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# **Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, June 8, 2010**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Scott Reid**



## Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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•(1315)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)):** We are the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today, Tuesday, June 8, 2010, is our 21st meeting.

This afternoon we are hearing four witnesses from Belarus: Jaroslav Romanchuk, president of the Scientific Research Mises Center; Andrey Dmitriev, from the international office of the United Civil Party of Belarus; Anatoly Liabedzka, the chairman of the shadow government of the National Committee of United Democratic Forces of Belarus; and, finally, Vladimir Prokofyevich Neklyayev, director of the Forward Movement Research and Education Establishment of Belarus.

Maybe I can ask you to begin, Mr. Romanchuk.

**Mr. Jaroslav Romanchuk (President, Analytical Center "Strategy", Scientific Research Mises Center):** Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I am honoured to testify here. It's a great pleasure to be in Canada. We are looking forward to telling you what's going on in our country.

I'm running for president this year. It's a unique chance to deal with a couple of issues that are of very great concern to all of us.

First of all, it's about human rights and freedoms. The Lukashenko regime has failed to deliver on even minor liberalization of human rights and freedom issues. The latest local election campaign proved that things have become even worse.

On May 17, the huge, aggressive assault on the movement "Tell the Truth!" proved that Lukashenko has chosen to carry out a campaign based on the use of crude force rather than constructive dialogue with all political forces. So for us, a presidential campaign is another chance to improve dramatically the situation with regard to human rights.

Secondly, the regime has not delivered on the improving of election legislation, so there are huge risks that this particular campaign will also lead to massive falsification of the results of the elections. That's why we're determined to defend our victory in the face of the governmental repression.

Another issue that is very important for us is to take the opportunity of the presidential election campaign to improve the situation with regard to freedom of expression. Journalists are being

prosecuted on a regular basis. People are jailed for their civic activism. Let me just give you the example of Andrey Bandarenka and Victor Aftohovitch, who have been in prison for five to six years for their participation in the parliamentary election campaign and their attempts to resist the authorities.

Finally, the presidential election campaign is a chance for us to end Belarus being a source of external danger. It's one thing for the Belarusian regime to be a danger to the Belarusian people; it's another thing that the regime poses dangers to the international community by dealing with such states as Iran, Syria, and other countries. Most of these deals are not transparent and we'd like to be back within the international community. We'd like to join the ranks of the Council of Europe. That is why our campaign is aimed at democratizing Belarus and at bringing freedom to our country.

We look forward to the support of Canada, which has a unique role nowadays as the country that can afford and does have policies based on values rather than on pragmatism. We look forward to enhancing cooperation.

My colleagues will add further testimony.

[Translation]

**Mr. Anatoly Liabedzka (Chairman, Shadow Government, National Committee of United Democratic Forces of Belarus):** The international community really underestimates the problem in Belarus. For most politicians in the Euro-Atlantic region, the problem is not on their agenda. They see it as no more than a local problem that does not cross the Belarus border. That is a misconception. Belarus is a real laboratory experimenting with the ideology, or rather the authoritarianism, that we call "Lukashism". "Lukashism" is a mix of communism, fascism and Latin-American populism. Today, it is Belarus' key export. It must be recognized that the regime is very popular in the post-Soviet states. Russia and other post-Soviet states are following Belarus' example. This is a dangerous trend to which the west pays insufficient attention.

What is happening in Belarus? For a number of years, Belarus has been in a state of real cold civil war. A group of heavyweights, the Lukashenko clan, controls affairs in Belarus using the power of the state. They destroy any political alternative. This neo-Soviet state, for that is what it is, [Editorial note: inaudible] all civil rights. The state, in the form of the Lukashenko clan, holds the monopoly over political, economic and social rights.

A social contract does not exist in Belarus. Neither does the rule of law. Justice comes from Lukashenko. That is why [*Editorial note: inaudible*] an independent judiciary. Belorussians have no say in running the state. Power is always in the hands of the same person. Lukashenko's authoritarian regime has been in existence for some time. Lukashenko effectively bans any political challenge. Opposition members cannot be elected without approval locally and from the state.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am ashamed to say that Belarus is Europe's last dictatorship. I know that Belarus and its people deserve better. We have a right to democracy based on European standards and values. The Belarus issue must be resolved in Belarus. No one can solve our problems for us. No one from Lithuania or from Canada can come and build a democracy for us. It is our country and our responsibility. Thank you very much.

• (1320)

**The Chair:** Okay, thank you.

[*English*]

Were you going to continue, Mr. Neklyayev? Please do.

**Mr. Vladimir Prokofyevich Neklyayev (Director, Forward Movement Research and Education Establishment of Belarus):** Thank you.

I'm Vladimir Neklyayev, the poet, and I have been forced to get into politics, which is not something that I am used to, because the political regime has brought me and the national culture to a critical level, including the national language and the civil society as a whole.

I am the leader of the campaign called "Speak the Truth!", which was created three months ago. It's a civil society organization that was created just before the presidential campaign. Speak the Truth is an organization that was attacked in a form of banditry; they took away all of our assets and our office. They even took away our money. They forced us to break up. They arrested me and also Andrey Dmitriev, who is here as well. Under pressure from the international community, they let us go, and somehow the situation was changed.

It is impossible to register a single NGO or political movement that has its own dissenting opinion that goes against that of the government. It is impossible to work in such organizations without being oppressed and without worrying about your own safety and that of your near and dear ones.

Our juridical status, the juridical group that we worked with, was also closed down, so when we come back to Belarus, our actions will be seen as the actions of an unregistered, unlawful group, because the group that was registered before has been disbanded, so our lives and our country are now in danger.

On the eve of new presidential elections, we would like to play an information role. We don't have the media to get our word out to the people.

We would also like to have some assistance. We need a place to work and equipment to work with. We need to give help to the families of those who were oppressed, because they have been put in

prison, and their families would like to know how they are and how they are managing in prison.

Thank you.

• (1325)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Neklyayev.

Mr. Dmitriev.

**Mr. Andrey Dmitriev (Chief and Secretary, International Office of the United Civil Party of Belarus):** My name is Andrey Dmitriev and I am also involved in the Speak the Truth campaign. Today I would like to tell you here about what is happening with religious rights and minority rights and to talk a bit about civil society.

Today the situation in Belarus is such that the government wants a monopoly, in essence, on everything that keeps man alive, religion being no exception. So for many years, approximately eight now, it's been impossible to register any organizations. All religious organizations that exist in Belarus constantly run into problems with the powers that be.

For instance, the Protestant community in Minsk has for a year now been battling the municipal executive committee because they lost their building to the municipality. This building was bought by them. It was like an old cowshed, but they fixed it up and put in everything they needed. As soon as the building looked attractive, the municipality decided to take it away.

More than 100 people went on a month-long hunger strike to keep the municipality from taking this building away. They were able to hold onto the building for a while, but when the emotions quietened down, the municipality went back to its old ways and tried to take the building away again. This is what's happening across the whole country.

The government says that Orthodoxy is the main religion in the country and all of the others are unequal, which means that the Orthodox community has an agreement with the army, with the schools. They have an agreement with all the government institutions for support, whereas the Catholic, the Protestant, the Jewish, and other religious communities have no access, not even relative to what the Orthodox community has. Also, it is becoming a problem to register any new organization, because the government sees any religious community as just one more association, one more group, that they cannot control and that could quite possibly not support the policies of the existing powers.

There is the same problem with the ethnic minorities. The government divided up the Polish community. They were allowed to receive registration and assets; this is the former union of the Polish in Belarus. Those who had agreements... The Polish association had its assets taken away, and they were no longer allowed to dissent, because they are a group that speaks of freedom of association and freedom of speech and their leaders are constantly being oppressed. Their activists are constantly involved in criminal proceedings. They are constantly being shown on TV in a discrediting light.

And today, the government, although it says that it would like to resolve the issue, is doing nothing. The only way for the existing government to resolve problems is to force people to agree with it through force, through prison, and through other forms of pressure.

The same is happening with civil society. The problem is that the only way, at least the way the government understands civil society, is that it is young people and union groups who support the government... As soon as civil society tries to create even a small ten-person group that wants to do something of their own free will, there comes an order from the government that says this is war against the government. It's impossible to register organizations, and it's surprising what happens.

You need to register your organization. To do so, you have to go to the Ministry of Justice. They say no, right? Then, under the criminal code, which has been passed by that very same government, you can end up in prison for up to two years just because you did something on behalf of your organization. So the government is trying to control us. It's trying to control everything we do.

• (1330)

I will give you the example of the Speak the Truth campaign. We spent some time in prison and we want you to know what we did. We said nothing against the government. We said, "Let's put together a petition at a local level and let's just deal with some local problems". They were problems like, I don't know, fixing the roads...

Three months later, on May 18, in 22 cities, the KGB came to see our activists. They searched. They did personal searches. They took everything out of the apartments and took everything out of their offices. Why? It was because the government is not prepared to be and does not wish to be liberalized at all. It does not want any change to happen.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all of you for giving us this unique opportunity to speak before you and to tell you about Belarus in the hope that you will be able to help us with international support from Canada.

I would like to thank Michael Mostyn and his organization for their assistance in organizing this.

Thank you very much. We're ready for your questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much to all of our witnesses.

We have enough time to allow for seven-minute rounds. We'll begin with the Liberals.

Go ahead, Mr. Silva, please.

**Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for their presentations.

I think what came out of the presentation was a quite disturbing picture of what's taking place in Belarus in terms of the lack of freedom of expression, including the arrest and prosecution of several journalists, the freedom that is not being given to certain ethnic minorities and religious minorities, and the upcoming elections and the problems that might come out of that.

I have a few questions. One of them is around the Council of Europe. Have you been in touch with or involved at all with the Council of Europe and has there been any type of declaration by the Council of Europe in relation to your situations?

Second, has there been an international call for election monitors, particularly from Canada? Would the European Community also be sending election monitors?

Third, what would you like directly from us as parliamentarians? What role do you think we could play in terms of helping the situation within your country?

**Mr. Anatoly Liabedzka:** A discussion on Belarus was held in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I, as well as the Belarus authorities, took part in this discussion as the only country outside of the Council of Europe.

The conclusion from the discussions was a decision to freeze contacts between the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Belarus government at the highest level. This is in reaction to the refusal by the official government in Minsk to put an end to the death sentence or to put a moratorium on the death sentence. That is something we see in the resolutions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

One is regard to the situation in Belarus on the actions of something called the *escadron* of death, i.e., the death squadron. A couple of years back, several branches of the secret services and the police ministries organized the kidnapping and execution of several people who planned to take part in the presidential campaign.

It is a special resolution that names specific names—representatives of the secret services and the police—and they intend to hold an independent, objective investigation into these criminal acts. However, a number of years have passed, and there is now a very realistic threat that the death squadrons may raise their ugly heads again.

One of the results of our visit might be that the Parliament of Canada would be able to take a number of actions before the presidential campaign. We have a stake in creating a special group of members of Parliament for a democratic Belarus, which would monitor the situation and could come into contact with civil society and with the political opposition in Belarus. We also have a stake in having direct relationships with the political parties, in signing agreements with them.

As for observation by the OSCE, we are definitely very interested in having the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly delegation having maximum representation by members of the Canadian Parliament, who could then come to Belarus during the electoral presidential campaign and be unbiased observers.

*Merci beaucoup.*

• (1335)

**The Chair:** Mr. Silva.

**Mr. Mario Silva:** I think you gave us some very good answers in terms of the role of the Council of Europe.

I have a further question regarding what you would like the Parliament of Canada to do. Specifically, with the upcoming elections coming soon, is there a more active role that you feel we could be taking? That's the question I'd like to have answered.

**Mr. Jaroslav Romanchuk:** A very important issue would be to set up a parliamentary group, Friends for Belarus, that would consist of members of the Canadian Parliament. That group would take some initiatives, initiate making statements, or hold fact-finding missions to our country so that Canadian people and members of the government are well aware of what's going there.

Secondly, we would welcome the formation of a Belarusian-Canadian group or society that would consist not only of members of Parliament, but also of representatives of different communities and NGOs, that would deal with broader issues, such as the issue that we touch upon in the Speak the Truth campaign. It would inform entrepreneurs of the economic opportunities in our countries and deal with the issues of civil society in general. This kind of coordination would be welcome.

In addition, something that has been very practical, and Parliament would have a role in it, is to urge CIDA to open a special technical program for Belarus to provide assistance in implementing different initiatives. If we do this, it would definitely boost Canadian-Belarusian cooperation. We would definitely put Canada in a unique perspective, because now, sadly, the issue of human rights and values-based politics is a rare thing.

Canada is unique in carrying out its politics based on values. Canada does not depend on Russian gas and oil, it doesn't have Russian corrupt money, and it's not tied up like America in agreements with Russia on Afghanistan and Iran. So it definitely is unique, and it can really, for the first time in history, play a major role in changing the situation of our country.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dorion, if you please.

**Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ):** Thank you, gentlemen.

You are giving us more information about a regime that is frankly very little known in the west. Your description sends chills up the spine, so to speak. Basically, power is concentrated in the hands of one person.

First, in terms of the nature of Belarus society, are you finding what they found in Russia, that private concerns have taken over the capital that was once in the hands of the state? Or is it still a state economy? I think that this is a very pertinent question because he who holds economic power generally holds the rest directly or indirectly.

Could you tell me about Belarus' economic system? You also mentioned the close ties with the government of Russia. A few years ago, we heard media reports that President Lukashenko was practically advocating a merger of the two countries, of Russia and Belarus. That plan did not work.

Could you shed some light on why Russia declined, as it were, to swallow up a smaller neighbour. It is not clear what danger this

could have for Russia, but perhaps you see one. If so, could you explain it?

Perhaps it would help if the pressure we exert were not only on the Lukashenko regime, but also on Russia itself. How helpful do you think that would be?

• (1340)

[*English*]

**Mr. Jaroslav Romanchuk:** Thank you for your questions.

Belarus is predominantly a centrally planned economy, with 80% of all assets belonging to the state. You are absolutely right to say that it's a miniature of the Soviet Union. We have a central planning body that plans all of the economy. We have a president who appoints even the manager of a small plant. We have a situation of total price controls.

At the same time, the regime was lucky to get a huge amount of support from Russia. It amounted to about 15% or 20% of GDP. It's a unique situation, unheard of in any part of the world, when a foreign country subsidizes its neighbour in this volume. Of course, it wasn't about friendship; it was all about the imperial ambitions of Russia.

Lukashenko didn't want to have a merger. He wanted to be the president of a new, revived Soviet Union. When his plan failed and Putin took over in Russia, he decided to make the best use of Russian resources and sold Russia political futures. Russia bought them, but right now Russia is fed up. It is cutting subsidies.

Now, in 2010, the subsidy amounts to about 7% of GDP and will continue to fall. Belarus has failed to deliver a customs union and Russia now sees that the only strategy is to put on more pressure via economic tools and mechanisms, meaning to raise gas prices. But again, even the west cannot complain here, because Belarus buys gas at a price that is three times lower than the price for Germany, let's say. That was a kind of subsidy. Belarus is highly dependent on the Russian market and Russian energy.

Lukashenko, even using IMF money, has failed to diversify the economy and start market reforms. That is why we, as the people who are taking part in the presidential elections, are seriously concerned about the sustainability of the Belarusian model. We want the Canadian government, the Canadian Parliament, to support us right now and then to provide us support once we get into power.

With this kind of heritage, it will be extremely difficult to carry out reforms, and we definitely want to avoid a Ukrainian scenario, where, after the elections in 2004, the Ukrainian government did not deliver on the promises to the people. We want our reforms to be a success, not just to be there to redistribute wealth.

**Mr. Anatoly Liabedzka:** [*Witness speaks in Russian*]

**The Chair:** Just a moment, please. We've lost the sound. My apologies.

• (1345)

**Mr. Jaroslav Romanchuk:** Meanwhile, I can refer to Russia and how Canada can treat Russia. Of course, Canada is one of the key players in major international organizations, the G20 or the G7, and of course, if you remind Russia of its international obligations, if you remind Russia of the importance of abiding by international rules, that will be extremely important, because Russia definitely has a role to play.

We are fearful of Russian invasion via economic means. Ultimately, Russia does not see Belarus as an independent country. That is why it doesn't want to support democracy and political pluralism; rather, it wants to corner Lukashenko and force him into a kind of merger.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** You only have a minute left.

**Mr. Jean Dorion:** To what extent do Belorussians see themselves as Russian? Is there a strong sense of national identity, or would some people like to be reunited with Russia?

[English]

**Mr. Vladimir Prokofyevich Neklyayev:** The uniqueness of Belarus is that the economic component in the consciousness of the people is not the main thing. What I mean is that when we developed our pre-electoral campaign for our candidate as president candidate, the impact of such things as the crisis, which in another country would be the determining factor, for us was not so. There were other issues.

The history of this people is made up of poverty. People remember the fear and the horror that their fathers, grandfathers, and ancestors lived through, and as for what Lukashenko is talking about, the possibility of eating and having a roof over their heads, they don't see this. They see this as, I don't know, maybe a sign of prosperity. If you look at the richness of Canada, only 99% can see what's happening in Canada; maybe 0.9% have ever been to Canada. So it's not the national consciousness we're talking about: it's self-awareness, the awareness that they need to survive.

In our company, we tell the truth. We put aside the issues of political power and the economy. We talk to them about one thing: we say they are telling you that you live well, we show them our fingernail, and we say that's what you get, that little bit, and we ask them how much they tell them that they give them. They say, "They give us this much, a whole bag full". It's not true.

No, it's not true. There's a joke that was made up by the people themselves. They ask a Belarusian what country he would like to live in. He says Belarus, and they say, "But that's where you live". He says, "No, I want to live in the Belarus they show on TV".

There is a disconnect between the propaganda on TV and what people are actually living in their economy. People are sick and tired of the lies. They're constantly lying and humiliating people. They don't listen to people's conscience and they don't respect the basic human values, so these are very painful, painful issues. This is what we work on in our campaign.

As for self-awareness and the relationship with Russia, it never changes. It's a constant. It's 50% toward Russia. Maybe 40% look to

the west, 60%...well, it's a factor that you have to take into account. There is a real Soviet history here. Russia and Belarus were always sisters. They always helped each other, but in reality, there was never a history of endless warfare.

**Mr. Anatoly Liabedzka:** And in accordance with sociology, approximately 5% to 6% who were surveyed said that they are for full political unification with the Russian Federation, which means that approximately 94% of people want to live in their own home, and this is a major achievement of the political opposition, which for all these years has spoken for building a Belarusian homeland.

Lukashenko has to say that his opponents have won in recent times. The government has been actively stealing the slogans of the opposition. Fifteen years ago, the slogans were for a free and independent Belarus, and for those we were put in prison. Today, Lukashenko talks about independence, but it's another matter for him. Independence is an instrument to strengthen his own personal power.

• (1350)

**The Chair:** Mr. Dmitriev.

**Mr. Andrey Dmitriev:** I'll be brief about your question of self-awareness, of identity. It is a tragedy in Belarus today, because in the past 15 years the government has constantly been destroying in people's minds their linkage to history, to culture, and to their language. It is a paradoxical situation in a country when you have to save your national language and it is one of two official languages. It is the first language, the first official language, and the majority of people don't speak it, because in the past 15 years all possible conditions were created to make another language the first official language. That is Russian, the one I'm speaking now, and not Belarusian.

So in those past 15 years in Belarus, schools that worked in Belarusian were closed. Before that, people used to come in from the village schools where everybody spoke Belarusian. For those who come in from the village schools and go to university, in the schools they write a Russian language exam, which means that the government has done everything... You'll understand what I mean if you talk about the hundred-year history of Belarus, where they spoke their own language and talked about a national culture. But to talk about unification of the country would have been difficult—not a partnership, but I'm talking about unification.

Our history with Russia started at the end of the 1900s, but the president says you must be very happy, there's no war, and everything is fine. That's what they talk about when they talk about societal issues.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Marston, please.

**Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP):** Good afternoon.

There are a number of points I want to talk about.

One I'm curious about is that in China when we started to see the changes in that country, they had what they called the "iron rice bowl", where the government supplied the food services for a lot of people. Was there a situation like that in your country prior to the changes in the Soviet Union?

Also, this is going to seem like quite a contrast, but in regard to the extrajudicial killings you're talking about, I'm curious beyond that as to whether the courts have been used against people for executions.

There's another question I'll ask you. Have you had or will you have the opportunity while in Canada to meet with our foreign minister here?

We'll try those and then see if we have more time.

**Mr. Jaroslav Romanchuk:** I'll answer the first question on the situation in Belarus. Belarus, at the end of the 1980s, was more prosperous than Poland, the Czech Republic, or Slovakia, because it was in the west of the Soviet Union, and the leadership wanted Belarus to look like the west. It was like eastern Germany and the western part of Germany. The contrast was huge, but the information monopoly created the illusion that we were very prosperous.

In 1994 the average salary was about \$30. Those were very bad, rough times. That was the bottom. Then the economy began to grow. Lukashenko was in power. It was a coincidence, but many people attributed this kind of growth to Lukashenko policies.

Anatoly.

**Mr. Anatoly Liabedzka:** I have much experience with the judiciary in Belarus; I have been in prison more than 10 times. And I must say that in Belarus there is a building that has signs on it that read "Supreme Court" and "Constitutional Court", but these are just on the exterior. There is no interior content. There is no independent judiciary.

That system exists. All the judges are appointed by Alexander Lukashenko. There are no exceptions. It is very developed and is what we call the "telephone right", where a judge makes his decision when called by the administration without looking at the constitution and the legislation.

I can give you an example so that you'll understand me completely. There was a case that led to a young person being sent to jail for 15 days because, as it said in the decision, he yelled out anti-presidential slogans. This young man was deaf and incapable of speaking. He could not have yelled out anything. This was his personal tragedy. And they condemned him to prison. This is just an example of the judicial actions of Belarus.

We have a huge problem facing us. There will be changes. There will be changes in government in Belarus, and the judicial system we have today will be a huge issue for a new democratic Belarus, for a new European Belarus. Here, we need the assistance, experience, and expertise of Canada. It would be very relevant for us.

As for investigation of killings, murders, and the stealing away of people, this is something that the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE has discussed. It's a very relevant topic today, just before the presidential campaign.

•(1355)

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** You finished with talk about an investigation. Is there a number that you could put on the number of missing—I heard you say "taken away"—who have been found dead?

I'll go on to another question. That way, you can wrap up both questions.

I'm really interested in this Speak the Truth campaign. In your presentation, I've heard quite a bit about the propaganda on how glorious it is compared with what life is actually like. Here, we're used to dealing with the Internet. We have all kinds of media access in this country. How effective is it and how will you go about reaching the people to speak the truth?

**Mr. Anatoly Liabedzka:** Four specific examples of kidnapping and murder are as follows: Victor Gonchar, one of the heads of Parliament and the Supreme Soviet of the 14th Congress; Yuri Zakharenko, the former Minister of the Interior; Anatoly Krasovskiy, a businessman who worked with the opposition; and Dmitry Zavadsky, an independent journalist.

These are four specific examples of kidnapping and murder with very good evidential documentation: the last names of people who kidnapped these people and murdered them. However, there has been no independent judicial review; therefore, the case is still open.

**Mr. Jaroslav Romanchuk:** As for a way to reach out to the people, we definitely use door-to-door campaigning, which is very effective. The only way to meet people is to deliver, to give them information about different issues.

Then there is the Internet, which is getting more and more popular. About 3.5 million people in Belarus use the Internet in their everyday lives, although they don't read political news. As well, we use different social networks to reach out to them and get them engaged.

Another important way is to get NGOs that have national networks involved, to get business associations, entrepreneurs, women, youth, and unions of Poles involved in these kinds of activities. In addition, we have satellite channels supported by the Polish government and called Belsat. One of the areas where the Canadian government can make a difference is to support Belsat as an international project that broadcasts for Belarus in the Belarusian language.

**Mr. Andrey Dmitriev:** Regarding the Internet, I would also like to add that right now a presidential decree that is being prepared is spearheaded at limiting the opportunity for people to have access to information on the Internet. Not in a single government institution or university today can you simply open a website for an opposition organization. They're all blocked. This equipment has been bought in China and it is an experiment that's being done.

I can give you an example of a discussion in the electro-communications ministry: are you going to be able to register your e-mail address in government institutions or not? Should it be for free? Should you have to pay for registering? Think about that. It's nuts. This is craziness that they're forcing upon us, where in order to open your e-mail you will have to go to a government body, pay a fee, and say that it is actually your e-mail. That's what our government understands and thinks should be done with Internet information.

• (1400)

**Mr. Vladimir Prokofyevich Neklyayev:** As for the Speak the Truth campaign, the phenomenon of it is that we had developed the technologies to spread our campaign, to spread the word, and in less than three months our recognition in our country has gone from 0% to 20% today. That's a huge achievement, if you know anything about Internet technologies. So we developed our technologies, but people are so hungry for the truth, you know, and they can finally hear words that have real meaning and substance, which means that people are coming...

We have to speak the truth in our country. We're being oppressed. You can't hold a meeting without the special services there. The special police come. In Mazyr, they said we brought in drugs and that people came in to smoke up rather than listen to a meeting. I'm telling you that society is tired to death of the lies and society is ready to help us.

Why are we being repressed? Because there's not a single political party in the past times...though there are a number of other parties and powers. This repression occurs because the lies in our country are the ideology of the state. Lukashenko is looking for a government ideology. Well, he found one: it's called lies. That is why we are looking for the truth. His truth is a lie.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. That ends that round of questions.

In order to give us time to have a round of questions from the Conservative members, I'm going to see the clock as being seven minutes before the hour, as I did this morning.

Mr. Hiebert, please begin.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be sharing my time with my colleague.

A number of you have referenced the upcoming election. When is that election going to occur?

**Mr. Jaroslav Romanchuk:** We don't know the date because Alexander Lukashenko decides on the date himself. The threshold is February 9. We have inside information that the date will be some time in December of this year.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Okay. Now, has there been any request made to any international body to monitor the election results? Can you confirm that?

**Mr. Jaroslav Romanchuk:** We made a request to ODIHR to provide long-term observation, but they need a formal invitation from Belarusian authorities. They are waiting for the authorities to invite it in for long-term observation and the invitation cannot come before the date is set.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** I see.

I have two other questions before I pass this on to my colleague. One has to do with the extent of government control over the media. Is it entirely state controlled?

Second, one of you mentioned the danger to the world that Belarus presents, specifically because of deals with Syria and Iran. This committee has spent a great deal of time studying Iran and the threat that it is. I wonder if somebody could elaborate on that.

**Mr. Jaroslav Romanchuk:** All media are definitely state-controlled, state-owned, and even if the authorities allow some private papers to exist, they put a lot of pressure on journalists. Recently, four lady journalists were investigated and essentially interrogated by the KGB for their coverage of corruption deals, but that was an excuse. The real reason was that they belong to the opposition media and they are quite authoritative.

As for Iran, as an economist I always wonder why some economic and investment projects exist. We have the assembly line of the Iranian car, Samand, that makes 250 cars a year, with a plan to make 30,000. There was an ongoing line of communication between Iran and Belarus; there was an Iranian bank and many projects inside Belarus.

Belarus is used as the country that may be an intermediary between Russia and Iran on the technologies that we all suspect to be somehow involved in producing nuclear weapons. Of course, we don't have evidence of that, but we have many rumours inside Belarus, and talking to people gives us evidence of something that is behind the official smokescreen for these economic relations. For example, I've heard of a deal that is being discussed for an oil swap among Iran, Russia, and Belarus.

If you do not have transparency of weapon flows and if you don't have transparency in finance flows, you definitely suspect these kinds of arrangements to be not just about economic operations.

• (1405)

**The Chair:** Mr. Sweet.

**Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much for coming here and taking the courageous stance that you are.

You've mentioned a cultural genocide. You've mentioned the lack of freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and freedom of assembly, except, of course, if Lukashenko decides you can exercise one of those freedoms. There is no independent judiciary. Arrests are happening at random. You have to now register even for access to e-mail and Internet.

Is there any source at all...? You mentioned some journalists who were... Of course, the Russian KGB, as you've also mentioned, is involved in Belarus. What about international journalists? Are they able to get the word out? Is there any kind of freedom there or does Lukashenko treat them with the same kind of irreverence and impunity?

**Mr. Anatoly Liabedzka:** As for the international presence in the area of information, there are certain opportunities that exist for the Russian Federation. As in Belarus, there are about five or six channels, but because of the difficulty with the Kremlin in recent times, the Belarus authorities are banning certain Russian programs. As for the rest, then, it is all very rigidly controlled. Belsat, a television channel, as my colleagues mentioned, has tried to receive its official accreditation to no avail. It is now working illegally and could very likely be criminally prosecuted.

In the 2006 presidential campaign, there were 1,000 people in prison at the same time that I was. Of them, there were a number of international journalists, some from Canada. One was my neighbour in my cell.

We are deeply interested in having Canadian journalists come to Belarus. It's possible that they could monitor the situation and publish the situation here. It's so important. It's extremely important for information on Belarus to enter into the Canadian media. That way, it would be far more effective for Canadian politicians and officials to affect the situation.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Mr. Chairman, I just want to conclude with the fact that I have the Belarus country profile from the BBC in front of me, which says, in case anybody doubts the validity of our witnesses and their courage, that President Lukashenko is "Europe's last dictator".

I just want to say to our witnesses—and I am certain that at this time I can speak for my colleagues—that the help you have asked for and your specific recommendations will certainly be strongly considered and followed up on after this.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We are actually well past the concluding time we set, so I want to take the opportunity to thank our witnesses for coming here and to thank our committee members for having agreed to two meetings today to accommodate both sets of witnesses we've had. I thank you very much.

We are adjourned.

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