



Center for Strategic & International Studies  
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Center for Strategic and International Studies and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

**The Last Dictatorship in Europe:  
The Impact of Upcoming Elections in Belarus**

With

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**Svyatlana Zavadskaya**, *Dmitry Zavadsky Foundation*

**Walter Stankievich**, *Belarusian Review*

Moderated by

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On February 9, 2006, the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS in partnership with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty hosted a Congressional Briefing on the upcoming March elections in Belarus. Stephen B. Nix, Iryna Vidnava, Svyatlana Zavadskaya, and Walter Stankievich delivered remarks at the event. The following is a summary of their presentations.

**Mr. Nix** provided an overview of the current political situation of the opposition in Belarus in light of the upcoming presidential elections. He noted that in comparison with the previous election of 2001, the opposition is much better organized: ten political parties and numerous NGOs have united to form one oppositional bloc in the parliamentary elections. Following the summer of 2005, the bloc decided to support one presidential candidate, Alyaksander Milinkevich. As a result, this campaign differs from the campaign of 2001 in the respect that the leaders are united and are maximizing their potential to reach the electorate. Due to restrictions placed on the length of the campaign period, it is impossible to begin the presidential campaign before late February. The lack of access to mass media has forced the oppositional bloc to engage in active door-to-door campaigning and direct contact with the voters, in order to increase the electorate's familiarization with their message. According to a recent study, Milinkevich is gaining support and his name is gaining recognition fast. Due to a high possibility of rigged elections, it is very important to conduct exit polls in order to monitor the elections more effectively.

**Ms. Vidanava** highlighted the social and youth movements currently taking place in Belarus. She focused on the increasing repressions against non governmental organizations, independent media and youth activism undertaken by the current president, Alyaksander Lukashenka, following the 2004 parliamentary elections. As the result of President Lukashenka's actions NGOs cannot legally register and some of them are currently operating without a legal status. Furthermore, there are also numerous obstacles and restrictions for university students, but despite these difficulties, the Belarusian youth desires democratic change and is willing to play a key role in the upcoming elections. Ms. Vidanava highlighted some of the advantages and challenges faced by the current opposition. She pointed out the experience gained by NGOs and youth groups since the 2001 elections, which include a strong coalition united behind one candidate and his growing recognition; positive impact of successful democratic changes taking place in Ukraine and Georgia; and support of other Eastern European NGOs, who contribute their expertise and encouragement to the mobilization efforts. Vidanava also mentioned the decreasing unity between civic mobilization and youth efforts when compared to 2001. Today numerous highly disorganized campaigns are targeting only specific groups without a common message. The lack of independent media and funding is also hampering the efforts of these movements. In spite of these obstacles, the opposition is able to inform and educate the voters through the distribution of unregistered newspapers, bulletins and newsletters, traditional campaign methods and new media sources, such as the

Internet. She pointed to cell phone technology, especially text messaging, as an effective way of reaching out to young voters. Ms. Vidanova emphasized that these campaigns aim at building pro-democratic segments of society, by educating and mobilizing young people beyond the 2006 elections.

**Mrs. Zavadskaya** commented on the state of personal freedoms of Belarusians in the context of the diminishing independent media. She noted that the current campaign of the opposition bloc has been extremely effective, and that support for Milinkevich has grown from 6 percent to 26 percent over the past couple of months. However, due to increasing censorship and pressure from the Lukashenka government, the independent media is unable to exert any influence on the general public. Many independent journalists have already faced threats and persecutions, such as the case of Veronika Cherkassova, who was killed in October 2004. Independent newspapers are forced to print in Russia and are unable to distribute their materials in Belarus through official channels. Broadcasting by Radio Free Europe has an important impact, but more must be done to support Belarusian-based radio stations that have been unable to broadcast their material. Mrs. Zavadskaya emphasized the importance of resurrecting independent Belarusian media for long-term democracy development in Belarus. She encouraged the cooperation between the United States and the European Union in pressuring the Lukashenka government.

**Mr. Stankievich** further discussed the obstacles faced by independent media. He outlined some of the basic experiences of the Belarusian public, which include deep-seeded feelings of fear, the older generation's nostalgia and a universal lack of awareness of the historical past. In the area of the electronic media, he emphasized the desire of Belarusians for more sources of information. Currently, FM and AM radio broadcasts are the most popular, but the Internet, satellite TV and wired radio channels are also gaining popularity. Internet news sources, often self-censored in an attempt to avoid state censorship, are an important tool for the opposition. State-run media refrains from even mentioning the name of the opposition candidate in spite of his high-profile visits in Europe and energetic local electoral activity. State-controlled press is heavily subsidized, forcing the independent papers to close down or self-censor in order to stay afloat. The recently enacted criminal code amendment targets criticism of the government as a criminal offense and, thus, effectively limits the independent media. Several steps were proposed in order to break the information blockade, such as the use of satellite television broadcasting, radio broadcasting (increasing the coverage of the AM transmitter from Lithuania), increasing Internet access at public libraries, support for in-country independent press and regional newspapers, and assistance to NGOs in publication and leaflets production (digital duplicators). In conclusion, Mr. Stankievich noted that free access to information is the key to long-term democratic development and independence in Belarus.

During the question and answer session the speakers were asked about the role of the trade unions in the Belarusian reform movement. **Ms. Vidanova** stated that the main reason for the trade unions small role is the lack of organization of the trade unions, and the much more effective involvement by small businesses.

The speakers were also asked about the long term plans that the United States can undertake in case of Lukashenka's victory. **Mr. Stankievich** replied that it is the responsibility of the OSCE Mission to Belarus to view the current conditions as jeopardizing the validity of a fair election, and declare that this election is already compromised. He also stressed the need to maintain unity of the democratic forces after the election, and to ensure those forces survive through increased aid and assistance to independent media coverage.

The speakers were further asked about how the experience of the United States with Poland, "Keeping Solidarity Alive", could be applicable to Belarus. **Ms. Vidanova** stated that the Belarusian opposition is moving closer to the conditions in which Solidarity was created. In terms of support it would be useful to remember some of the methods that were used, including the support that was given to civil society. **Mrs. Zavadskaya** stated that every country has its own path to democracy and although Belarus will also get there one day, there are differences between the two countries. One of such differences is the economic situation in Belarus. The European Union, however, plays an equally important role in Belarus' economy as does Russia, so it is time EU's lack of interest in Belarus' political situation is questioned.