

ENGAGING BELARUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY



JULY 21, 2017

**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

Washington: 2017

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
234 Ford House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
202-225-1901
csce@mail.house.gov
<http://www.csce.gov>
@HelsinkiComm

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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Helsinki process, formally titled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, traces its origin to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in Finland on August 1, 1975, by the leaders of 33 European countries, the United States and Canada. As of January 1, 1995, the Helsinki process was renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE]. The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 56 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

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

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

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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

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

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

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

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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC

The briefing was held at 10:31 p.m. in room G11, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, DC, Scott Rauland, Senior State Department Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, moderating.

Panelists present: Scott Rauland, Senior State Department Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; Stephen Nix, Eurasia Division Director, International Republican Institute, Washington; Katie Fox, Deputy Regional Director for Eurasia Programs, National Democratic Institute, Washington; Sanaka Samarasingha, United Nations Chief in Belarus; and Pavel Shidlovsky, Charge d’Affaires, Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the United States.

Mr. RAULAND. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the Helsinki Commission Chairman Senator Roger Wicker, and Co-Chairman Representative Chris Smith, I’d like to welcome you all to our briefing on “Engaging Belarus on Human Rights and Democracy.” My name is Scott Rauland and I’m the Senior State Department Advisor for the Helsinki Commission. I served for two years as the chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Minsk, where I had an opportunity to see firsthand the work being done to promote greater respect for human right and democracy by the U.N., the National Democratic Institute [NDI], the International Republican Institute [IRI], USAID, and many other organizations, working both in Belarus and abroad.

I just returned from a week in Belarus, attending the 2017 annual session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. That provided hundreds of parliamentarians from throughout the OSCE region an opportunity to engage the government of Belarus and leading democracy and human rights activists. The Helsinki Commission’s mandate is to monitor and encourage compliance with the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent OSCE commitments, especially in the human dimension. The Helsinki Commission’s Belarus activities have included hearings, public briefings, congressional resolutions, press releases, direct contacts with Belarusian officials, as well as, of course, with the democratic opposition and civil society.

But the most visible expression of Congress’ interest and concern has been the now three iterations of the Belarus Democracy Act, public laws signed by President Bush in

2004 and 2006, and most recently the Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011, signed by President Obama. It's rare for countries, at least those in which there's not a war or some other major crisis, to get that kind of attention in Congress. Each of the three Belarus democracy acts was authorized by Representative Chris Smith, the co-chairman of the Helsinki Commission. And I'd like to list just a few of the highlights for you before we begin.

- The Belarus Democracy Acts stated a U.S. policy of strong support for the Belarusian people to live in a free and independent country with human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, sending the signal of solidarity with the Belarusian people.
- They call for the cessation of human rights abuses, and the immediate and unconditional release of political prisoners—a goal which was realized in 2015—and the restoration of their rights.
- They call for targeted sanctions, including visa denials and blocking of the assets of senior officials and those engaged in human rights and electoral abuses, and the undermining of democratic institutions, and economic sanctions against major state-owned enterprises.

At the same time, the legislation explicitly opens the door to the reevaluation of U.S. policy towards the Belarusian government should it take steps toward democracy and respect for human rights. A congressional delegation led by Senator Wicker which just returned from Minsk on July 8th made that clear, both in press engagements and in meetings with President Lukashenko and with civil society leaders that the U.S. is willing to move forward under the new U.S. administration *if* we see progress being made by the government of Belarus on key democracy and human rights issues.

So what are the prospects for us being able to move forward? To answer that question, we have assembled a great panel for you today of people who have been working on Belarus for years. Let me quickly turn to introducing our speakers, who are going to give us a good overview and a basis on which to have a discussion. We're very much looking forward to the participation of our audience in a question-and-answer session that will follow their presentations.

On my far left, and on your far right, Sanaka Samarasingha has served in his current capacity as head of the U.N. in Minsk since January 2013. Before coming to Minsk, Mr. Samarasingha has served in various offices of the U.N. and the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], including as senior advisor to the U.N. resident coordinator in Iran, and deputy resident representative of the UNDP in Myanmar. Sanaka and I were both working in Minsk when Belarus released all of its political prisoners in 2015. And Sanaka also convinced me to join in a unique train ride around Belarus promoting U.N. projects. Very few Western diplomats can match his years on the ground in Belarus and contacts with human rights and democracy activists and government of Belarus officials.

Katie Fox is deputy director of the Eurasia Department at NDI. Ms. Fox oversees NDI election monitoring, civic organizing, and political party development programs in the former Soviet Union with a focus on Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and Moldova. I had the pleasure of meeting Katie in 2014 before I began my assignment in Belarus, and found the overview I got on activities there very helpful to me as I began my work there.

Stephen Nix joined IRI in October 2000 as regional program director for Eurasia. In that position, he oversees programs in Belarus, Georgia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova,

Russia, and Ukraine. Mr. Nix joined IRI after serving for two years as senior democracy specialist at the U.S. Agency for International Development. Mr. Nix is a specialist in political party development and judicial and legal reform in the former Soviet Union.

As you can see, we have three highly qualified experts to provide us an overview. After we've heard from them, I'll moderate a question-and-answer session. So let us start in reverse order with you, Steve, if you don't mind.

Mr. NIX. Good morning. Thank you, Scott, for the introduction. I'd like to begin by thanking Senator Wicker and Representative Smith for their leadership on this Commission and the fact that this Commission is again focusing attention on a very important country. Belarus is important to the strategic interests of the United States for a number of reasons: Belarus' cooperation militarily and economically with Russia, and also due to the increased West presence in the Baltics and the area. So, again, thank you for this opportunity and I ask that my remarks be entered into the record.

I'm the Eurasian Director for the International Republican Institute, a not-for-profit democracy-building organization based in Washington and working in over 80 countries throughout the world. Our roots harken back to Ronald Reagan, whose unshakable belief in democracy was one of his principal aims and doctrines while president.

I'll start by saying that we certainly applaud Belarus' expressed intent at engagement, but we've seen very little concrete action taken on the issues that the United States has offered in terms of engagement. These issues include amending the election code, registering political parties, and halting the practice of arresting citizens for political activity. In reality, democratic reforms in Belarus, including economic freedoms, remain stagnant and rarely move beyond the level of roundtables or diplomatic discussions.

As evidenced most recently in February and March of this year, raids of human rights defenders' offices and mass detentions of opposition activists still occur in Belarus. If we look at the level of freedoms enjoyed by citizens of Belarus, very little has changed. The OSCE notes that elections are undemocratic and do not meet international standards. The most recent Freedom House "Freedom of the World Report" classifies Belarus as "not free," largely due to human rights violations and incursions on media freedoms. The government owns Belarus' sole internet service provider, and often blocks independent media sites, as it did during the protests that I noted.

At the beginning of this year, Belarusian citizens, unable to secure jobs, began receiving notices that they owed money for what's known as the "parasite tax." This unemployment tax triggered discontent and pockets of protests and resulted in major protests in five large cities, with thousands taking to the streets across the nation throughout the months of February and March. Police and security forces in Belarus aggressively attacked these peaceful protests. They caused injuries to hundreds.

More than 1,000 opposition demonstrators, political and civil society activists, and community leaders were arrested during this crackdown. Many of the protestors, middle-aged working-class residents of regional cities, actually form the base that voted for President Lukashenko in the past. Their participation in these protests is indicative of a growing feeling of betrayal and of economic desperation, and shows a fracturing in society.

Regarding pro-democratic opposition, on the other hand, we are seeing steps. I want to discuss two key examples. The first is the United Civic Party, which has succeeded in having one of its members, Anna Kanopatskaya, be elected to the Belarus Parliament in 2016. Those elections were not deemed free and fair, and the parliament is under heavy

executive control. Nonetheless, Ms. Kanopatskaya has made a name for herself providing insight as to how the state is run, and using her position to highlight certain issues, to travel to the regions, in an effort to connect citizens with their government.

The other example is Tell the Truth, or Havary Pravdu, a citizen action group led by Tatyana Karatkevich, who challenged Lukashenko as the only opposition candidate in the 2015 presidential election. While the official election result from the CEC listed Karatkevich as receiving 4.4 percent of the vote, independent polling showed that nearly 20 percent of voters supported her candidacy. The same polling showed that Lukashenko's result was only 51 percent—far different than that reported by the CEC.

Since that campaign, Karatkevich has continued to be active politically, and using her strong name ID by traveling and advocating on local issues, talking to small business owners, urging municipal and local ministry officials to meet with citizen groups, and raising awareness of social service problems. These two women represent change in Belarus. The work of Kanopatskaya and Karatkevich, and the community-level work of hundreds of activists, show that the citizens of Belarus are looking for ways to improve their lives.

This spring we saw segments of the entire population becoming active in protesting. Belarusians have discovered the power of unifying, standing together, to drive change. More and more people are finding the courage to stand up for a better life. Further fostering this civic activity requires a localized approach. And next year's municipal elections, preliminarily planned for February of 2018, provide an important opportunity for change in Belarus. Should the government allow free and fair elections in 2018, we would expect to see a number of victories by the political opposition. That type of a result would be convincing evidence that the Government of Belarus is committed to conducting open and competitive elections.

IRI has assisted pro-democratic forces in their struggle for democratic change since 1997. We have programs to help political parties refine their message, connect up with constituents, and discuss issues that are of importance to the citizens of Belarus. These programs are the foundation of IRI's mission to support democratic organizations, and help their leaders and activists prepare for public policy roles in a future democratic Belarus.

And responding to developing trends in the country, IRI has shifted its programmatic focus in the last few years to community-level activism. IRI firmly believes that the future development of Belarus depends on unleashing the potential of its citizens, allowing people to speak, assemble, and earn a living in the way they see fit. IRI also works to support political participation by the youth in Belarus which, as we all know, represents the future. Many in this generation see their country falling behind regional neighbors, who have made great strides in development and exposure to the ideas and practices of democracy. We think this is a key step in providing context for these future leaders.

So, in sum, IRI will continue to monitor the limited democratic space that exists in Belarus, and will continue to work with the opposition to find ways to continue their struggle for democratic and true change in Belarus. Thank you for this opportunity and I'll be happy to respond to any questions.

Mr. RAULAND. Thank you for presenting IRI's views on the current situation in Belarus so well, Steve. We really appreciate that.

Let's move on to Katie Fox from NDI.

Ms. FOX. Thank you, Scott. And thanks to the Commission for holding this briefing today.

As Steve said, Belarus is an important country; it borders the EU and NATO and is in the heart of Europe, and can sometimes be overshadowed by its larger neighbors. NDI has been working in Belarus, exchanging ideas with, and responding to advice from democratic parties and civil society since 2000. I agree entirely with what Steve said; that Belarus is not today a free or democratic society, for all the reasons that you mentioned, Steve. I'm going to focus my time, rather than repeating that, to expand a little bit on some of the modest openings that may be available, that may be leveraged, to make ultimately broader democratic gains, using a mixture of aid and engagement.

So what are those openings? First, there is growing evidence that the Belarusian Government is not monolithic. As Steve mentioned, there were two opposition members essentially appointed to parliament in what were very flawed elections in 2016. However, once there, they have found support among their colleagues for opening up the parliamentary body in some ways, such as to public hearings and meetings with voters. There are also meetings taking place, I believe, between opposition parties and members of parliament on such issues as health care and drug abuse.

Also, in regard to the parasite tax—the so-called parasite tax and the protests against it—as Steve pointed out, the government did react with arrests, as they usually do. But it's important to also note that they made some concessions to a movement that was clearly grassroots and had support throughout the region. The government offered meetings or receptions with citizens, and they narrowed the scope of those affected by the tax.

The second point I want to make is to pick up on what Steve said in regard to potential democratic openings. As Steve mentioned, the official polling data on the last presidential election in 2015 was different from polling which NDI and IRI analyzed, which showed that the vote for the opposition candidate was somewhat higher, and, importantly, that she was reaching people outside of the traditional opposition electorate, people who had not voted for the opposition before—young people, women, urbanites—who responded to her message of peaceful change, showing that that electorate can be expanded.

So then the last potential opening and positive sign I want to focus on is the growth and development of the democratic parties, which Steve also mentioned, and their reaction to the parasite tax. The parties in Belarus have often been criticized for being insufficiently attentive to the concerns of ordinary Belarusians. But in this case, they knew that this tax was important to their constituents long before the protests broke out. They held meetings with citizens. They incorporated their positions on the tax into their parliamentary election campaigns. And that's growth.

In addition, we saw in the last elections the parties organizing in a more professional manner. We saw the democratic parties increasingly refraining from attacks on each other. And finally, we saw that party coalitions that previously existed only on paper were being replaced by smaller, but more pragmatic and genuine, coalitions of parties with shared ideologies.

With that in mind, I would like to take a few minutes to offer some thoughts on future engagement in Belarus. Diplomacy, including that of multilateral groups like the OSCE, will be most effective if it, first, focuses on systemic changes as conditions for greater engagement with the Belarusian Government. There's great humanitarian value

in prisoner releases, but of course new prisoners can always be taken and held as bargaining chips. Whereas systemic changes, such as allowing the registration of parties, removing the penalties for assembly and other legitimate political activities and reforming the electoral code to ensure real competition, would help to lay the building blocks for long term, sustainable progress.

And in regard to these systemic changes, particular emphasis should be placed on the electoral system reforms recommended by the OSCE, as well as independent Belarusian monitoring groups such as Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections and the Right to Choose Coalition. These recommendations include opposition representation at all precinct election commissions, full access for party and nonpartisan observers to report on the vote counting and tabulation processes.

And finally, in the realm of diplomacy, it is important that dialogue and engagement continues, but prioritizes outreach to civil society and parties, as well as the government. And I commend the OSCE PA for doing that in a very effective way, and bringing those groups into the room on that recent trip.

Finally, a couple of quick words on the role of outside assistance to Belarus. We recommend that it should—in this period of relative, even if limited, opening of political space—it should be focused on helping democratic parties and civic groups take advantage of that opening to grow. It should enable them to attract new supporters, present alternative ideas, and identify and reach out to youth and other potential new democratic voters.

Second, assistance should treat information warfare like the urgent international security threat that it is. As Russian speakers, Belarusians are consumers of the propaganda and disinformation that permeates the Russian language information space. This makes it vitally important that there is support for the few sources of independent information that Belarusians get. There is, for example, Tut.by, a large independent news portal. NDI has also helped to start e-Pramova, which is an online platform for discussion and debate, including on politically themed issues, which reaches more than 700,000 Belarusians each month.

In conclusion, I am going to quote from a Belarusian democratic leader, who said: “We ask the U.S. to support our goals—democracy, social stability, and a better life for Belarusians. To support these goals by maintaining a dialogue with both opposition and government, and with aid programs that give civil society, independent media, and democratic movements inspiration and vision. With this, we can bring peaceful changes for our country.”

Thank you very much.

Mr. RAULAND. Thank you very much for your testimony, Katie. I’m glad to see that you and Steve both emphasized the opportunities that we have in 2018 with the local elections. I hope that’s something that policymakers both here and in Europe can focus on in the months ahead. Thank you also for mentioning future engagement, what you see there as possibilities, and for bringing up that question of information warfare. These may be topics we can come back to in the question-and-answer session.

And now I’d like to turn the floor over to Sanaka Samarasingha to tell us a little bit about what the U.N. is doing in Belarus, and what your perspectives are on where things are at, and the opportunities for us moving forward.

Mr. SAMARASINHA. Thank you very much, Scott. And thank you as well to the Helsinki Commission for bringing me back to what I consider to be my second home. As Scott knows, I went to university here and I was a Maryland law student, amongst other things, and attended George Washington University. So it's nice to be back. It's not often that the U.N. gives me the opportunity to come to D.C. They keep bringing me to New York, but I'd prefer to come to D.C. more often.

That said, I also want to say thank you to my colleagues here at the table, because I think they've given you a pretty accurate picture of the issues and the challenges that face Belarus and Belarusians on a daily basis. In my short presentation, let me try to focus, if you will, on the engagement dimension. Since we've acknowledged that Belarus has human rights challenges, then the question is, what do we do about it and how do we do it in such a way that actually gets us, if even incremental progress, progress.

The U.N. has been working in Belarus for 25 years this year and its focus has been on development activities. So going back to the early years, it was post-Chernobyl. There was quite a lot of focus on health and economic development of Chernobyl-affected communities. Belarus happens to be in the only region in the world where HIV is on the increase—Russia, Ukraine, Belarus. This is mostly because of injecting drug use. And so the U.N.'s been working for many years on dealing with these issues, dealing also with the stigma of people who are most at risk—men having sex with men, female sex workers. As you can imagine, this is not an easy subject, but it has been something that Belarus and the U.N. have been working closely on for many years.

Another area that has been the focus on our work is on fighting human trafficking for some years, with a degree of success. Now, the degree of success may differ depending on who you ask, but it has been a significant area of work where the U.N.'s been working with a whole range of stakeholders. Refugees, there are a number of refugees, as you know, recently who have been coming over from Ukraine, from Syria, from Afghanistan. And so the U.N. refugee agency works there. Children's rights, juvenile justice, and environmental rights—these are traditionally the areas where we've been engaged for many years.

Now, when I first came to Belarus in January of 2013, I still recollect a very well-meaning person—who turned out then subsequently to become a friend—this senior official told me something as I was going to have my first meeting with the foreign minister. He said, well, you know, Sanaka, we know that you have a human rights background, and have been a journalist, but I think it would be very good if you don't mention human rights in your meeting. And I actually was a little taken aback. I think it was very well meant. I think the idea was, listen, don't start off your very first meeting by talking about human rights. And I thought it was very important that I did. The reason was that I wanted it to be clear that the U.N.'s work must involve working on human rights, as it did in every country, not just in Belarus.

And so it needed to be clear. It needed to be up front. And I also wanted it to be clear that I was not there, in my particular role, with a big stick. There are parts of the U.N. which have a particular role—as you know, Belarus is part of several U.N. treaty bodies. It's part of the Human Rights Council. Currently, for the last five years, there is a special rapporteur who has been appointed by the Human Rights Council specifically for Belarus, who has not been able to come into the country for many years—although he was in with Scott and me in Minsk at the same time recently, not in his capacities

specifically as special rapporteur, but as a Hungarian delegate to the OSCE PA annual meeting. But nevertheless, Belarus did let him into the country.

But my job, I felt, was to remind Belarus of the obligations that it has voluntarily signed onto, and to help find ways in which they could live up to those obligations. And this is the job of any U.N. representative in any country. And so it was not going to be any different in Belarus. So from that first meeting, where I was advised not to mention human rights, it really is quite interesting for me now that two weeks ago—Scott, you were there—when during President Lukashenko’s opening speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE he focused on human rights—on the death penalty issue and on the national human rights action plan.

So one of the ways—one of the things that struck me from the very beginning that needed to be done, was to find a space for people to talk to each other, because I got a very early feeling that this understanding of human rights was very different depending on who you talk to—within the country to start with, but of course also in terms of the different countries. And so one of the tasks that I went ahead and set for myself, is to try to build dialogue between countries—to try to build dialogue that went beyond the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, because if the business of human rights was simply in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is clear this is simply for external consumption.

And I think the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—and the Minister of Foreign Affairs—is also very keen that others in the government understood that human rights should not be the domain simply of the opposition or the NGOs, but human rights must be, first and foremost, the business of the government of every country, because it is for the people of the country, who the government represents and services in response to the needs of the people. So this is one.

Second, I felt that it was really important not to focus selectively on this human right or that human right. Governments typically would like to focus on the socioeconomic and maybe cultural rights, depending on the country. And external partners, opposition politicians, and NGOs like to focus on civil and political rights. This happens in Sri Lanka. It happened in the United States, everywhere. So it was really important to understand that human rights cannot be divided. Human rights cannot be selected. Human rights are universal. And it doesn’t depend on which country you’re in or what cultural background you have.

And the third thing—and then I’ve got one more thing to say after that—and the third thing is that I’ve also discovered—this is not unusual. It happens in my country too, in Sri Lanka. But I also discovered that one of the key things I need to try to do is find a safe space for Belarusians to talk and listen to each other. It seemed to me, that Belarusians when they disagree, no matter who they are—whether they’re government or opposition or NGOs or private sector—when they disagree, they prefer to talk to us, the international community, foreigners, even if we disagree with them.

And so we needed to find a safe space to do that. And we worked very hard—in the Q&A we can get into it—we worked very hard to do that, and organized several events. I think these are first—the stepping stones to something greater.

And I just want to finish off then with what I considered to be some key principals. Scott said to me, give some examples, because I know you have them, for each of them. But I’m running out of time, so I’m just going to give you the principles and certainly in the Q&A we can get to the examples.

I think the most important thing, for me, in my almost five years in Belarus, is you've got to be principled, but you've got to be patient. I thought it is critically important also to be respectful and to be constructive. Then I think you can't do this business of human rights, of course, unless you believe in it in the first place. But you have to be consistent about what you believe and what you say, and you have to be transparent.

And I think the context of countries like Belarus is important. I don't speak Russian, I knew very little about the Soviet Union space, I come from an island, Belarus is landlocked, I like spices in my food and I can say that's one thing I miss in Minsk. [Laughter.] So what did I know of? What did I have in common in Belarus? A hell of a lot, it turns out. And over the years, I've discovered that Belarusians, like us Sri Lankans and Americans, are creative. So if you want to do human rights in Belarus, you've got to be creative too.

I'll stop there. Thanks a lot.

Mr. RAULAND. Well, thank you very much for your presentation, Sanaka. And I hope that people will feel inclined to ask Sanaka to talk about some of the examples of the principles he named. I think those are not only good principles for doing human rights work in Belarus and elsewhere, but are pretty good principles for being successful in life.

I'd like to thank all three of our panelists for your presentations. This is really a great way for us to get into our question-and-answer session. But I have a bonus round for you before we get there. We have the Belarusian Charge d'Affaires with us today. We'd like to give him the opportunity to share the viewpoint of the government of Belarus on this topic.

So, Pavel, if you'd like to join us—Pavel Shidlovsky, the Belarusian Charge d'Affaires, please deliver your statement.

Mr. SHIDLOVSKY. Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen, first of all I would like to thank the Helsinki Commission and Scott Rauland in particular for the invitation to speak at this briefing, which I believe is both important and timely.

I take this event as an indication that the Helsinki Commission and U.S. Congress and Government have Belarus on their mind and are seeking ways to expand engagement with it. We can only welcome that, and my job is to make sure that the proposals expressed here today will be received and considered in Minsk.

As other countries of the former Soviet Union, Belarus appeared on the political map of Europe just recently. And the U.S. was the second country in the world to establish, 25 years ago, diplomatic relations with Belarus, and we value that. During this historically short period of time, we have built a truly independent country which forges a mutually beneficially model of cooperation with all states, in particular with its neighbors, which pursues a consistent, multi-vector foreign policy, one of engagement, not of estrangement—which tries to balance its interests between various poles of power in the currently unstable geopolitical environment, which spurns the false choice between West and East.

Twenty years ago, Belarus unilaterally and unconditionally relinquished possession of nuclear weapons. And I believe that this strategic decision has positively influenced stability and security in the world, and relations with Europe and the United States. On many occasions, Belarus has proven its reputation of a security donor. Together with the U.S., and with European partners, we seek to deliver our input to managing global and regional problems, countering modern challenges and threats. Recently Belarus has inten-

sified its efforts to establish tight defense cooperation with all neighbors, and with the United States. And it is in that spirit of cooperation and transparency that we invited representatives of NATO, among other countries and regions, to observe the Belarus-Russia strategic joint exercise, Zapad 2017 in September this year.

Belarus has demonstrated a desire for more active participation in regional and international activity. We provided a venue for the Minsk agreements [on Ukraine], and for the trilateral working group. The Minsk agreements are universally considered as the only tool for resolving the situation in eastern Ukraine. We have just held the 26th annual session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE. All 57 OSCE participating states sent their national delegations. Hosting this marquee event, Belarus aimed to promote the assembly's efforts to bridge differences and re-establish trust in the OSCE region. The Minsk session was called one of the smoothest sessions ever. The head of the U.S. delegation, the Honorable Senator Roger Wicker, praised the high level of organization of the session.

The president of Belarus suggested launching a discussion in the OSCE on a new Helsinki process during the annual meeting. A number of resolutions were adopted at the session on such topical issues as combatting terrorism and human trafficking, managing flows of refugees, and countering religious discrimination. They became part of the Minsk declaration. Belarus sponsored a resolution on measures against new psychoactive substances, which was adopted all but unanimously. I'm pleased to say that one of 44 cosponsors was Congressman Chris Smith. Belarus organized two side events on new psychoactive substances and on combatting trafficking in persons. Chris Smith was the keynote speaker at the trafficking in persons side event. The Swedish delegation initiated a side event on the situation in Belarus.

I say all that to demonstrate to you that at these events civil society representatives were present and did show the openness of Belarus to engagement with civil society, including on human rights. OSCE Assembly Secretary-General Roberto Montella thanked Belarus for its hospitality, openness for dialogue, and sometimes for criticism. Minsk reaffirmed its status as a venue for effective convocation of the largest international fora.

Belarus has always regarded normalization of relations with the United States as a priority of its foreign policy. Yes, we have had our ups and downs, but never had the leadership of Belarus underestimated the importance of full-fledged engagement with the U.S. We enjoy positive momentum in relations with your country. We have developed a constructive dialogue on political, security, nonproliferation, law enforcement, trade, inter-regional, and, of course, human rights issues. We are committed to continuing, with the Trump Administration, the path that we have started with predecessors. We are grateful to the U.S. for making this rapprochement possible, for supporting our sovereignty and independence. Belarus and the European Union have already achieved tangible results in our bilateral cooperation.

That now includes the launching of a Belarus-EU coordination group and mobility partnerships, intensification of political contacts, sectoral dialogues, cooperation with European financial institutions, and engagement in the field of international technical assistance. We held three human rights dialogues with the United States. Yesterday in Brussels, the Belarusian delegation conducted the next round of our human rights dialogue between Belarus and the European Union. We have identified goals with our Western partners—we have identical goals with our Western partners regarding protec-

tion and promotion of human rights. The only difference is the pace of reforms. We cannot change the situation momentarily.

The national human rights action plan adopted at the level of the president in Belarus is a crucial element of our framework for the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms. We have established a high level advisory group on the rule of law and access to justice. Belarus has set up an interagency group of experts to analyze recommendations of the OSCE ODIHR, and to further improve electoral law. Belarus has no backlog concerning reports on human rights treaty bodies of the United Nation. Belarus successfully passed two cycles of the universal periodic review on human rights. And we took 160 recommendations out of 260. And 100 we could not take because of either lack of resources or lack of competence.

I will stop here, because I hate to stand between you and the distinguished panelists—but I'm happy to answer your questions on a one-on-one basis, if you are interested to learn more on these subjects.

Thank you.

Mr. RAULAND. Thank you very much, Pavel, for your views on this, the views of the Government of Belarus, and for mentioning the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. Belarus's management of the event really was an impressive performance. The American delegation was very impressed with the organization, with the opportunities for engagement, with not only the Government of Belarus but at the Swedish side event you mentioned, where a full range of people belonging to the opposition parties, to the media, to human rights activists participated. So congratulations on a job very well done.

OK, now I want to, again, thank everybody for their contributions to the first part of the briefing this morning. And I want to open it up to the audience now for your questions. This is being streamed live on Facebook Live. So we will come around with a microphone for you so that everybody following on Facebook Live can hear what it is you have to ask our distinguished panel here.

So if you would raise your hand if you want to ask a question. And also, if you can tell us who you are and what organization you represent, that would be very helpful to all of us.

Do we have a first question out there? Up front here—most of us here know you, but go ahead and let the worldwide audience know who you are.

QUESTIONER. Orest Deychakiwsky, until relatively recently a policy advisor with the Helsinki Commission who covered Belarus, among other things.

Thank you very much for your very comprehensive presentations. I want to start drilling down just on one subject that Katie raised, and that is the influence of Russian propaganda and the Russian media space being extremely prevalent in Belarus. You mentioned the important role of independent media to counter that. I was wondering if any of you could comment on the role of international broadcasting as well, let's say the Belsats or Radio Liberties or even any kind of EU media outlets, because arguably from a geopolitical perspective they've become even more important now, given certain realities, to counter the Russian propaganda effort.

Thank you.

Ms. FOX. Thank you, Orest.

That's a very good question. And I should have mentioned when I spoke that you're right, broadcast is very, very important. And NDI has formed a partnership with Belsat,

with Radio Liberty, with a number of other radio outlets to expand the reach of the content on this online site I mentioned. It's kind of an online town hall. We also have candidate debates and issue debates. And those debates in particular have also been broadcast by Belsat. And through that method, they've reached millions of people, as opposed to hundreds of thousands—very, very, very important resources, without a doubt.

Mr. NIX. I would just add, Orest, to your question, media's so important. Whenever I brief a member of Congress to Belarus, trying to frame the situation—so these are for people who've never been to the country and don't know much about it—I say to them: Imagine running for Congress your first time. And imagine not being able to have access to TV, no access to radio, no access to direct mail. And people are pretty shocked to realize that the opposition in Belarus doesn't have access. There's some limited access around election time, as you well know, Orest. But again, it's one of the needs of the civil society organizations and political organizations that advocate for democracy and human rights in Belarus to get that message out. It's incredibly difficult to do so without that type of access.

So we welcome Belsat. We are hoping that Belsat will continue and enlarge and expand and the types of activities that Katie has referred to, because it is an urgent need. It's one thing to take polling data and have the right message as a political party trying to compete in an election. It's another thing to transmit that message across a nation of 9 million people without access to electronic media. So media is very, very important. And again, as I mentioned in my testimony, Belarus controls the one Internet service provider in Belarus.

Mr. RAULAND. Sanaka, did you have a contribution there?

Mr. SAMARASINHA. Yes, just a quick comment. Let me first say, being a journalist myself, and having had to, in part because of my journalistic work, leave my country for almost a decade, I do not undervalue the role of the media at all. But I think in Belarus, it's more a generational issue. The smartphone penetration is 114 percent in the country. Pretty much everyone carries at least one phone, right? Social media, everyone under the age of 35 is on it. And so I think there are different ways in which people can be reached. And, you know, it's not just the traditional media. In fact, amongst the young people, when I talk to them and ask, did you see my interview on Channel One or Channel Two? And they're like, oh, we never watch TV. What are you talking about, right? This is true—I mean, my kids don't watch TV either. I'm sure your kids don't either. So they get their news from other places. This is one thing.

The second thing, let's also not undervalue human contact. In Belarus, Scott, as you remember, there are more Schengen visas that are issued per capita than any other country in the world—more than a million, you know, for a population of nine and a half million. So, yes, I think that there is still quite a degree of influence that the traditional media has, especially with the older generation, the older population. But you know, Tut.by is a good example, where they do stuff online. And I think it's really good, the kind of influence that they have. But there are many ways to skin this cat, is the way I see it.

Thanks.

Mr. RAULAND. Any other questions from the audience at this time? Over there.

QUESTIONER. Thank you to the panelists for coming to speak with us today. My name is Charlie King [sp]. I'm interning in Senator Bill Nelson's office.

The panelists acknowledge that Belarus is a relatively young country, and I think it's not uncommon for states in their conception to struggle with issues of human rights. So, when you're addressing this issue, how do you ensure that, while it is very important that this process occur sooner rather than later, not to rush it, and that the changes that are made are indeed long lasting and systematic changes, as opposed to more temporary?

Mr. RAULAND. Would you like to start and then move this way?

Mr. NIX. Sure, I'll be happy to respond to that.

Well, again, we talked about engagement. And in my view, engagement merely for the purposes of having engagement is not productive. Engagement needs to result in tangible change. And we're still waiting to see that. In terms of the sequence and the timing, there's no science on this. Countries have developed at various rates. Former Soviet republics—you look at the Baltic countries in comparison—EU members, NATO members, fully developed private economies, hardly any state ownership of business. And then you look at other countries in the region. So every country develops along its own path based on its history, its traditions, its culture.

But I would just note that change is needed. And today, the IMF announced that it had broken off negotiations on the possibility of further financial assistance to Belarus. And the basis for that decision—and it's all in the public realm, you can go read about it—is the fact that the IMF had found that Belarus had not achieved sufficient reform of their economy. So again, change is essential in order to receive benefits and for recognition and for normalization of relations. And so while no one's saying that all of this has to happen tomorrow, we need to see tangible results, in my view, in the short term.

Thank you.

Ms. FOX. Thank you for that question. I would say two things in terms of making sustainable changes. First, as I said in my testimony, when the U.S. is putting forth its agenda, for engagement with the Belarusian Government, it should focus on things that have systemic effect, rather than affect only a sole individual. So removing restrictions on the peaceful assembly and freedom of speech, rather than releasing a single prisoner who may have been locked up for violating those things.

The other more global thing is that in the long term human rights and other protections will be best ensured through a more pluralistic society, in which there are a number of different visions and political parties competing with each other for Belarusians' attention, so that if one is not delivering on human rights or whatever else Belarusians want, there's an opportunity for them to vote for someone else. And that is the kind of society that NDI works for.

Mr. SAMARASINHA. I recently gave a TED Talk about change is coming and you better not hide because it's going to catch up with you eventually, right? I was talking about Belarus, but it wasn't only about Belarus. I think it's true about the entire world. But, you know, it depends on what you mean by change and what kind of change you're talking about.

So if we look at Belarus and poverty, for instance, in 2000 absolute poverty was over 45 percent. By 2015, it was less than 5 percent. Now, that's change, right? If you consider that practically 100 percent of kids are enrolled in school, that's change. The quality of education, you can argue, is it as good as it should be, is it where it should be? These are things that we need to work on. Forty percent of Belarus is covered by forest, and they preserve it. This is quite unique for Europe.

So this is positive change, and we must acknowledge it, because if you don't then I think what happens is that we politicize some very specific human rights issues, very important ones, which then become something that is perceived as being used, in which case the response is going to be transactional. OK, so you want me to do this? Fine, what are you going to give me in return, right? And so one of the things I've really tried to do is to depoliticize these issues, these very important issues, on the whole range of human rights. So, give credit where it's due because there are some very good things that have happened in that country, and then let's work on those things that still need to be worked on.

Acknowledging that it is a young country, but young countries have gone further in some cases. So that's not an excuse. And old countries haven't even caught up in some cases. This is not an excuse, because Belarusians have the capacity. I mean, they're amazingly intelligent, sophisticated people. So that's not what's holding them back, right? It's the issue of systemic change. And let me, on the issue of systemic change, just also mention, since Pavel mentioned the high level advisory rule of law group, that was my creation. I co-chaired this high level rule of law group with the deputy head of the presidential administration, the minister of justice, the EU head of delegation.

Now, why did we do this? We did this because I wanted to find a way to bring those institutions that don't have contact typically with the international community to the table to talk about the issues that we're talking about now. But if you say human rights, they always say, oh, go to the Foreign Ministry, right? So I went and said to the minister of justice, listen, let's talk about access to justice and obtaining legal remedies for people, especially who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. One of the people meeting said, oh, that's the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Why don't you go talk to them? And I said, really? But it is access to justice. And the minister of justice said, no, no, no, no. That is my ministry. That is justice.

So taking this thing, that human rights is the domain of a few politicians, which must be dealt with by only the foreign ministry, is a very important shift. And if you want it to be systematic and sustainable, we've got to make sure that we bring the whole of government and the whole of society together. Now, here is another challenge. I mean, while we're working through this it's really important that the range of civil society stakeholders are at the table. This is a very big challenge because, as you know, at the moment there is this real issue—are they registered organizations? Are they not? And if they're not registered organizations, do they even exist? And if they don't exist, why should we talk to them?

Well, they do exist and they have ideas and opinions. It's just the question of how to make it constructive. And so one of the things that we're working very hard on is to try to create a safe space where people can talk constructively to each other and creatively. And so it's a big project that we're about to launch with the EU just to do that, to build capacities of people on both sides of the divide to be able to listen and talk to each other.

And the last thing is on the national human rights action plan, which is also one of those things I worked really hard on behind the scenes. Look, action plans are action plans. You can do action plans for whatever you want and have no action, right? But it was a start, because, as I said, from being told not to mention human rights, it has become something of a degree of national pride. Now, the challenge is to make it operational.

I mean, we've been discussing this in Minsk. It is very important, because one can look at that action plan and say, well, it doesn't actually include all of the things that we want. It's very important to note that the human rights defenders in Minsk are very supportive of operationalizing this plan. So it's very important that we, as foreigners, understand that if Belarusians on both sides want this, let's help them to not just have it as a piece of paper, but to make it something real.

Mr. RAULAND. I have a question I want to get in before we reach the end of our briefing, on U.S. assistance. All three of you represent organizations that conduct programs in Belarus. You understand the importance of having the right resources to be able to get your job done. The Trump Administration's budget calls for cuts of over 30 percent to the Department of State and USAID. And that includes zeroing out foreign assistance to Belarus. So what I'd like to ask you is, recognizing the previous levels of assistance has been relatively modest—7 [million dollars] to \$8 million a year for Belarus—what would that kind of a change have in terms of impact on the things we want to do in Belarus? How would it affect the ability of the U.S. Government to achieve its goals?

Mr. NIX. Sure, I'll be happy to take that. Well, first and foremost, yes, for IRI we are funded primarily through USAID in Belarus. And those funds are very consequential and important to the work that we do there. Obviously, we want to see it continue. We think that for Belarus an expansion or an increase in funding would be in order, given the opportunities that we see there, if we are funded to do this important work.

With regard to the issue of potential cuts, again, I think we have to remind ourselves that we have a process. And the submission of a presidential budget doesn't necessarily mean that that will be the end result. And I think you've seen the public comments—the very public comments made by our Chairman, Senator John McCain, by Senator Graham and many, many others about their viewpoint with regard to cutting this particular type of funding, and very, very strong support for democracy work in this part of the world, particularly the Eastern Partnership countries of Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Belarus. So our hope is that the thinking in Congress prevails, and that the important work that we're doing in those countries continues at the same level—we hope, actually, an increase in funding.

Mr. RAULAND. Any thoughts on that, Katie?

Ms. FOX. Thank you. An interesting and timely question, of course. Yes, I agree with everything Steve has said. We're in a budget process. But hypothetically the elimination of all budgetary USG support for our programs in Belarus would decimate them. I think it would be incredibly short-sighted. Our leader, Madeleine Albright—Secretary Albright, and also Ken Wollack, have also testified to this effect, that it would be contrary to U.S. interests, including its hard national security interests, to cut democratic assistance like that, for democracy and human rights building.

I wanted, just in the case of Belarus, to add one more thing; that there's no doubt that if the U.S. would disengage completely from Belarus that the void could be filled by a different kind of aid. There is a Russian Government department called—I'm going to mispronounce it—Rossotrudnichestvo. There's a superficial similarity to USAID. It has already set up shop in Belarus, in Minsk, and in the regions, and is doing a number of aid and cultural and scientific-type projects there. I think that's how that void would be filled.

Mr. SAMARASINHA. Scott, maybe I could also add, because I worked closely with USAID in my early years in Belarus. I also co-chaired the—gosh, I co-chaired so many things I've forgotten now—but I also co-chaired the Council on International Technical Assistance, with the first deputy prime minister of Belarus. And USAID is part of it. So are the Russians, the EU, and then of course a number of government ministers. The largest donors at the moment are—that we know of, let's put it this way—[laughs]—are the EU and Sweden, as a bilateral donor. Russia is funding a number of U.N. agencies in Belarus as well, but is still not quite at the levels of the EU or Sweden.

Now, the important thing is this: I remember once President Lukashenko said, I believe it was to Bloomberg but I may be wrong, said something about you've all focused on Lukashenko but you've forgot that there are nine and a half other million people in this country. And whatever you may think of that particular statement, I think it's really important that there are women who are victims of violence. There are women who are being trafficked. There are rural, elderly, poor without services. There are 540,000 people with disabilities. These are the people who desperately need help.

And if we can work—not just to hand out grants, because that's not sustainable, right—but while we are helping and passing out those grants, we are giving them new skills, we are eliminating barriers—social, physical, financial, policy barriers, legal barriers. This is human rights. This is making a difference in people's lives, without waiting for Belarus to turn 100 years, right? So I think it's really quite facetious to say we want to promote human rights in Belarus but we're going to pull out the funding. I mean, I would not recommend that at all.

Finally, let me also add, before I was coming here I was talking to another good friend of mine, who Scott also knows, happens to formerly be the president's economic advisor. And I said, Kiryl, I am going to Washington—what is your view on engagement? You know, before he left—he's now the ambassador in China for Belarus—so he's doing engagement of a different kind, in a different direction, I suppose.

But he gave me a present. And he held it up like this. And it was a rock. And I said, well, that's great. You're giving me—I mean, sticks and stones, what is this? You're giving me a stone. And then he turned it around, and on the other side of the rock—I keep this on my desk, I think it's the best present I've received in my five years there—on the other side of the rock, there was a man sitting inside the rock. The rock had been broken open and there was a man sitting inside the rock. And he said, this is you. And I said, what does that mean? He said, you came to Belarus and you find a way. And there you are, you broke open the rock.

Now, I said, that's very flattering, thank you very much. Why was I able to do that? Because of people like him who helped me to understand how to navigate what is a very complex place. And why did he help me? Because he was here on a Fulbright scholarship, and it had opened his mind in terms of how to engage. So if you disengage, if you cut the funding, then don't expect positive change in the directions that we want positive change.

Mr. RAULAND. I'm tempted to wrap things up right there. That's such a nice thought to have us close on. However, I do see we have a question back there. So please go ahead.

QUESTIONER. Thank you so much for this informative panel. My name is Jasmine Cameron. I work for Justice International. We work on human rights and supporting human rights defenders and lawyers, including in Belarus as well.

Do you have any advice on engaging with Belarus for small-scale international NGOs? As we've seen in the past, especially after the March events, there are still restrictions in civil society in terms of engagement from inside, and we've noticed that in our work we have challenges. So, moving forward, do you have any practical advice on how to continue engaging civil society, while we see that there are some changes taking place? I would love to hear that.

Mr. RAULAND. Anybody in particular?

Mr. NIX. Sure, I'll go.

First of all, thank you for the question and thank you for the service that you provide. The promotion and protection of human rights in Belarus is very critical to its potential development.

I would just say this: My advice and counsel is keep doing what you're doing. As I stated in my testimony, and then Katie as well, there have been a number of very important events that took place this year in Belarus that showed that if people united on a common cause, on a difference that they had with government policy, they can be successful. The government will have to listen to them, if they unify and gather in substantial numbers. And again, the March demonstration—the spring demonstrations really, really portrayed this, that if people speak out the government will listen. And that's an important lesson for people in communities. It's an important lesson for human rights organizations to really learn from this.

We think there's the potential for other things. And maybe we can even get a change in the election code before the local elections, for an example. Maybe we can get Havary Pravdu registered as a political party. There are a number of issues that are out there that if people really, really concentrate and force the government to listen that they can affect change. So my advice and council, keep your voices. Make sure that the government hears them. Unite. And make it very clear what the demands are. Make it clear to the government what you are expecting the government to do, and you'll be successful.

Mr. RAULAND. Anything you care to add, Katie?

Ms. FOX. Steve said it all.

Mr. SAMARASINHA. Let me add another perspective on it. I mean, I think it's very important for you to keep doing what you're doing, and to keep saying what you're saying because, like I said, there's nothing more important than being consistent and principled in your message. At the same time, I think it is also important to consider multiple ways of engaging as civil society. And it's really important for all of us also to keep emphasizing to the authorities the need for them to find multiple ways of engagement, too. So you will see, for instance, the first NGO government engagement on human rights happened my first year. It was related to the universal periodic review reports, and it was in November of 2013.

It was very difficult, trust me. And I can remember, even during the coffee breaks, I was talking to both sides saying guys, please, don't shout at each other, because if you do there will not be another one. And we managed to have a dialogue. And so it was a little bit easier five months later, because now people knew each other a little bit more. And now it actually happens on a fairly regular basis. That's not enough, of course, because that conversation must lead to positive action, concrete action, measurable action. For the first time, we have a human rights NGO in that international technical assistance

coordination council that I mentioned. By decree, the Helsinki Committee is a member of that high-level council.

Mr. RAULAND. The Belarus Helsinki Committee, right?

Mr. SAMARASINHA. The Belarus Helsinki Committee, I'm sorry. [Laughter.] Yes, the Belarus Helsinki Committee, which is an NGO, and it's a recognized and credible human rights NGO. An NGO that represents the rights of disabilities is part of that council. In the national human rights action plan, as per the universal periodic recommendations, Belarus accepted that they would bring in civil society to engage in all these human rights issues. And one of the things I have been advocating very strongly for is to have a council, like to have these public advisory councils, but have a council that supports and helps to implement and monitors the implementation of this human rights action plan. Right now, I co-chair a group of ambassadors—12 ambassadors with the EU and the deputy foreign minister. But we need civil society. We need the NGOs. So this is one thing.

The second—and the Belarus Helsinki Committee was also appointed to this prisons inspection public advisory council just last week. You know, this is a huge shift. It's not going to change the world, but it is a huge shift. So you can find other ways to engage.

But there is one important challenge here which I'm working very hard to address, hopefully before my time is up, is the issue of unregistered organizations, because if you're an unregistered organization you could still be an expert in the field. And so my argument is why not—let's have this conversation. If you don't want to recognize the unregistered organizations as organization, let's bring them in as experts on whatever issue it is that we're discussing. So I'm cautiously optimistic that before the end of the year we can achieve that too.

Mr. RAULAND. On that cautiously optimistic note, I think we'll now wrap things up. I'd like to thank the panel, all of you, for your interesting, thought-provoking presentations, the audience for your interest and your questions on the various topics that were raised today. For any of you, either here in the audience or on Facebook Live, who would like to come back to today's briefing, and share it with friends and colleagues interested in the topic, we always post our transcripts on our website. Let me spell that out for you, [www.csce](http://www.csce.gov)—which stands for Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe—dot-gov.

So one more time, www.csce.gov. You'll be able to find the transcript there hopefully by Monday.

Thank you once again and I hope you find a way to stay cool the rest of the day today. [Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 11:44 a.m., the briefing ended.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENT OF STEPHEN B. NIX, EURASIA DIVISION DIRECTOR, INTERNATIONAL
REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

I wish to commend Co-Chairs Senator Wicker and Representative Smith and the Ranking members Senator Cardin and Representative Hastings for their leadership of this Commission and thank them for conducting this event and inviting me to provide a brief on an extremely important part of the world. Due to its economic dependence and military cooperation with Russia and its proximity to three EU and NATO countries, Belarus is of great strategic and security interest to the United States—especially now as the U.S. has increased its military presence in Central Europe and the Baltics. It is the last dictatorship in Europe and cannot continue in its current form. Because of that, this Commission’s continued focus on Belarus is more important than ever.

I am the Eurasia Director for the International Republican Institute (IRI), a non-profit, nonpartisan democracy assistance organization that is active in more than 80 countries around the world. We trace our roots back to President Reagan and his unshakeable belief that, “Liberty is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable right of all mankind.” There are not many places around the world that this message applies more than Belarus.

While we applaud Belarus’ expressed interest in engagement, we have seen little concrete action taken on the issues the United States has offered in terms of engagement. These issues include amending the election code, registering political parties and halting the practice of arresting citizens for political activities. In reality, democratic reforms in Belarus—including economic freedoms—remain stagnant and rarely move beyond the level of roundtables or diplomatic conversations. As evidenced most recently, raids of human rights defenders’ offices and mass detention of opposition activists like we saw in March and February of this year, still occur.

The democratic record in Belarus is dark and closed. If we look at the level of freedoms enjoyed by the citizens of Belarus, very little has changed in the last few years. The OSCE has consistently noted elections are undemocratic and neither free nor fair. Both parliamentarians and local officials are controlled by Lukashenka’s government. The judiciary is not independent and heavily relies on government dictates for decisions. The most recent Freedom House *Freedom in the World* Report classifies Belarus as “Not Free,” largely due to human rights violations and incursions upon media freedoms. The government owns Belarus’ single internet service provider and often blocks independent media sites, as it did during tax protests on March 25 of this year. Seventy percent of the economy is state-owned and centrally planned. Transparency International’s *Corruption Perception Index of 2016* puts Belarus at a distant rating of 79.

However, citizens finding themselves left behind by Lukashenka’s rule have begun to organize and act. This citizen participation, which has included high profile protests

as well as more locally-focused activism, gives hope for progress as citizens find small successes by working together.

Current Context

At the beginning of this year, those Belarusian citizens unable to secure jobs began receiving notices that they owed the equivalent of \$250 in taxes for being unemployed. This “unemployment tax,” also referred to as the “Tax on Social Parasites,” was designed to penalize those who consume social services but do not contribute to government coffers through taxes. Onerous taxation on those worst off in society spread discontent throughout the nation and small pockets of protesting communities began to form. They eventually developed into large citizen-led protests in five major cities throughout February and March.

Actions were taken to deter these demonstrations. In advance of the largest protest—organized on March 25—authorities preemptively detained many leaders of the pro-democracy opposition. Also, in an effort to further deter participation on March 25, schools and universities held classes and state employees were required to report to work despite it being a Saturday.

Police and security forces also aggressively attacked these protests, causing injuries to hundreds. More than 1,000 opposition demonstrators, political and civil society activists and community leaders were arrested.

Following the protests and the subsequent security crackdown, the official rhetoric of Lukashenka shifted. In previous years, he had ridiculed the opposition, claiming they were bankrupt of ideas—framing their work not as dangerous, but as laughable. However, with the recent crackdown and arrests, he has returned to portraying them as a “fifth column,” manipulated by Western funding with the aim of destabilizing Belarus. He further claimed that funding and even weapons were being provided by Lithuania and Poland to the enemies of stability inside Belarus. Over a dozen political opposition and civil society activists were arrested and held for belonging to the “White Legion”—an organization police alleged to exist to overthrow the state. No evidence of this existed, and those detained were held until just before the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly held in Minsk this July, then released due to lack of evidence.

The nationwide protests showed a fracturing in society. Average citizens, not associated with the opposition or politics, marched against what they saw as a step too far by the state in shifting responsibility for bad decisions onto the public. Many of the protestors—middle-aged working class residents of regional cities—are the very people that independent polling shows have in the past supported Lukashenka. Their participation in these protests is indicative of a growing feeling of betrayal and economic desperation.

Members of pro-democracy parties had been warning of the unemployment tax for over a year. In addition, they have been advocating local authorities to be more transparent in decision-making and budget allocation, and mobilizing communities over better services. By the time community residents were faced with an unemployment tax early this year, the opposition activists were proven correct and gained credibility as activists loyal to the community—not a “fifth column,” or Western puppets or any other moniker thrown by Lukashenka. Since the protests, community activists have built on the level of citizen engagement and have driven successful initiatives on everything from road repair to rights awareness for small business owners to municipal budget transparency.

Successes and Opportunities within the Pro-Democracy Opposition

Regarding the pro-democratic opposition, recent strides have been made. I want to discuss two groups as examples. The first is the United Civic Party, which succeeded in having one of its members, Anna Konopatskaya, be elected to parliament in 2016. The 2016 elections were neither free nor fair, and the Parliament of Belarus is under heavy executive control. While being the lone opposition voice in a largely symbolic parliament does not carry political influence, Konopatskaya has provided insight into how the state monolith operates. She has also used her position to travel to the regions in an effort to connect citizens to the processes that govern them. A successful businesswoman herself, she has been a critical voice not only on economic development issues, but also electoral reform.

The other example is *Govori Pravdu*, a citizen action group which translates to Tell the Truth. In 2015, the organization's leader Tatsiana Karatkevich challenged Lukashenka as the only opposition candidate in the presidential election. While the official election result listed Mrs. Karatkevich as receiving only 4.44 percent, independent polling shows nearly 20 percent of voters supported her candidacy. The same polling shows Lukashenka's result as only 51 percent—still a mandate, but significantly lower than the Belarus Election Commission asserted. Since the campaign, Karatkevich has utilized her strong name recognition by traveling and advocating for regional small business owners, urging municipal officials and local Ministry officials to meet with citizen groups, and raising awareness of social service problems.

These two women represent change in the opaque, authoritarian Belarus. Through years of activism they have won small community-level victories, and expanded their influence to nationwide recognition. They continue to utilize opportunities to civically activate citizens and push government authorities to meet citizens and hear their demands. But there are dozens more like them throughout the regions of Belarus. Belarusians have discovered the power of standing together, the power of uniting to drive change. More and more people are finding the courage to stand up for a better life and opposition activists have successfully brought citizens together. Further fostering this growing civic activity in Belarus requires a localized approach—and next year's municipal elections, preliminarily planned for February 2018, provide an important opportunity for change in Belarus.

Economic Situation

Polls conducted in Belarus show the top five concerns and priorities of the public to be economic in nature: rising prices, decreasing salaries, low standard of living, lack of local economic development and unemployment. This trend has held over the last decade. Despite some changes or positive improvement in indicators like GDP, citizens feel negative, rather than positive trends. Independent polling shows that over 60 percent of Belarusians have little or no savings, and are living paycheck to paycheck.

Belarus still relies on central planning with heavy state interference in at least 70 percent of the economy. Price controls, minimum production quotas for state-owned industry and collectivized agriculture, and coercive labor regulations which have been classified as forced labor by the U.S. State Department have placed burdens on average citizens and resulted in distorted markets designed to please the head of state rather than customers or workers.

Due to a reform-minded Economy Ministry, Belarus continues to rise in the World Bank's *Doing Business* report—ranking 37th in 2017. However, as the majority of decisions, reforms and legislative actions depend on the whims of Lukashenka as head of state, the pace of reforms is likely to be glacial. Average citizens will not feel the benefits of these reforms, but do feel the cut in social services, the burden of additional fees and taxes and the decline in state owned enterprises. A telling example is the factory in Mozyr which can only afford to run its machinery and pay its staff from 8:00 am to 8:45 am every weekday.

IT has become the fastest growing sector of the economy with 20 percent growth annually and recently Lukashenka has announced radical measures for further development of the IT sector. However, recent arrests of IT CEOs and managers, as well as high taxes and regulations, deter investment in this sphere. Conducting business in Belarus almost always involves arrangements with the regime. Many IT entrepreneurs prefer to leave Belarus and register their companies abroad to minimize risk of arrest and intimidation.

Lukashenka has often used economic populism to curry public favor during election periods. As Lukashenka's government becomes cash-poor, such spikes in social welfare spending will no longer be possible. Thus, he will rely on further disempowering citizens and falsifying elections to maintain power, or using force to keep citizens away from civic or political participation.

The country stands in need of a bailout worth billions of dollars. Belarus must make fundamental, systemic economic reforms if it is to recover from its current situation. The regime now faces a dilemma: to recover economically, the government has to dramatically change its current economic model, which is the foundation of its political control over the country. Economic reform would mean giving up political control.

Dependence on Russia

Because of failures intrinsic in Lukashenka's central planning and authoritarian control over Belarus' economy, he has always been dependent on Russian subsidies in order to maintain stability. Russia aids Belarus through low-interest loans and preferential pricing of raw materials and energy.

Due to Russian subsidies, Belarus has the cheapest energy prices in the region besides Russia itself. But this has come at the cost of control over infrastructure. In 2011, Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom assumed full ownership of Beltransgaz, the Belarusian energy provider. Russia also controls Belarus's many oil refineries as well as exercises major influence in Belarus' electricity sector.

Russia further has influence over Belarus through the Eurasian Economic Union and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). A new and disturbing area of influence is the construction of the Astravets nuclear power facility—with no allowance for international safety observers despite two accidents already during construction.

This September, Belarus will host the joint Russian-Belarusian *ZAPAD* military exercises. Thousands of troops—as well as twenty-five Russian aircraft—will work to, “maintain security of the Union State, its preparedness for repulsing acts of aggression and to advance command and control organizations' actions compatibility and units' training standards.” These troops will be just miles from the borders of the EU and NATO. Belarus already hosts Russian communications and radar stations.

There are signs that Belarus wishes to maintain its sovereignty in the face of Russian influence. Lukashenka has repeatedly dismissed Russia's proposal for a base on Belarusian soil. When Russia began to increase pressure for military exercises during the Ukraine crisis, Belarus engaged in military exercises with China instead. When Russia began using energy prices to pressure Lukashenka, Belarus struck energy deals with Venezuela and Azerbaijan.

One view is that Russia is taking advantage of Belarus' poor economic model, and swallowing Belarus' strategic assets while encouraging more dependency. For Belarus, this results in a creeping loss of sovereignty. Another view is that Belarus is simply maneuvering between two great powers (Russia and the West) and trying to find the best deal. However, the level of economic dependence, the current level of military cooperation and integration and the high level of social sympathy with the Kremlin position due to years of propaganda and pro-Russian media make change unlikely. Russia will continue to curtail Belarusian sovereignty as the price for economic bailouts. Only swift economic and democratic reforms will spur growth, attract investment and decentralize power to the point where Russia's influence is curbed.

Next Steps

The parliamentary and reform work of Anna Konopatskaya, the national and regional outreach by Tatsiana Karatkevich and the community-level work of hundreds of activists shows that the citizens of Belarus, whether previously active or not, are looking for ways to improve their lives and neighborhoods. Segments of the entire population have become active and have protested, not merely the political opposition.

In a 2016 poll, 90 percent of respondents stated they had not participated in any social activity aimed at solving local problems. Their reasons? They don't believe it would make a difference, they had never been invited to do so and they did not know how. Future change depends on addressing these concerns.

The recent protest wave, which was widely covered in the media and discussed among the population, drew different sectors of society to the street, and which led to Lukashenka's suspending the unpopular unemployment tax, demonstrates that citizens have begun to change their minds and have discovered the power of standing together, the power in uniting to drive change. Belarusians' participation in change-oriented social activity is currently trending up as more and more people are finding the courage to stand up for a better life.

The upcoming municipal elections in early 2018 provide an important opportunity for further change in Belarus. Local governments deal with everyday issues which directly impact citizens and are charged with delivering basic services citizens rely on. A free and fair local election would result in local concerns receiving attention from citizens demanding solutions. However, the current patronage-driven system rewards candidates for political loyalty, not innovation. Elected leaders become defenders of the system, rather than demanding results and serving their constituents.

Should the government in Belarus allow free and fair elections in 2018, we would see a number of victories by the political opposition. We would also see a number of concerned citizens able to access resources to improve their communities. Perhaps most importantly, residents would see the reality of the system and what reforms need to be made to allow them liberty and prosperity.

The question remains: What is the United States' position with regard to the Lukashenka regime and toward the Belarusian pro-democracy opposition? The answer lies with the people of Belarus—who deserve to be the true decision-makers and power holders. U.S. assistance should be directed toward increasing the effectiveness and capacity of democratic political parties and activists inside the country first and foremost. Particularly, at community-level initiatives and developments. These grassroots activists are the ones who provide a decentralized and democratic alternative to Lukashenka and his authoritarian rule. Freedom and democracy should be the common cause uniting the European Union and U.S. with those inside Belarus who are fighting for a more prosperous future and a more democratic country.

IRI IN BELARUS

IRI has assisted pro-democratic forces in Belarus in their struggle for democratic change since 1997 through political party strengthening, coalition building and youth leadership development programming. These programs are the foundation of IRI's mission to support democratic organizations and help their leaders and activists prepare for public policy roles in a future democratic Belarus.

Responding to developing trends in the country and nationwide discontent over the dismal economy, IRI shifted its programmatic focus in the last few years to fostering community-level activism. IRI firmly believes that the future development of Belarus depends on unleashing the potential of its citizens—allowing people to speak, assemble and earn a living in the way they see fit.

For this reason, IRI continues to provide communication training, campaign training, project management consultation and community mobilization training in order to assist grassroots activists in their work with colleagues and neighbors to improve their lives at every level.

IRI also works to support increased political participation of youth in Belarus, which represent the future of the country. Many in this generation, born after the fall of the Soviet Union and during Lukashenka's over two-decade long hold on power, see their country falling behind regional neighbors who have made great strides in development. Exposure to ideas and practices in democracy is a key step in providing context for these future leaders.

IRI will continue to monitor the limited democratic space in Belarus and work with the opposition to find ways to continue their struggle for democratic change in Belarus.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF KATHERINE FOX, DEPUTY REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR EURASIA
PROGRAMS, NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Commission, for holding this briefing on the ways the international community can best engage Belarus to encourage progress on human rights and democracy. Geographically in the heart of Europe and bordering the European Union (EU) and NATO, Belarus is an important country in the Eurasia region that can be overshadowed by its larger neighbors.

In accordance with the Copenhagen Document of the OSCE, which affirms the right of citizens to “receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers,” NDI has been exchanging ideas with—and responding to requests for advice from—democratic parties and civil society in Belarus since 2000. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this discussion in the wake of the OSCE’s parliamentary assembly in Minsk.

Supporting democracy and human rights in Belarus is the right thing to do. It is also consistent with the OSCE’s values and commitments. But these are not the only reasons it’s important. As Tom Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment points out, “In most of the dozens of countries where the United States is employing diplomatic, economic, and assistance measures to support potential or struggling democratic transitions—from Cambodia, Indonesia, and Mongolia to El Salvador, Kenya, Nigeria, and Venezuela—such efforts align closely with and serve a critical array of unquestionably hard interests. These include limiting the strategic reach of the United States’ autocratic rivals, fighting terrorism, reducing international drug trafficking, and undercutting drivers of massive refugee flows.” In other words, it is in our own national interest to ensure that Belarusians feel their interests, rights and dignity are being respected.

Belarus is not a free or democratic society. Democratic parties and civil society groups face many barriers to organizing, and individuals risk arrest for exercising basic rights of speech and assembly. As the OSCE pointed out after the 2016 parliamentary elections, Belarus’s “legal framework does not adequately guarantee the conduct of elections in line with OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards.” Signs do not point to a dramatic democratic breakthrough in Belarus in the near future. However, there are new opportunities to contribute to the foundations of a more democratic system—as envisioned in the Copenhagen Document—with foreign assistance as well as diplomacy. While the government and president still control most aspects of Belarusian political and economic life, stifling independent activism, there are modest openings that can be leveraged to make broader democratic gains more attainable in the long run.

First, there is growing evidence that the Belarusian government is not monolithic. The government allowed two opposition members to claim seats in 2016 parliamentary elections that were otherwise seriously flawed. Despite the limitations of these positions, the two members of parliament have found support from colleagues for opening up the parliament through public hearings and meetings with voters. In addition, there are discussions underway between opposition parties outside the parliament and government representatives on reforms in health care, Belarusian language education, and policies to curb drug trafficking and alcohol abuse. When massive protests broke out last March over the imposition of a new tax on the unemployed, the government reacted with arrests. But it also made some concessions to a movement of unprecedented size that had broad grassroots support and was present throughout the regions. The government offered meetings

with citizens to explain the tax and it narrowed the scope of those affected. These developments, however humble, suggest that there may be room for citizens to influence some types of policies.

Second, the movement against the so-called “parasite tax” on the unemployed illustrates how democratic parties have grown and become more effective. The opposition parties, which have previously been faulted for inadequate attention to the problems of ordinary Belarusians, recognized the importance of the tax issue long before protests broke out. The parties held meetings with voters, and campaigned on the tax issue in parliamentary elections. These parties have made significant strides in several areas. As the parasite tax case indicates, they are communicating with the public more regularly, both during and between election periods. In the most recent elections, they adopted more professional organizing practices and refrained from public attacks against other democratic parties. And finally, party coalitions that existed only “on paper” have been replaced by smaller, more pragmatic and genuine coalitions of parties with shared ideologies. One such example is the Center Right Coalition, composed of three parties and movements. These parties are now in a position to better represent citizens’ interests in the political sphere.

A third modest opening is the shifting aspirations of Belarusians themselves. Analysis of independent polling results from the 2015 presidential campaign suggests that the sole democratic candidate, Tatiana Korotkevich, gained backing from voters who were not previously supporters of the opposition. Her message of “peaceful change” resonated particularly with young, urban Belarusians, and with women more broadly. This trend suggests that the electorate for democratic reforms may be expanding.

As NDI Chairman Madeleine Albright noted at a recent Senate Appropriations Committee hearing, “democracy can produce the kind of stability that lasts, a stability built on the firm ground of mutual commitments and consent. This differs from the illusion of order that can be maintained only as long as dissent is silenced; the kind of order that may last for decades and yet still disappear overnight.”

In the case of Belarus, the international community cannot afford the ‘illusion of order’ in a country in the middle of Europe, between Russia and the EU. If the international democratic community disengages, there is little doubt that the void will be filled by illiberal and authoritarian forces. In fact, a Russian government department which bears a superficial similarity to USAID, and is known as RosSotrudnichestvo (Russian Cooperation), has set up shop in the Belarusian regions.

Belarusians are consumers of the propaganda and disinformation that permeates the Russian language information space. Disinformation in politics represents a critical threat to democracy. It spreads cynicism, distorts political processes and interferes with citizens’ ability to make sound political decisions. Disinformation from foreign sources designed to influence political outcomes constitutes a violation of sovereignty. In a study by an independent Belarusian pollster, Russian mass media enjoyed more trust than either Belarusian state or independent media.¹ Alternative sources of information for Belarusians, such as Warsaw-based Belsat and the independent internet news portal Tut.by, become more and more essential as the effects of Russian disinformation expand.

With this backdrop in mind, following are thoughts on future engagement in Belarus.

¹ <https://news.tut.by/economics/544272.html>

Diplomacy, including that of multilateral groups like the OSCE, will be most effective if it:

- Continues dialogue and engagement, but prioritizes outreach to genuine civil society groups and independent parties. These non-governmental activists should be included in the agenda of every visit.
- Focuses on systematic changes as conditions for greater engagement with the Belarusian government. There is great humanitarian value in prisoner releases, but of course, new prisoners can always be taken and held as bargaining chips. Systematic changes—such as allowing the registration of parties, removing the penalties for assemblies and other legitimate political activities, and reforming the electoral code to ensure real competition—would help to lay building blocks for longer-term, sustainable progress toward democratic reforms.
- Emphasizes changes to the electoral system recommended by the OSCE as well as independent monitoring groups such as the Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections and the Right to Choose coalition, composed of parties and civic groups. These include opposition representation on precinct election commissions, full access for political party and nonpartisan election monitors to observe and report on the vote counting and tabulation processes.

Let me be clear, these efforts are not designed to influence electoral outcomes. They are simply a way to help advance peaceful participation in an otherwise restrictive political environment.

Outside *assistance* should:

- Help democratic parties and civic groups take advantage of current, albeit limited, political space—and corresponding opportunities for civic participation—to grow. It should provide support to enable them to attract new supporters, present alternative ideas, identify and reach out to youth and other potentially democratic groups.
- Treat information warfare like the urgent international security threat that it is. This means, among other things supporting the few but vital sources of independent information such as Tut.by, or ePramova. ePramova, an online platform for open discussion and debate started by NDI, has reached an average of 700,000 Belarusians each month. Millions more can watch ePramova’s politically themed content on television, via a partnership with Belsat. “Each of Us,” a talk show filmed in Belarus with a studio audience, is showcasing instances of successful citizen activism on everyday issues. Projects like these are minor streams in a larger information flow, yet are invaluable as a source of accurate information on political life and citizen engagement.

A Belarusian democratic leader recently said the following: “We believe the presence of opposition in government and dialogue will bring democracy, social stability and a better life for Belarusians. We ask the U.S. to support these goals by maintaining a dialogue with both opposition and government and with aid programs that give civil society, independent media and democratic movements inspiration and vision. With this we can bring peaceful changes for our country.”



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