



U.S. AND LITHUANIAN INTERESTS IN PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS

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Earlier this year I made the relatively short drive by car from Vilnius to Minsk. Along the way I saw much that demonstrated the closeness of Lithuanian and Belarusian history – castles, towns and places associated with the common history of the Lithuanian and Belarusian peoples when they were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as well as buildings and monuments reflecting the Soviet past both nations endured. But when I arrived in Minsk I could tell I was in a very different country. Although the city is clean and the people dressed like those in any European capital, I could immediately sense the far slower pace of commercial life and vitality compared to Lithuania.

On the political side, however, the differences between these geographically and historically close neighbors are like night and day. Whereas Lithuania has moved rapidly since independence to become a full-fledged democracy with a vibrant market economy, rejecting the Soviet values and practices that had been imposed on it, Belarus has taken a vastly different course under the long leadership of its first and only president Aleksandr Lukashenko.

The country only a thirty kilometer drive from Vilnius appears to be drawing further away from the trends now in full bloom in Lithuania. The regime appears to glorify Belarus' Soviet past, rejecting Belarus' European roots and values and bombards the Belarusian people daily with self-serving propaganda while denying the Belarusian people free access to any alternative views. The economy remains largely in state hands as most economic decisions and all political discourse are controlled by one figure rather than a democratic society with independent institutions and an economy governed by the market. While the Belarusian economy has grown, largely because of high oil prices, that growth is clearly not sustainable over the long term. The Belarusian economy is becoming less compatible with the outside world

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even with its great neighbor and “union state” partner Russia. Frankly it is astonishing – and quite sad – to see such a society, such an economy and such a government in today’s Europe right next to the Lithuania’s democracy and burgeoning market economy.

One can discuss at length the reasons why this has come about, but it is clearly abnormal. Many Belarusians say so as well and wish their country could become a true democracy with a prosperous economy integrated into the broader Europe. Probably many more Belarusians would agree if only they were exposed to true information and not state propaganda. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said after she and the EU’s Javier Solana met with representatives of Belarusian civil society in Vilnius earlier this year, the Belarusian people deserve better. They deserve to choose freely their course and not be forced by fear and intimidation to accept the dictates of a regime that manipulates elections and restricts information along with everything else.

Although far away and possessing minimal trade and political ties with Belarus, the United States nevertheless has always remained committed to promoting a free, independent, sovereign and democratic Belarus. A democratic Belarus can be a force for regional stability and bridge to a reforming east rather than being as it appears today a nagging regional problem, a disgrace to its talented people and a model of how not to integrate into the broader global community of nations.

The U.S. recognizes that Europe and especially Belarus’ neighbors including Lithuania must take the leading role in promoting change in Belarus that will serve to integrate Belarus into the region lest its self-isolation and growing hostility to Europe lead to policies and actions threatening to regional security and stability.

The U.S. has no desire to force unwanted change on the Belarusian people. The U.S. simply encourages the legal and international rights of the Belarusian people to participate in a democratic political process that allows the Belarusian people to make their own choices freely and based on exposure to a wide range of information, not simply state propaganda.

Unfortunately the Minsk regime views such encouragement as a direct challenge to its values, its policies and its existence. The regime has responded by seeking to incite public opinion against the U.S. and the rest of Europe with a disinformation campaign reminiscent of the Cold War.

As in the Cold War struggle that required patience, unity, commitment and resources, the U.S. has been and will remain strongly engaged and committed in supporting the democratic process, free media and civil society struggling to survive in an increasingly authoritarian Belarus. For years we and the EU pursued in tandem a step-by-step/benchmark approach to encourage the regime to fulfill its OSCE commitments to restore democracy, only to have those efforts rejected as the regime has taken more steps backwards, conducting farcical elections, arresting opponents, closing independent media and universities, and oppressing civil society and religious minorities. In addition, the regime has passed laws and decrees whose only goal is to prevent the outside world from helping those in Belarus who seek democratic change. The regime has even started to cancel exchanges and restrict the participation of Belarusian officials in programs and seminars.

In response to the worsening situation in Belarus and the regime's increased hostility to democracy, the U.S. Congress in 2004 unanimously passed the Belarus Democracy Act to assist U.S. policy toward Belarus and encourage resources to aid those seeking democratic change. Subsequently the Congress has appropriated more funds to assist the political process, independent media and civil society in Belarus. On the diplomatic front, the U.S. continues to work closely with the European Union and with individual countries both to press the Belarusian regime to change its destructive course as well as to provide coordinated assistance to civil society and information media initiatives. The U.S. has been devoting almost \$10 million yearly to these programs in Belarus as well as continuing humanitarian assistance and outreach efforts to the Belarusian people. The U.S. has also tried to enlist Russian support to encourage democratic development in Belarus as part of the overall discussion the U.S. conducts with Russia on the problems of democratic development in the area of the former USSR.

With presidential elections scheduled to take place in Belarus next year, the U.S. sees an opportunity to encourage the democratic process not only by supporting observation and voter education efforts but also by focussing international attention on the elections so that the regime will not think it can hide its efforts to deny candidates' access to the electorate, intimidate voters and falsify the vote. As Secretary Rice said in Vilnius the U.S. encourages the world to shine a bright light on Belarus to let the Belarusian people

know we care and let the regime know the world is watching and that there will be consequences to its actions.

The U.S. acknowledges and applauds the strong moral and material support other countries and especially Lithuania have given to the promotion of the democratic process and civil society in Belarus even at risk to Lithuania's bilateral relationship with Belarus. The U.S. particularly admires the critical support Lithuania has given the European Humanities University after it was ruthlessly closed by Belarusian authorities in offering the university a home in Vilnius to continue educating Belarusian students in liberal values. The U.S. continues to provide concrete support to these projects along with Lithuania and other European countries and institutions.

As we witnessed in the Cold War, united support for freedom in the end prevails. Lithuanians in particular recall the U.S. support throughout the long years of Soviet occupation. We never gave up hope that Lithuania would some day be free. The U.S. continues its longstanding policy of providing all these forms of support, in unity with the EU and individual countries such as Lithuania, in addressing the situation in Belarus. Above all we join Lithuania in remaining committed to the Belarusian people. Like the Lithuanian people, the Belarusian people will find their respected place in Europe's house as they have long deserved. The Belarusian people will ultimately achieve this by themselves as the Lithuanian people did but like the Lithuanian people they can always count on committed real and moral support from America and the democracies of Europe.