, difficult, but embracing—and others seemingly just really holding onto the former Soviet style, as Dr. Wallander just said. These are tactics we saw in Soviet days.

What's the bifurcation? Can somebody give me what's happening from a 30,000-foot view of why certain ones are going back to the Soviet style, or retaining it, and others embracing and moving forward?

Dr. WALLANDER. I'll take a first stab at it. I think it's a—there are many reasons, and there are many variables, since we talk about 30,000 feet.

I think one of the important differences is that the countries that early on had a diverse and energetic political and social structure—had regional politics, such as in Ukraine, had different sectors of the economy and cultural differences, such as in Georgia—are those which sustained diversity and competition in views.

Those countries that were somewhat more unified, or didn't have some of those messy, but actually quite helpful, sets of variations in their political and social structure—it was easier in those countries, including Belarus and Uzbekistan, for leaders who were ruthless and corrupt to kind of pick off the opponents one by one.

I think the lesson is that isolation reinforces that lack of diversity. And even though we can't affect where these countries started out at the end of the Soviet period, we can affect support for building diversity of views, especially in the next generation, as Iryna so eloquently argued.

And I think that's where the hope lies, in creating diversity and variety of options for the citizens over the long term.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Mr. Nix, you've had a long experience in this region.

Mr. NIX. I would join the previous comments by saying that, what seems to be lacking in the countries you've mentioned, the problematic countries, that existed in Ukraine and Georgia was some semblance of civil society and political parties.

In Ukraine, political parties had developed over years into a fairly unified force. The same could be said in Georgia.

In Uzbekistan, you should know for the record, there are no legally registered opposition political parties whatsoever in the country. In Kazakhstan they're severely regulated and oppressed. So, there's really a lack of oxygen in these countries that you've mentioned with regard to civil society and political parties.

Where we had the benefit of having these things in Ukraine, they united, they came together. The same was true in Georgia. But you don't have that in the three countries that you had mentioned.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Let me build on that statement, because that's been my experience in traveling in the former Soviet Union areas—in Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan.

Also, I mean, leadership matters. Some of these places, you would run into some of these guys, and they're just—they're old-style Soviet communist dictators. That's their style. And in others, they're more open and engaging.

But it seems like you're just going to have to differentiate in tactics, then, depending on which of these folks you're dealing with. I mean, in some—and you are going to have to get the club out and start beating on people. And it's going to have to be real, and it's going to have to be effective.

Dr. Wallander says, well, we won't recognize Lukashenka's election, which would be significant. And then a series of economic sanctions.

Are we, I guess, at the point that you're going to just have to pull out the club and really start beating on some of these folks?

Mr. Merloe?

Mr. MERLOE. Well, Senator, I think the question comes down, in many ways, to the kinds of incentives and the kinds of disincentives that are put out there in an effective way. And I think that Celeste was very forceful in her presentation about that. All the way through to questions like targeted sanctions, and so on. There are economic dimensions to this as well.

And in the case of Ukraine, there are the connections to Europe. There are cultural and other issues that have been involved that I think she mentioned.

In the case of Georgia, there is a certain amount of openness that has been part of Georgian society over the centuries, as well.

The leadership question that you mentioned, I think is critical. And if we look at what was allowed to happen under Shevardnadze, and what was allowed to happen in Ukraine, on the one hand you saw a number of factors—a relatively open space for the development of independent media, civil society organizations, even election monitoring in these countries.

We don't see that in Belarus. And we said, and to a lesser extent, in the other countries you mentioned. And I would add Azerbaijan and Armenia into that list—to a lesser degree, but they're on the negative side of the ledger.

If you think about, there's some development of balance of powers within the legislatures in Ukraine and in Georgia. There was some sense of assertiveness that was put forward. In Ukraine, even some evidence of judicial independence in the lead-up to the so-called Orange Revolution.

There was a fracturing of the security forces, and in some sense, political and economic constituencies in those two countries, where certainly in Belarus, there's a more unified power base.

The emerging frustration of citizens, it's been true across the board in all of these countries. But in Belarus and in Georgia, and in some other places, we've seen evidence where the political opposition has shown more maturity in the way they've gone about organizing themselves, offering themselves as more of a realistic alternative, more unity among them, and so forth. Less so in some of these other countries.

Civil society, again. It's hard to fault the opposition or civil society for not being more effective. It's almost like talking about two people who are going to enter a sprint, one of whom has had their

legs beaten for three or four days before the race, and we fault that runner for not doing as well as the one who was free to run, or less injured .

A number of these factors have to be examined as we look at country by country. But I agree completely that consistency in policy by the European Union, other European formations—the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and so forth—and U.S. foreign policy towards these countries, is critically important to give signals to those who hold power and to give solidarity and encouragement to those who are seeking democratic reform.

And so, even sessions such as this, which show that solidarity and help to break down the isolation, I think are quite important and not to be underestimated.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Dr. Potocki, doesn't it all go back to Russia? And isn't this just all really tied into Putin's recentralization of authority, and these countries picking we're going to lean back on Russia, or we're going to lean away from Russia? Isn't it all tied, or moves away from Russia?

Mr. POTOCKI. Certainly, Russia and the Putin administration are playing a large role in these developments. Belarus in particular has a very difficult history with Russia and with the Soviet Union and then with Russia again.

I would point out that, in terms of the way the Kremlin looks at the world, especially these days, focusing on energy and energy security, Belarus is playing a very important role in that, because of the pipelines that go through there.

Belarus is seen to be more important, perhaps, than some of the other states that we've mentioned today, from Moscow's point of view, because of bordering on three NATO countries, on the EU as a buffer zone between Europe and Russia.

Certainly, when Russia looks at Europe and looks at developments as the Rose and OrangeRevolutions, Belarus and the Central Asian states then become even more important and keeping a hold on them.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Keeping a hold on them and keeping democracy out?

Mr. POTOCKI. Well, I would argue that, in Russia, things are going in the wrong direction. And many of the policies that they've adopted were first introduced by Mr. Lukashenka, in terms of media control, in terms of the NGO laws.

So, Moscow's role in limiting democracy within its own borders is also, in a sense, extended outside of its borders to support for people like Mr. Lukashenka.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Well, let me understand. You seem to be saying to me that Belarus is the experimental ground for what you can do on getting away from democracy and controlling things for Russia? Russia's watching to see what you can get away with in Belarus, and then they're using that?

Mr. POTOCKI. I would agree with that. Mr. Lukashenka is Europe's longest-serving head of state. And so, he's set a few policies in place that are being copied by others, especially in the aftermath of the Orange and Rose Revolutions.

Mr. BROWNBACK. I still don't understand the long-term game plan, even under Putin's analysis of this. They've got to be seeing

that history moves towards free people and free societies. Free societies, free people do more. They operate better. It clearly is the route of European formation and history, or progress, if you want to put it that way.

I mean, is this just to try to control things, while they feel like they get their societies better together, or their economies? I don't see the long-term game plan here. Unless it's just to make yourself very wealthy.

Mr. POTOCKI. Mr. Chairman, in terms of Russia, your comments, it's clearly a pattern that Russia is reasserting itself within the region. That's true in the countries of Central Asia. It's true of the Caucasus. In fact, the Duma has recently appropriated money for democratic reform for places like Latvia.

So, Russia is determined to reassert itself politically and promote its own version of democracy in countries. And there will be...

Mr. BROWNBACK. But what would that version be in Latvia?

Mr. POTOCKI. Well, it would certainly support the Russian-speaking minority there. There's a huge question of minority rights there, the use of Russian language, things like that.

So, there will be—and it's a very controversial issue within the country. People are required to take tests in the local language before they are accorded citizenship, and that is a troubling issue.

So, we see a pattern here where Russia wishes to reassert itself diplomatically and geographically within the region. And certainly, it's within that interest for Lukashenka to continue to serve as president of that country.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Ms. Vidanava, I want to ask you, just operationally on the ground—somebody gave me a piece of denim with "16" on it. As somebody involved in politics, I understand the importance of symbols and rallying points. Tell me about this one.

Ms. VIDANAVA. Well, the 16 Campaign developed first as a solidarity campaign with those who disappeared in Belarus during the last 7 years, and those who are now in prison, political prisoners.

It has now developed into a combined campaign of our Solidarity Campaign—the number 16 is its symbol—and the Jeans Campaign, which is a symbol of youth mobilization sort of campaign.

Basically, jeans for young people, as well as for older generations, for those who were dissidents in Soviet time, is still a symbol of freedom. And it's something that you can wear, like you can put a candle in a window and show your solidarity with the opposition movement, and show your opposition and still not be punished.

So, as well, you can wear jeans and say, I want to be free. And this is what the young people are doing.

And Mr. Milinkevich is now wearing jeans piece on his coat when he is talking to crowds of people. So, it is important have a symbol. And we hope that in Belarus there will be Denim Revolution, or there will be denim change.

So, we also try to tell the—to give a symbol that can be understood by the outside world. And easily, the jeans are something that people understand everywhere in the world.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Are the young people afraid of Mr. Lukashenka?

Ms. VIDANAVA. Yes and no. Definitely, the entire generation grew up with Mr. Lukashenka. Those who are now 18, 21 years old, they

don't know anything but his regime. They were studying state ideology in high school. They are studying state ideology at the university. They know that they can be expelled for any kind of independent opinion or activities.

So, we have to keep it in mind when we expect young people to be active, in Belarus it's really dangerous.

On the other hand, young people come and meet with democratic candidates. They participate in civic mobilization campaigns. Young people are a driving force for the campaign that Rodger Potocki mentioned called Hopits!, Enough! They want to say, enough, to this person in power, and they want a change.

So, they are less afraid to discuss their opinions now, especially before the elections.

And they use different means for that, including Internet, including cell phones, including print editions, including the street actions.

So, I would say that there is a growing hope among young people. And we hope that democratic activities, that we will be able to build on momentum and to keep working after the election.

Mr. BROWNBACK. So, what if the elections are stolen? What do you think the reaction in the country will be after March 19, if these are not free and fair elections?

Ms. VIDANAVA. Well, the hope is that people will realize that the elections and their votes were stolen, and they do have a right for peaceful protest. And we hope that people will come out and say, we voted the way we did, and we want it to be acknowledged.

If it does not happen, I think that these elections are a starting point in Belarus, not the last point, and that we can observe now this change in the mood of people. They are energetic, they are more hopeful. And I can compare it with 2001 campaign, 2001 presidential elections. I was part of it, as well. There is a big change, and there is a big difference between the two.

So, we do hope that the democratic opposition united in the coalition, united force of political parties and NGOs and youth movements and independent media will continue telling the population truth, and that people of Belarus will understand that it's up to them to change the situation in their country. So, they're not going to stop on March 19th or 20th.

Mr. BROWNBACK. So, if the election is stolen, it does not comport to international standards, you would anticipate major rallies after the election?

Ms. VIDANAVA. It's very hard to predict in Belarusian conditions.

For now, the goal of the campaign, of the democratic candidate and all of the civic mobilization efforts, is to give people information. What people do not have is objective information. So, the hope is that, having this information, people will make the right choice on the day of the elections and afterwards.

If they are afraid—because fear is huge in Belarus, and it's understandable; the reasons all were named today—then we hope that the change will occur later on. But the main goal is not to leave the people of Belarus alone and to lead the democratic movement along, if on the day of the elections or the day after the elections, there won't be those rallies, there won't be demonstrations.

Because we have to keep working and we have to believe that the situation will change sooner or later.

Mr. BROWNBACK. Well, Godspeed to you and to the young people and others advocating for freedom in that country.

I want to thank this panel. It's been an excellent panel and very, very thoughtful.

I've been watching this region for some period of time, particularly since being in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and then chairing this and traveling a fair amount in the former Soviet Union, although primarily in the southern states area.

Belarus strikes me as a—this is a real kind of a tipping case. You could look at some of those in the southern former Soviet Union, and you can travel in Geoorgia versus Uzbekistan, and you could see stepping off the plane one's development of civil society and the other's throttling of it.

I mean, you just felt it when you walked off the plane, and then as you met with dissident groups—or if you could find one in some of these places—you knew the soil was hard, that it was going to be hard for something to sprout up.

Belarus, it seems like to me, is a—I mean, you've got some hardness, but you've also got some possibility with this one. And while Ukraine had the civil society the development that was taking place, and that was known, you could see this taking place. Belarus will be an interesting case.

It's kind of neither hot nor cold in that sense, or neither hard nor soft. It is in between. And it's certainly my hope first that there'd be free and fair elections, although the lead-up to this seems nothing of the sort is going to take place.

But then, the reaction afterward will be key, and will be critical of what takes place on our part, as Dr. Wallander and several of you note. But what also takes place in the people of Belarus, what they do afterwards will be critical.

And no doubt, in an authoritarian regime, you've got a lot of physical violence that's threatened and that has happened already, and that will be exercised. Still, you know, we will do everything we can to support that civil society development and push by the people, and particularly, those wearing blue jeans throughout Belarus.

Thank you very much. The record will remain open the requisite number of days, if there's additional statements that you'd like to enter into the record.

The hearing's adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:39 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

APPENDICES

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. SAM BROWNBACK, CHAIRMAN, COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Welcome to the Commission's hearing on Belarus.

Presidential elections will be held next week on March 19th. Today, we will hear from the Administration and expert witnesses on how Belarus is doing with its freely undertaken OSCE election commitments in light of the upcoming elections. These commitments include respect for human rights and democratic principles.

The picture there is not encouraging. Last week, security forces beat up and arrested one of the two opposition candidates. Just yesterday, security forces detained a top opposition leader for holding a meeting with voters in Minsk.

Daily reports of arrests, KGB raids, and the closure of independent newspapers and NGOs have become commonplace as Belarus prepares to hold presidential elections on March 19th capping off a decade of dictatorship under Alexander Lukashenka.

Beginning with an illegal referendum 10 years ago aimed at consolidating political power in his hands, Europe's last dictator has led his country into increased isolation as Belarus' neighbors, excluding Russia, have consolidated democracy through free and fair elections.

By contrast, Belarus has held a series of fundamentally flawed elections at both the parliamentary and presidential levels, seriously undermining the legitimacy of the country's political leadership. Regrettably, this pattern is already evident as the 2006 elections get underway in earnest. It is instructive to assess current developments in Belarus in light of the four criteria agreed by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and European Parliament nearly six years ago. These are: (1) ending a climate of fear; (2) granting equal media access; (3) empowering parliament with meaningful authority; and (4) enacting meaningful electoral reform.

On each of these critical points the regime no longer even feels compelled to pay lip service, let alone take meaningful action. The leadership has yet to explain the disappearances of leading opposition figures even as it perpetuates a climate of fear by directing the levers of state power against independent voices it seeks to silence. Belarus is the only country in Europe where there are political prisoners. The regime maintains such a stranglehold over the flow of information that even some broadcasts from Russia are blocked, while the handful of remaining independent newspapers are squeezed, and most have already been shut down.

Opposition candidates, given token time on state-run media, are in turn the subject of a constant barrage of vicious attacks by the state apparatus for agitation and propaganda.

This is a country where mere criticism of Lukashenka deemed defamation, has landed several activists in prison.

Meanwhile, the National Assembly remains a largely rubber stamp institution going through the motions on measures already decided by the Presidential Administration.

The electoral apparatus at all levels, much like the country's media outlets, remains firmly in the hands of the regime. In a country where the state is the dominant employer and most workers are kept on short-term contracts as a control mechanism, pressure to support Lukashenka cannot be dismissed.

The same holds true for university students subject to expulsion for dissent. Tragically, educators responsible for training the younger generation in Belarus also make up the bulk of those administering the elections through commissions often headed by the school principal.

At the end of Election Day, these teachers are then presented with results that they must confirm or face the obvious consequences. Not surprisingly, of the over 74,000 commission members, two—two in the entire electoral apparatus—represent opposition candidates.

Based on the evidence thus far, there are few grounds to believe that the elections will be free or fair. And, in the end, it is the Belarusian people, long denied their freedom and dignity, who suffer.

One of our witnesses today was featured in a Washington Post profile regarding her activities as a dissident. I've read her testimony, and as difficult and bleak as the situation in Belarus may seem today, Ms. Iryna Vidanava has an optimistic message. According to her, the young people of Belarus today will change the fate of Belarus tomorrow. We must support their efforts and we must give them hope.

I look forward to the testimony.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. BENJAMIN L. CARDIN, RANKING MEMBER, COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Mr. Chairman, this year marks the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, an event that had devastating and lingering consequences for Ukraine, where the actual facility was located, and for neighboring Belarus affected by the radioactive fallout. Chernobyl revealed the limits on the ability of a closed system—in that case the Soviet Union—to control information both within its borders and beyond. Twenty years later, the Lukashenka regime is similarly bent on maintaining a monopoly over Belarus' information space in order to retain power. But the winds of change are evident in Belarus even as Europe's last dictatorship struggles in desperation for its very survival. I welcome U.S. and European cooperation in efforts to break the information blockade through stepped up broadcasts to Belarus.

Simply put, Mr. Lukashenka is on the wrong side of history and it is only a matter of time before he falls and Belarus takes its rightful place among the democratic countries of Europe after a decade of self-imposed isolation and misrule. The Government of Belarus has shown utter contempt for its own people, unleashing a campaign of repression aimed at silencing independent voices from university students and free trade union activists to journalists and advocates of peaceful democratic change. Others have also felt the ire of the regime, including ethnic community leaders, particularly Poles in western Belarus as well as members of some religious minorities, including Catholics. The assault on a presidential candidate just last week underscores the continuing climate of fear in Belarus. In this regard, I would also mention the longstanding cases of disappeared opposition figures.

Mr. Chairman, as one who has played an active role in the OSCE since the early 1990's, I am particularly concerned over Belarus' blatant disregard for the fundamental principles of democracy and human rights contained in the Helsinki Final Act. In this regard, I would also note the fact that one of our fellow Commissioners, Alcee Hastings, will be leading up the OSCE's Election Observation Mission in Belarus, in has capacity as President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

Even before the election is held on March 19, I have grave concerns about the pre-election process which is overseen by Lukashenka's faithful at the Central Election Commission to determine that these elections will be neither free nor fair. Stepped up harassment, arrests, and the jailing of opposition supports and the inability of candidates standing up against Lukashenka to conduct anything like normal campaigns speak volumes about the run up to the elections. The only question is when the people of Belarus will say enough: enough to intimidation, enough to manipulation, enough to falsification of election results.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing today, and I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses today.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAVID J. KRAMER, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR EUROPEAN AND EURASIAN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you here today. This hearing comes at a critical moment, with the Belarusian presidential election less than two weeks away. Our policy toward Belarus is defined by our support for the Belarusian people and their aspirations for democracy. As President Bush stated when he signed the Belarus Democracy Act in October 2004:

> At a time when freedom is advancing around the world, Aleksandr Lukashenka and his government are turning Belarus into a regime of repression in the heart of Europe, its government isolated from its neighbors and its people isolated from each other. We will work with our allies and partners to assist those seeking to return Belarus to its rightful place among the Euro-Atlantic community of democracies. There is no place in a Europe whole and free for a regime of this kind.

In the one and a half years since the President's statement, the Belarusian government has only added to its shameful record of denying basic rights and freedoms to its citizens. The President and Secretary met just over a week ago with the widows of two of the disappeared persons believed to have been murdered by the Belarusian authorities for their political views. The President gave these women his personal support for their efforts to seek justice for the disappeared and for all those who seek to return freedom to Belarus.

As Belarus approaches the presidential election March 19, the authorities there seem to be obsessed with preventing what they call a "color revolution." To that end, the regime has given itself broad new legal powers to silence dissent and targeted representatives of independent civil society with a dramatic increase in politically motivated detentions, prosecutions, beatings, harassment, and property seizures under the cover of laws passed by a parliament that does not have a single opposition member. Nonetheless, despite this government repression, it is possible to see significant positive developments within Belarusian civil society and to find active support for them by the international community. Secretary Rice has stressed the importance of "shining a bright light" on Belarus, and we are working to do that at all levels.

Mr. Chairman, allow me to offer a brief assessment of the situation within Belarus, including a description of the regime's increasingly repressive actions and its involvement in corruption. I also want to highlight the recent achievements of pro-democracy forces despite the intense pressure they face from the regime. I will then speak about what we are doing to stand together with the people of Belarus. We have coordinated closely with our European allies and partners on our approach to this election, and our unified stance has sent a strong message to the government and people of this new neighbor of the European Union.

The story of the dismantling of the democratic institutions in Belarus that began after Aleksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994—ironically, in the last Belarusian election that met international standards—is a familiar story to members of this Commis-

sion. Lukashenka's record is particularly stained by the disappearance of three opposition figures and a journalist in 1999 and 2000, when Lukashenka was preparing for his first run for re-election. As noted in a report by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, there are credible reports that high officials were involved in these disappearances and probable murders, but the authorities have utterly failed to conduct a serious investigation. In a system lacking an independent parliament and judiciary that could check executive authority or a strong civil society and independent media that could spotlight these abuses, it isn't surprising that Lukashenka can act with such impunity. Belarus, as Secretary Rice has said, is the last outpost of tyranny in Europe.

Now, Lukashenka is running again, having engineered a fraudulent referendum in 2004 to change a constitutional provision that would have otherwise limited him to two terms. Clearly rattled by the recent democratic breakthroughs in the region, he and his government have ratcheted up pressure on the opposition, non-governmental organizations, and the independent media. They have rewritten the laws to criminalize "discrediting Belarus," and they have used these and other legal provisions to punish and intimidate the people of Belarus.

There has been a surge in detentions and harassment in the last two months designed to intimidate opponents of the regime and to create a climate of fear in the run-up to the election. Opposition leaders and campaign workers have been repeatedly stopped for so-called identity checks and their materials seized. Other incidents are more serious: on February 21 the Belarusian KGB detained four civil activists, and they continue to hold them on charges under a new Criminal Code provision forbidding activity in "an unregistered organization threatening the interests and duties of the citizens of the Republic of Belarus," a crime that carries a prison sentence of up to three years. The KGB has publicly claimed that these individuals were involved in bizarre coup plot, allegedly directed by a U.S. NGO. This claim is absurd and totally false and would be laughable if it were not for the continued, unjustified detention of these activists in a Belarusian jail. On March 2, the authorities beat and detained an opposition presidential candidate, Aleksandr Kozulin, as well as a number of his supporters and journalists. Reportedly, one of Kozulin's assailants was none other than Dmitry Pavlichenko, the notorious special forces colonel implicated in international investigations as being directly involved in the cases of the disappeared in 1999–2000.

These young people—as well as any other citizens the regime may decide to detain tomorrow or the next day—could potentially join the political prisoners currently serving lengthy sentences in Belarus, including Mikhail Marinich, Valery Levonevsky, Nikolai Statkevich, Pavel Severinets, and Andrei Klimov. It is clear that the regime has decided to create a climate of fear that it hopes will intimidate opponents during the election campaign. At the same time, the government has failed to adequately investigate the deaths of two independent journalists, Veronika Cherkasova and Vasily Grodnikov.

Because of the government's tight control over mass media in Belarus, few Belarusians are probably aware of reports linking

Lukashenka and his inner circle to corruption. His Presidential Administration owns a large and ever-increasing amount of property in Belarus, including hotels and other real estate. Lukashenka and his immediate family reportedly enjoy residences and other facilities throughout Belarus. Distinctions between personal and state property are blurred, and a large Presidential Reserve Fund remains separate from and unaccountable to the main state budget.

Lukashenka once admitted that this account amounted to $1 billion. These funds, earned from the sale of military equipment abroad, do not enter the state coffers. Lukashenka himself said that "it is hidden so well that no opposition member will find it."

Public quotes from former regime insiders offer insight: one called Lukashenka "the richest man in the CIS," explaining he had "sold weapons for astronomical amounts of money" and kept the money off official government books. Another former associate said Lukashenka was "not a poor man," adding that "one can wonder" where money from foreign arms sales went. A third explained how Lukashenko has profited from gifts—such as expensive suits and watches—from his subordinates and businessmen. These reports point to extensive allegations of abuses of public resources by Lukashenka and those around him.

The opposition asserts that the presidential fund's size is commensurate with Belarus' annual budget, and Belarusian media, citing Western experts, noted that Lukashenka has $3 billion at his disposal. A dissident website claims Lukashenka is worth an astounding $11.4 billion. The same website states that Lukashenka and other former government officials steal profits from the transit of oil and gas, arms sales, confiscated goods, as well as by skimming 10% from state contracts. According to Lukashenka himself, such funds receive money from secret arms sales, the total profits of which have not been recorded in the state budget and are beyond public scrutiny.

Despite all the obstacles and uncertainties thrown up by the regime, many Belarusians have chosen to work for a democratic future for their country. These include embattled independent journalists, NGO activists, members of pro-democracy political parties, and many ordinary people who have taken simple steps like signing a candidate's ballot petition or attending a political rally. These people know they may be risking the loss of their jobs, arrest, trumped-up criminal charges, jail time, beatings, or worse. And they have achieved some successes, even in a forbidding environment: the pro-democracy opposition is more unified today than it has been in recent memory. Our proper place is standing beside these brave Belarusians, doing what we can to encourage and help them to achieve a better future for their country. Such a future will inevitably come, although we cannot predict when. Belarus is in the heart of Europe, and its democratization will be a major step in completing the democratic transformation of the continent.

The U.S. government, in close coordination with the European Union and with the invaluable help of the Belarus Democracy Act, has been a strong voice against the regime's abuses. We have sponsored successful resolutions in the UN Commission on Human Rights, issued public statements, sent messages to Belarusian officials, and taken concrete actions to hold regime officials account-

able, such as the travel restrictions we announced in 2004 against government officials responsible for the disappearances and election-related abuses. In 2005 and 2006, President Bush, the Secretary of State, and Under Secretary Burns met with Belarusian democracy and human rights activists. As noted earlier, just over a week ago, both the President and Secretary met with Irina Krasovskaya and Svyatlana Zavadskaya, women whose husbands were among the disappeared of 1999 and 2000. Following her meeting with Belarusian civil society representatives in Vilnius in April 2005, Secretary Rice said publicly that we would continue "to work to support democratic development" and stressed the importance of promoting free elections and fundamental freedoms in Belarus.

For many years, we have denied most kinds of direct U.S. government assistance to the Belarusian government, with some exceptions including continuing humanitarian assistance and educational exchanges. Instead of supporting government activities, our programs have largely been aimed at furthering development of democracy, respect for human rights, and market-oriented reform. They have focused on promoting human rights monitoring and education, access to objective and independent information, independent trade unions, democratic political party development, voter education, civil society, rule of law, and electoral reform and independent oversight. We have made a particular point to focus on these elections as an opportunity to help democratic activists reach out to their constituents, to break the regime's stranglehold on information, and, as Secretary Rice has said, to shine an international spotlight on Belarus and the government's record. After the elections, we intend to continue our outreach efforts and our work to help pro-democracy forces build capacity to push for change. We understand the obstacles standing in the way of quick change, and whatever happens in this particular election, we intend to remain engaged in Belarus for the long term.

I have been very pleased with our cooperation with the European Union on a unified approach to the election. I was in Brussels for consultations with our EU colleagues and was struck by how we share the same concerns. We have made them known in joint and complementary ways: to take one example, on February 3 we took the highly unusual step of issuing statements in Washington and Brussels on our policy toward Belarus and our views on the election that were identical word-for-word. At the beginning of this year, we agreed with the EU on a joint pre-election message to the Belarusian government, and we proposed that Assistant Secretary Daniel Fried and Director General Robert Cooper travel to Minsk to deliver it. As it turned out, the Belarusian authorities refused to allow Fried and Cooper to visit Belarus simultaneously, which, needless to say, exposes as hollow their claims that they seek dialogue with the international community. This was the latest evidence demonstrating that the Belarusian government's isolation is self-imposed. The U.S. and the EU delivered the message by other means, and we remain united.

We have also taken steps over the past year to improve international coordination of our various types of assistance. We have instituted a series of donor coordination meetings with the EU and the many European countries that support programs in Belarus on

a bilateral basis. We welcome the EU decision to support media programs in Belarus, including external broadcasting, and we have coordinated closely to be sure these efforts mesh with our own in this area. Getting objective information flowing into Belarus has been one of our top priorities as a way to break through the government's stifling control over most media. Top officials of the EU and several EU member states have received opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and have used that occasion to underline their support for democracy in Belarus.

Mr. Chairman, I traveled to Minsk two weeks ago. I went for several reasons:

1) I wanted to reinforce the sense among the people of Belarus that despite the thwarted Fried-Cooper mission, the U.S. is still very closely following developments there and remains very engaged.

2) I wanted to get a feel first-hand, albeit only for two days, for the situation in Minsk and to give a boost to those fighting for democracy and freedom.

3) I wanted to convey directly to Belarusian officials in Minsk, rather than simply through their Ambassador here, that there will be serious consequences if the election—including the process leading up to the actual voting—remains as seriously flawed and tainted as it has been thus far. I also underscored that there will be major consequences if the government resorts to force against protestors who have a right to assemble and protest peacefully, if they so choose.

4) I wanted to make clear to Belarusian officials that the U.S. and European Union are completely united in our approach to Belarus, that the concerns about developments there are not simply based in Washington but are shared in Brussels and all EU capitals.

5) I wanted to reach out to civil society representatives, students, and the independent media as well as to those in the opposition—and what's left is brave and vibrant—to let them know that the U.S. is a friend of the people of Belarus and that the isolation of their country is a result of the decisions made by the paranoid regime there.

6) Finally, I wanted to give a boost to our terrific embassy employees who face increasing and outrageous harassment from thuggish authorities and state television.

When I left Minsk, Mr. Chairman, I don't think I left behind any ambiguity with the authorities there that we in the West are prepared to respond in a most serious way to fraud, abuse, and violence perpetrated by this regime. It would be a grave mistake by those in the Lukashenka regime to underestimate American and European resolve.

Both the U.S. and EU have made clear publicly that we are ready to take further measures against individuals responsible for committing fraud and violating international standards in this election. A dialogue is already underway on what these measures will be and who they will target, although obviously final decisions and public announcements will have to wait until after the results are known and the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission has offered its assessment.

Unfortunately, the election process has already been deeply flawed. Lukashenka has already tilted the playing field to assure his re-election by using state officials and police to intimidate opposition candidates, non-partisan activists, and voters. Stringent campaign rules have been applied only to the opposition. The regime has used its domination of the state media to vilify government critics with impunity. Election commissions are stacked with government supporters. Nevertheless, there is still a theoretical possibility that the government could conduct the voting and vote counting in a manner better than they have the pre-election period—and we strongly urge them to do that. But past experience gives us very little hope even for this somewhat improved but far from perfect outcome.

Mr. Chairman, the United States will be ready to respond to any result, holding accountable those responsible for abusing the rights of their fellow citizens, and continuing to help the people of Belarus in any way we can to support the transition to a free society and to consolidate democratic gains when they come. We are already making plans with the Europeans for our post-election policies toward Belarus and for continuing donor coordination meetings. We look forward to the day when Belarus takes its rightful place as a democracy in a Europe whole, free, and at peace. We appreciate continued Congressional support and interest in Belarus. Whatever happens March 19, we should not and will not give up our support for the people of Belarus.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to take questions.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF IRYNA VIDANAVA, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, STUDENTS' THOUGHT

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission:

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

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

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

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

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE DENIED FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION:

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

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

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE DENIED FREEDOM OF SPEECH:

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

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

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE DENIED FREEDOM TO TRAVEL:

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

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

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE DENIED FREEDOM OF THOUGHT:

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

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

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE DENIED FREEDOM OF CHOICE:

All graduates of state universities are required to work for two years in locations and fields decided by the government, or must

pay back the entire cost of their education. Students are often sent to work in the still-polluted Chernobyl Zone and are paid miserable salaries. Students refusing to follow state assignments have been denied their diplomas.

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

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

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

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

- As an editor, I know that young people are desperately seeking objective information about Belarus and the outside world. Support for independent youth publications should be continued. More assistance should be provided to alternative forms of media, which

appeal to youth, such as the Internet and broadcast mediums, such as crossborder radio with a strong focus on youth.

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

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

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

Thank you.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF STEPHEN NIX, REGIONAL PROGRAM DIRECTOR, EURASIA, INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

Mr. Chairman, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Commission today. We are on the eve of a presidential election in Belarus which holds vital importance for the people of Belarus. The government of the Republic of Belarus has the inherit mandate to hold elections which will ultimately voice the will of its people. Sadly, the government of Belarus has a track record of denying this responsibility to its people, its constitution, and the international community. Today, the citizens of Belarus are facing a nominal election in which their inherit right to choose their future will not be granted.

The future of democracy in Belarus is of strategic importance; not only to its people, but to the success of the longevity of democracy in all the former Soviet republics. As we have witnessed in Georgia and Ukraine, it is inevitable that the time will come when the people stand up and demand their rightful place among their fellow citizens of democratic nations. How many more people must be imprisoned or fined or crushed before this time comes in Belarus?

Mr. Chairman, the situation in Belarus is dire, but the beacon of hope in Belarus is shining. In the midst of repeated human rights violations and continual repression of freedoms, a coalition of pro-democratic activists has emerged and united to offer a voice for the oppressed. The courage, unselfishness and determination of this coalition are truly admirable. It is vitally important that the United States and Europe remain committed to their support of this democratic coalition; not only in the run up to the election, but post-election as well. The road to a free Belarus may be long, and we must make the commitment to travel with our fellow democrats to the journey's end. Today, my testimony will focus on the history of the Unified Democratic Forces, their progress in spreading their message, as well as the challenges they face.

There has been remarkable growth in the level of participation and involvement by the pro-democratic forces within Belarus in the last six years. In 2000, there was much disunity and disorganization amongst the different pro-democratic parties and organizations. In fact, a majority of the opposition parties boycotted the 2000 parliamentary elections.

Real potential for democratic growth in Belarus became evident during the Belarusian local elections held on March 2, 2003, when approximately 600 pro-reform candidates participated in the elections. One-third of these candidates (approximately 200) won seats on city councils.

Despite these targeted successes in 2003, the overall campaign environment for pro-democratic political parties continually deteriorated. Repression against the pro-democratic political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) intensified and increased. In the face of continued crackdowns on their operations, in January 2004, six of the seven leading political parties in Belarus—the United Civic Party, the Belarusian People's Front, the pro-reform Belarusian Social Democratic Gramada, the Belarusian Party of Communists, the Belarusian Labor Party, and Belarusian Green

Party—along with more than 200 NGOs and associations formed the People's Coalition "Five Plus." This was a major step for all pro-democratic forces in Belarus. The coalition of ideologically different parties is based on the fundamentals that any civilized political force should support: human rights, basic freedoms, the sovereignty of Belarus, and democracy. The political parties agreed that they must bring democratic change and the rule of law to Belarus before they can argue about policy differences. The coalition came out with a common list of 220 candidates who ran for the parliamentary elections in 2004. The coalition ran campaigns in each of Belarus' 110 constituencies as well as one national campaign to promote its common platform.

According to exit polling conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys, the results showed that President Alexander Lukashenko's proposal to change the Belarusian Constitution to allow him to seek a third term (a proposal which was also included on the ballot that day) did not have the support of a majority of the voters. Moreover, based on the exit polling, Belarusians did not simply vote against Lukashenko, but voted demonstrably for pro-democratic candidates running for parliament. Ultimately, the lesson of the 2004 parliamentary elections for democrats in Belarus was that with a unified democratic opposition, united behind a single candidate, they would have not only an opportunity to compete, but would have the opportunity to win the support of a majority of Belarusians.

Instead of being demoralized by the rigged election results, the pro-democracy forces of the Five Plus remained invigorated and confident of their eventual success. In November 2004, four additional political organizations including the largest parties from the European Coalition/Free Belarus (the Belarusian Social Democrats National Gramada and the Women's Party), the Young Belarus Bloc, as well as activists who previously were unregistered joined together with the parties and organizations currently in the Five Plus coalition. Since that time, an additional number of prominent individuals, NGOs, and former parliamentary candidates from all pro-democratic coalitions have joined this effort. This large coalition, now referred to as the Unified Democratic Forces (UDF), is determined to remain united until it achieves its goal of creating a truly democratic Belarus.

Following the success the Five Plus achieved during the elections in 2004, the UDF set their sights on the presidential election to be held in 2006. The coalition realized that in order for maximum success, all pro-democratic activists needed to unite behind one single leader who would represent all the pro-democratic forces. Meetings and discussions were held between party leaders, human rights organizations and youth groups; and as a result, the coalition created a comprehensive and detailed democratic process for selecting the coalition candidate.

From June to September 2005, caucuses were held in 121 of the rayons of Belarus with 4,371 Belarusian citizens participating. At each of these meetings, local delegates were selected to represent their district at the national nominating congress. These caucuses culminated with a National Democratic Congress held in Minsk, Belarus on October 1-2, 2005. More than 800 voting delegates,

along with accredited press, distinguished guests and representatives of foreign embassies and diplomatic missions, were present at the Congress. After two rounds of voting, Aleksander Milinkevich narrowly won the nomination from the Congress of Democratic Forces to be the single opposition candidate for the Belarus presidential election. The conference itself was capably organized and implemented. Besides choosing the single candidate, the coalition also presented its platform entitled "Belarus: Path to the Future." This platform was an important document which sought to prove to the congress' attendees that the coalition has given serious thought to its message and goals that it would present to the Belarusian people.

Immediately following the congress, Milinkevich put together a team consisting of people from all of the political organizations. Starting in November, Milinkevich and the UDF party leaders began traveling around Belarus meeting with the citizens of Belarus to spread the UDF's message of unity and support for democracy. The UDF has also focused on the production and distribution of materials to promote their cause.

Following his registration as a candidate, Milinkevich has begun campaigning in earnest. Currently he and his team are attempting to spread the message of the UDF throughout Belarus. Because of the difficulties they face, this campaign is employing the most fundamental skills of democratic politics: person-to-person contact and grassroots activism. Before the March 19 election, Milinkevich will have visited the major cities in every oblast to meet with voters face to face, to hear their concerns, and to share his message of a peaceful, prosperous, and free Belarus.

Recent polling in Belarus confirms that Mr. Milinkevich and his team have made great strides in spreading the coalition's message to the citizens of Belarus. More than 55 percent of people in Belarus report having seen, read or heard about Milinkevich in the past few weeks. Among those people, 15 percent admit that what they have heard makes them feel much more positive about him, and 37 percent admit that what they have heard makes them feel somewhat more positive towards him. These statistics are monumental when considering the fact that Milinkevich's entire campaign is run by face-to-face meetings with voters, as he has no access to television or radio.

Despite the foregoing, Mr. Chairman, the regime shows no intentions of playing into false delusions for a fair playing field for this election.

On February 2, all precinct commissions had been formed for the March presidential vote. There will be a total of 6,627 precinct commissions, including 41 abroad.

Unfortunately, out of the total of 74,104 members on the precinct commissions, only 122 are representatives of political parties. And of these 122 political representatives, only two members represent pro-democratic opposition parties.

These abuses came on the heels of several damaging decrees which the regime had instituted over the past six months:

On August 17, 2005, the President of Belarus issued an edict which imposed new restrictions on foreign technical assistance to Belarus. The edict prohibits organizations and individuals from re-

ceiving and using assistance for "preparing and conducting elections and referenda, recalling deputies and members of the Council of the Republic, staging gatherings, rallies, street marches, demonstrations, picketing, strikes, producing and distributing campaign materials and for other forms of mass politicking among the population," according to the Belarusian president's press office. Under the edict, international technical assistance includes seminars, conferences and public discussions.

On November 1, a new law on political parties in Belarus came into force. The law sets forth new procedures for the creation of political parties, and their work and strengthens the government's control over their activities. Also, a provision relating to the suspension of political parties' activities was introduced. The activities of parties can be suspended by a decision by the Supreme Court given the appropriate application of the Justice Ministry. This new restriction has been used to astonishing affect against both the Union of Belarusian Poles and the youth umbrella organization RADA. Both have been closed and declared illegal by the government for their political activities.

Also in November, the National Academy of Science of Belarus took over the control of organizing opinion polls. This decision was formalized by the Decree of the Council of Ministers of Belarus on November 8, 2005. The council authorized a special panel under the National Academy of Science of Belarus to exercise control over the activities of accredited legal entities at any stage of opinion poll conducting. The panel has the right to revoke accreditation if it detects irregularities in the activities of a pollster or if released poll results are regarded as "biased and unreliable."

On December 20, President Lukashenko signed into law a controversial bill that would introduce severe penalties for activities deemed to be fomenting a revolution in the country. The bill amends Belarus' Criminal Code by introducing prison sentences for training people to take part in street protests, discrediting Belarus' international image abroad, and appealing to countries and international organizations to act, "to the detriment of the country's security, sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Mr. Chairman, in light of these repressions, the UDF have shown tremendous courage and tenacity. To quote Aleksander Milinkevich, "We hold no false illusions. We are in this for the long run." We owe the coalition our continued support. It is imperative that the United States and the European Union pay close attention to both the conduct and the results of the March 19 election. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe election observation mission findings will be crucial. Voting irregularities and embellished voting results must not be tolerated. It is our duty and the duty of the international community to hold Lukashenko and his regime accountable. Immediate repercussions must be put into place if the election is stolen; such as economic sanctions and visa bans on the leaders of this regime.

However, the election is only the beginning. To quote President Bush in his State of the Union Speech, "Elections are vital, but they are only the beginning. Raising up a democracy requires the rule of law, and protection of minorities, and strong, accountable institutions that last longer than a single vote." The United States

and the European Union need to strategize and focus on a long-term strategy on Belarus. This long-term strategy must include discussion with Belarus' neighbor and ally the Russian Federation. We cannot afford to let European and American policy on Belarus be undercut by Russia's support of Europe's last dictator.

The UDF are determined to maintain the coalition and their work. It is imperative for us to aid their resolve. More assistance is needed. Currently the UDF has no permanent headquarters. In order for the coalition to maintain its credibility, a permanent headquarters must be organized and established. Accordingly, assistance will be needed to fight the information vacuum and to spread their message.

The UDF also need long ranging training in many aspects of democratic governance. When these activists succeed in creating democratic change in Belarus, they will be faced with challenges of governance not seen since the fall of the Soviet Union. Among the many problems they will inherit include an economy under near total state control, a corrupt judiciary and police force, and a legislature stripped of nearly all its power. It is important that the new leaders of a free Belarus have the training needed to navigate the difficult waters of economic reform and liberalization, judicial reform, and other challenges that they will face.

The coalition has proven their willingness to unite and campaign against all odds. We owe it to them to acknowledge their dedication and to see their goals of a free Belarus come into fruition.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF PATRICK MERLOE, DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS ON ELECTION PROCESSES, NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Commission:

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the troubled conditions in Belarus during the run-up to its March 19 presidential election. Belarus has yet to organize an election that meets international standards and the country's commitments through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The run-up to the March 19 presidential poll, unfortunately, is marked by a large number of problems reported in respected news media, noted in OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) election observation mission reports and findings of nonpartisan Belarusian election monitors. Among the documented violations are: the beating and arrest of a presidential candidate; arresting and detention of a number of opposition supporters; charging opposition activists with violating the law simply for passing out campaign flyers; and more.

Mr. Chairman, these and additional violations of civil and political rights are covered by the testimony of others in this hearing. While NDI has been involved in Belarus since 2000, assisting citizens who want to build democratic political processes and ensure the integrity of elections, today I will focus my comments on one critical subject: the importance of the free exercise of the right of citizens to participate in government and public affairs through nonpartisan election observation by domestic nongovernmental organizations.

On February 21, 2006, several civic activists were arrested; their offices and homes were raided, and their computers and other effects were confiscated. These persons, who are leaders in the efforts of Belarusian citizens to monitor their presidential election, remain in detention, accused by the KGB of "slandering the president and illegally running an unregistered organization". Slandering the president is a criminal offense in Belarus that could result in multiple years in jail.

Belarusian authorities have thwarted in other ways the efforts of citizens to observe their election process. NDI, as well as the OSCE, provided assistance to a coalition of nonpartisan domestic election monitors who observed Belarus' 2001 election, and NDI assisted the efforts of more than 3,000 Belarusian nonpartisan observers for the 2004 parliamentary elections. A year later, many of the civic activists involved with these efforts once again sought to register a citizen initiative called Partnership in order to observe the present election. Their good-faith request for registration was denied.

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that Partnership signed the Zagreb Declaration and Commitments (attached to this testimony) adopted on June 29, 2003, at the European Domestic Observer Forum, sponsored by the European Commission and the OSCE and organized in cooperation with NDI. The Declaration and Commitments, among other things, commit the signatories to act in an impartial, nonpartisan manner and to observe the highest ethical standards when observing elections. The commitment of

Partnership to these standards establishes its bonafides regarding election observation.

The bad-faith denial of registration is being used by Belarusian authorities as a basis of charging individuals with running an "illegal organization". In addition, in an ongoing propaganda campaign, Belarusian authorities falsely accused Partnership of organizing fraudulent exit polls to be released after the election in order to draw protesters to the street, where explosions would be detonated to create "blood and sacrifices" to mobilize the population and attempt to seize governmental power. This false, outlandish accusation also fallaciously tied NDI to the KGB's fiction.

Mr. Chairman: The attempts by Belarusian authorities to foil nonpartisan election observation by its citizens violate rights guaranteed by Belarus' constitution, election law and international obligations. Article 13 of the Belarus electoral code recognizes the right of citizens to observe elections, just as the Constitution of Belarus recognizes the right of association and guarantees free and open elections (Articles 36 and 66). Yet, the authorities have created unreasonable obstacles to the effective exercise of these rights. The denial of genuine opportunities to exercise such civil and political rights also violates Belarus' obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and its OSCE commitments.

Through its membership in the United Nations and accession to the ICCPR, Belarus is obligated to ensure every citizen's right and opportunity, without any unreasonable restriction, to participate in government and public affairs, directly and through freely chosen representatives. Through its participation in the OSCE, Belarus commits to this principle (e.g., 1990 Copenhagen Document, paragraph 6) and explicitly commits to invite domestic (and foreign) election observers from any appropriate private organization that wishes to observe the course of national elections (Copenhagen Document, paragraph 8). Like all OSCE participating States, Belarus is obligated to ensure that its laws, regulations, practices and policies conform with obligations under international law and be in harmony with OSCE commitments (Copenhagen Document, paragraphs 4 and 24), and that they not be designed to frustrate the exercise of rights.

Belarus and other OSCE participating States are further committed to ensure that individuals are permitted to exercise their right to association by forming and joining organizations in order to study (i.e., monitor) the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms—including the right to genuine democratic elections. Participating States are also to ensure that such organizations are permitted to develop and advance ideas for improved protection of human rights and for ensuring better compliance with international human rights standards—including standards for democratic elections. (See Copenhagen Document, paragraphs 10.3 and 10.3.) This extends to having unhindered access to and communication with similar bodies within and outside Belarus, to engage in exchanges, contacts, cooperation and even to solicit and receive funds from such other groups for the purposes of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms (Copenhagen Document, paragraph 10.4). Beyond this, domestic nonpartisan

election monitoring organizations are a subset of "human rights defenders" that have gained protection under United Nations instruments.

Despite these clear obligations, Belarusian authorities have blocked legal recognition of appropriate groups that seek to engage in nonpartisan election observation, prohibited assistance from outside sources and are detaining individuals for nothing more than seeking to promote the right of citizens to free, open and genuinely democratic elections.

Mr. Chairman: We all believe that sovereignty belongs to and flows from the people of a country and that the legitimacy and authority to govern derives from the will of the people expressed in periodic and genuine democratic elections. It is from these precepts that citizens organize themselves to observe and help ensure the integrity of election processes. There is no more basic exercise of the right of association and no more important act by citizens to protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Around the world, citizens have organized in a nonpartisan manner to monitor elections as a means of building public confidence, promoting citizen participation in elections and safeguarding electoral integrity. NDI is proud to have worked with over 160 citizen groups and coalitions in more than 65 countries over the last 20 years to aid domestic nonpartisan election observation. Honoring citizens' rights to monitor their election processes is an established and growing state practice, which is a recognized component of standards for democratic elections.

NDI is deeply concerned that Belarusian authorities are taking overt actions to deny this and other human rights and fundamental freedoms in the present electoral period. NDI Chairman Madeleine Albright, in a statement released by the Institute on March 6 and attached to this testimony, deplored attempts to deny citizens the right to peacefully monitor the March 19 presidential election and condemned the recent arrest of citizen activists, as well as the false accusations against Partnership. In her statement, we called on the government of Belarus to immediately release those detained and to allow them to continue their rightful monitoring effort without interference. We hope that you will join in this call.

Mr. Chairman: NDI appreciates the efforts of Congress to support efforts of the people of Belarus to establish a full democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and Congress's call on the Government of Belarus to conduct a free and fair presidential election, as stated in House Resolution 673. We greatly appreciate the role of this Commission in defending and promoting human rights and respect for all elements of the Helsinki process. The CSCE is a strong voice of Congress and the American people.

NDI also would like to highlight the efforts of the OSCE concerning the electoral situation in Belarus, and in particular for the efforts of the OSCE/ODIHR. The March 3 statement of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, expressed concern and drew attention to the plight of four prominent domestic observers in Belarus, as well as the physical aggression of authorities against and detention of a presidential candidate who was later released. The Chairman-in-Office called on Belarusian authorities to stop such acts. The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observa-

tion Mission in Belarus also drew attention to these developments in its first Interim Report and in a March 2 press release. These and other actions by the OSCE are valuable and are consistent with mandates to follow the compliance of participating States with their OSCE commitments.

It is NDI's hope that the government of Belarus will meet its obligations and conduct itself in accordance with its international commitments and its constitutional requirements in this electoral context. Ensuring civil and political rights and guaranteeing a free, open and genuinely democratic election are crucial for developing democracy in Belarus, as in all other countries.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RODGER POTOCKI, SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER FOR EAST CENTRAL EUROPE, NATIONAL ENDOWNMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Despite the threat of criminal persecution, these civic campaigns are making an impact on the electorate. In a January 2006 survey,

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

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

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

- Civil society must continue to be supported after the elections. The political opposition in Belarus remains weak. Democratic reform can only come to Belarus through the active participation of NGOs in a broad-based civic moment. A key message for and means of supporting civil society would be the reauthorization of the Belarus Democracy Act.
- Everything that can be done to sustain, strengthen and expand the "10 Plus" Coalition of Democratic Forces, which includes a significant number of NGOs, should be done. NGOs and political parties must continue to work together and expand their cooperation.
- One of the greatest impediments to the development of civil society in Belarus is the lack of legal status of NGOs. The international community should pressure the Lukashenka regime to restore the legal right of NGOs to exist and respect international standards for the third sector.
- In the event of a crackdown after the elections, support and assistance must be directed helping NGOs to survive and operate in what will surely be a more underground fashion.

• Finally, we must demonstrate our solidarity with our brave Belarusian partners by making sure that resources are available for legal and humanitarian assistance to those who will be imprisoned, hospitalized, expelled or unemployed after the crackdown.

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

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

PREPARED STATEMENT OF CELESTE WALLANDER, DIRECTOR AND SENIOR FELLOW, RUSSIA AND EURASIA PROGRAM, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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 pro-

motion, 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 a 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 inte-

grated 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 Rus-

sian 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 19th 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.

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