

Statement by Katherine Fox
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before the
Helsinki Commission
Engaging Belarus on Human Rights & Democracy
Friday, July 21, 2017

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.

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

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

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."