



**STATEMENT OF KENNETH WOLLACK, PRESIDENT**

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**Before the**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN AFFAIRS  
OF THE UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS**

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**HEARING ON BELARUS**

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate this opportunity to appear on behalf of the National Democratic Institute before the Subcommittee on the current situation in Belarus.

The continuing Belarusian crackdown on democracy activists that began on December 19 is tragic and extreme. It is deeper, wider and more violent than any since the late 1990s. But it is not an exceptional act or a break with the past, rather it is consistent with the pattern that the Lukashenko regime first established in the 1990s and has followed ever since. The regime may adjust its tactics over time – sometimes the government is more responsive to the international community, sometimes less so – but the strategy remains one of holding onto power at all costs.

Although Belarus conducts regular elections, they are empty exercises, at best. Each has failed to meet minimum international standards; each has violated the country's commitments as a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The Lukashenko regime has consistently demonstrated that it will not tolerate meaningful dissent or opposition; and it has also sought to suppress independent voices

and organizations. It was four years ago, for example, that the government forcibly disbanded Partnership, a nonpartisan election monitoring group that was working with NDI assistance and in accordance with OSCE principles. Its offices were closed, its equipment confiscated, and its leaders arrested and imprisoned, along with NDI's resident representative, for six months or more.

In testimony before Senator Cardin and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe in advance of the 2008 parliamentary elections, NDI noted that "most forms of independent political activity, including [civic] and political party organizing, have been repressed." We cited criminalization of political activity through denial of registration to all but the most pro-governmental organizations, closure of media outlets and persecution of journalists.

Remarkably, the situation today has worsened. We are witnessing a systematic and far reaching roundup of journalists, civic and party leaders, and ordinary citizens, some identified from KGB videos of peaceful post election protests. Mr. Lukashenko's claim that no more "senseless democracy" will be tolerated in Belarus makes clear his intention to decimate the democratic opposition and independent civic groups.

Before December 19, reasonable people might have differed about the relative merits of "carrots versus sticks" approaches in dealing with Belarus. There were glimmers of liberalization that led some to hope that Mr. Lukashenko could be coaxed into constructive cooperation with the trans-Atlantic community. But these changes proved illusory. In addition, the Belarusian economy is struggling and there is evidence from a variety of opinion polls that Mr. Lukashenko's popularity is sinking. His capacity to rule through a so-called social compact is thus diminished. The main tool he has left is repression. The very nature of the Belarusian regime has made it virtually immune to entreaties from its democratic neighbors. Any international response to the current crackdown must be shaped by that fundamental point. Irrespective of its erratic moves toward the East or the West, the regime's disrespect for the rights of its citizens remains a constant.

Government-to-government actions and stiff consequences should, of course, be the front line of the international response to these events, and coordination within the Euro-Atlantic community will be essential. In this context, we commend bipartisan international outreach efforts such as the recent Senate letter to European Union High Representative Ashton.

Last year, we witnessed failed elections in such places as Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Burma, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, and Haiti. Sadly, Belarus was the latest addition to this group. At the same time, there was evidence that the international community has the capacity to react decisively. This has been most evident in Cote d'Ivoire, where the U.S., Europe, the African Union (AU) and the United Nations ultimately united behind a single message, a strong diplomatic response, and targeted political and economic sanctions. Moreover, Cote d'Ivoire was expelled from the AU and the Economic Community of West African States. The outcome of this standoff remains uncertain, but the forthright international defense of fundamental political rights sends an important message to the people of Cote d'Ivoire.

Belarus is of course a member of the OSCE, which was founded on democratic principles. Ironically, though, it was Mr. Lukashenko who expelled the OSCE Mission from Belarus. The OSCE might consider finding a suitably reciprocal mechanism to censure this flagrant violation of its core values. Likewise, it is difficult to imagine Belarus remaining a participant in good standing of the European Union's Eastern Partnership initiative.

At the same time, our *assistance* should focus on the citizens of Belarus – on defending, supporting and expanding their own aspirations for democratic reforms.

The slight liberalization in the pre-election period provided a glimpse of those aspirations and of the grassroots democratic potential in Belarus. Opposition leaders took advantage of the narrow opening to create a political environment that genuinely engaged and

activated people. Democratic candidates, when they were briefly allowed to campaign, found volunteers to carry and sign their petitions in numbers far exceeding expectations. On election night, thousands of ordinary Belarusians imbued with a new interest in politics flocked to the central square in Minsk, despite the very real threat of violence. The recent crackdown has touched and angered many previously uninvolved citizens, fueling increased support for the democratic movement. Since the election, political leaders have put aside differences to rally in support of political prisoners, forming multi-party organizations such as Solidarity and the Coordinating Council. Indeed, this swelling of popular mobilization, along with signs that the regime was losing popularity, is what seems to have triggered the regime's violent reaction on December 19.

Helping the hundreds who remain in jail, their families and those who are still being hunted by the KGB must be our first priority. Almost as pressing is ensuring the continued existence of the democratic organizations they represent. With their leaders jailed, equipment confiscated and activists threatened, the survival of many political parties, civic groups and independent media outlets is in jeopardy. A third key priority is maintaining a broad array of avenues through which more Belarusians can become politically active. The citizens who signed petitions, gathered on the square, or were simply jarred out of complacency by the regime's repression must have ongoing communication links, organizations to join, projects to support, information to weigh, and opportunities for dialogue if any good is to follow from this tragedy.

As we consider democracy assistance going forward, we should bear in mind that there is no silver bullet, no magic program formula that will lift Belarus out of its current crisis and toward greater freedom. But there are certain basics that have proven their worth in situations like these around the world.

- First, the democrats inside Belarus need international attention. Vaclav Havel has spoken eloquently about how important outside voices were to dissidents behind the Iron Curtain – as a source of hope and proof that they were not alone. We need to stand in public solidarity with the Belarusians now under attack.

- Meetings with high-level visitors, such as those that took place recently with Senator Durbin and the State Department's Tom Melia, are invaluable. In these conditions, political neutrality would only translate into support for the regime.
- Second, the activists need practical assistance that is both responsive to their requests and sensitive to their own assessments of the risk.

Along these lines, there are a number of activities, including some that NDI and others are already conducting, that merit consideration:

- Helping political parties and civic organizations regroup, strengthen their structures and conduct activities that engage citizens in political life.
- Ensuring that political groups have access to reliable information about the values and concerns of the population.
- Ensuring that citizens have access to impartial information about the activities of both their government and the opposition.
- Assisting Belarusians to find a wide range of entry points into political life, from low-risk discussion groups and community development projects to high stakes advocacy on political rights or campaigning for office.

Our emphasis should not be on promoting individual politicians, but rather on supporting democratic demand through organizations representing genuine citizen interests.

We would also caution against making rigid distinctions between 'political' and 'non-political' organizations – so as to assist only the latter. Support should go to groups that are responding to and engaging citizens.

Even though Belarusian democrats bear no responsibility for the current crisis – on the contrary, they are its victims – nonetheless the responsibility for democratic progress

going forward falls to them. What can the opposition reasonably accomplish in the current harsh environment, assuming its activists receive adequate moral and practical support from the international community?

First, we should acknowledge that there are no quick fixes. Democracy assistance is a long-term process with an unpredictable timeline. The objective is to support democrats with networks, skills and bases of support so they can fill the political vacuum when openings occur.

Until then, the leaders of the Belarusian opposition can defend, expand and strengthen the popular aspirations for democratic change. They can present alternative visions for the future of Belarus. Regardless of what precipitates a political opening, only grassroots demand will ensure a democratic outcome.

December 19 was a serious setback for the Belarusian democratic forces. But I am confident that, with international solidarity, they will recover and perhaps re-emerge stronger. By continuing to invest in the aspirations of the Belarusian people, we will bring the country closer to its democratic potential. Moreover, we will find ourselves on the right side of history.

Thank you, Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee.

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