

Testimony of Rodger Potocki, Senior Director for Europe, National Endowment for Democracy

Mr. Chairman, members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak about the ongoing crackdown in Belarus. And thank you for all that you and your staff have done on behalf of Belarus, especially the Belarus Democracy Acts. I represent the National Endowment for Democracy, a leading supporter of civil society in “Europe’s last dictatorship,” and we have been on the front lines of providing support for the victims of repression for more than 15 years.

Ales Michalevich’s testimony and personal story illustrate the appalling events that followed the flawed December election. But Belarus’ “Bloody Sunday” and winter repression are part of a larger chronicle of egregious human rights violations that began when Alexander Lukashenka came to power 17 years ago. While unprecedented in its ferocity, this crackdown also calls to mind the brutal attacks on demonstrators in 1996, the disappearing of dissidents in 1999-2000, and the violence against peaceful protesters in 2006. Sadly, the repression continues today. Since the dark days of December, more than 3,000 Belarusians have been arrested for participating in this summer’s “Silent Protests.” Scores have been detained, jailed and fined for taking part in this fall’s “Peoples’ Assemblies,” including just this past Saturday.

The crackdown that began on December 19th has not ceased. It is destined to continue, because force is a fundamental feature of this regime. Freedom House, the organization of my fellow witness, rates Belarus as one of the “Worst of the Worst” countries in terms of repression. The Lukashenka regime’s human rights record has been repeatedly criticized by every leading rights body, including this Commission. Fear has helped this dictator to stay in power.

But Mr. Chairman, despite more than a decade of repression, there are indications that Belarusians are becoming less afraid. Today, for the first time, citizens blame the regime for the country’s economic and political woes. Support for and trust in the head of state and government are at historic lows. While organized protests have yet to gain momentum, there are signs that society is stirring. In addition to this summer’s “silent protests,” more recent events, such

as the garbage strike in Borisov and the attempt to form a free trade union branch in Slonim, indicate that unrest is rising.

Today I will speak about three areas in which, despite the repression since December, there have been positive developments. The first optimistic note is the performance of independent media. Since Alexander Lukashenka came to power, Belarus has been one of the worst perpetrators of crimes against freedom of the media. Hundreds of independent broadcast and print media outlets have been closed down. Last year, a new law to regulate the Internet came into force. Reporters without Borders has declared that Lukashenka is a “Predator of the Press” and “Enemy of the Internet.”

On election night, scores of journalists were detained and had their equipment smashed. In the weeks that followed, more than a dozen media offices and journalists’ homes were raided. During this summer’s “silent protests,” 95 reporters were detained and 13 sentenced to jail time. Today, three journalists remain prisoners of conscience. Yet, despite this repression, independent media is thriving in Belarus. This is in dramatic contrast to five years ago, when it was on the verge of extinction. Today, the Top 5 news and information websites in Belarus are either independent or opposition run. Only 2 of the Top 10 sites are state-controlled. The website of regime’s flagship mouthpiece, *Sovietskaya Belarusia* (Soviet Belarus), barely cracks the Top 15. Since the December crackdown, independent websites have seen their audiences grow by 2.5 to 4 times. I will cite just one of many examples. In 2006, the independent online newspaper *Belaruskie Novosti* (Belarus News) had 1.2 million visitors. By 2010, the number of yearly visitors had risen to 11.4 million. As of the end of September 2011, the total had already reached 18.3 million.

What we’re seeing is that, following the regime’s precipitation of the political and economic crises, society is increasingly searching for information and ideas from independent sources. One media expert noted: “When something happens in Belarus, no one turns on the TV to get news... They go online.” Today, 62 percent of Belarusians distrust state media and, as one sociologist put it, “Propaganda is losing its influence over Belarusian society.” Ever growing numbers of Belarusians

are getting the real story about the country's collapsing economy, political paralysis, and international isolation. The regime has failed to convincingly convey its version of the events occurring on and after the 19th. Independent media is winning the information war.

Mr. Chairman, a second bright spot has been the exemplary work of Belarus' human rights organizations. Since the crackdown was launched, human rights groups have had their hands full. But, in contrast to a divided political opposition, they have worked together before and after the election to maximize their efforts and impact. The "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" campaign, led by the Viasna Human Rights Center and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, united more than 600 activists to independently observe the presidential campaign and Election Day. Its findings played an important role in the international community's determination that the election was neither free nor fair.

Given the repression experienced around past elections, Belarusian human rights organizations also created a Common Human Rights Fund in fall 2010 to render assistance to those in need, putting in place procedures and resources before the crackdown commenced. As a result, these groups were able to provide legal, medical and humanitarian assistance to more than 500 repressed presidential candidates and political leaders, civic activists, journalists, lawyers, ordinary citizens and their families – including Ales, his wife, and their daughters. More than 20 NGO, political party and media offices had their confiscated equipment replaced. This support has continued through 2011 and has been provided regardless of political orientation-- all who have needed and sought help have received it.

This work has been all the more impressive because, like Belarus' independent journalists, the human rights groups themselves have been a primary target of the crackdown. At least 10 leaders from human rights groups were persecuted following the elections. Aleh Gulak, chairman of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, was arrested on the evening of the 19th, the Committee's office was searched on January 5th, and the organization was officially censured a week later. The day after the election, the central office of the Viasna Human Rights Center

was raided. Ten of its members were arrested and all of its computer equipment and documents were confiscated. On January 17th, Viasna's office was searched again, as was the apartment of its director, Ales Bilatski. The effectiveness of the organization's work was recognized by the regime, when it officially warned Mr. Bilatski against taking part in activities on behalf of an unregistered organization, a criminal offense in Belarus. I'm proud to quote Viasna's response: "We believe that our human rights activities are absolutely legal and popular among Belarusian society. We will not stop them."

Mr. Chairman, civil society in Belarus is still alive and functioning, in part, because of the courageous and tireless work of these human rights defenders. So it wasn't a surprise when the human rights community's leader, Ales Bilatski, was jailed in August and put on trial this month. It is ironic that he faces 7 years in prison for not paying taxes on the funds that his organization received to aid those repressed by the regime. A massive defamation campaign has been launched by the regime against Mr. Bilatski, his wife, and his Viasna colleagues. But this has not prevented him from being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. It is a tribute to the tireless work of Ales and other human rights defenders that they have been targeted. It is a testimony to their organizations that the assistance to those in need has continued, despite the repression directed against their leaders.

The last, but most encouraging, example is the social solidarity that has resulted from the crackdown. Because so many were arrested on the night of December 19th, the human rights organizations I've spoken about were overwhelmed. Appalled by the regime's brutality, ordinary citizens stepped forward to monitor the "assembly line" sentencing in courts, gather information about the detainees, and contact families to let them know the fate of their sons and daughters. As the scale of the repression became known, activists made public appeals through blogs and social networking sites that quickly spread through the Internet. One webpage read: "Hundreds of people are in jail – beaten, sick and hungry. They do not enjoy the quiet snow or the holiday season... Restore their faith in the Christmas story. Do not wait for a miracle. Make one yourself!" This was the beginning of what became known as the "Guardian Angels Campaign."

And despite the fear, holiday vacation and winter weather, hundreds answered the call. Within a day, an office was filled with donated clothes, food, medical supplies, toiletries and even toys for prisoners' children. As the KGB raided offices and apartment throughout the city, and police tried to block access to the office, volunteers worked day and night to assemble more than 1,200 parcels for prisoners. Others, including taxi drivers, transported the care packages to three prisons, one of which was in another city, 35 miles from Minsk. When the jailers decreed that only family members could deliver parcels, the volunteers suddenly became the adopted "aunts" and "cousins" of prisoners.

More than \$50,000 was also collected and used to help more than 400 victims by covering the costs of prisoners' upkeep – Yes Mr. Chairman, in Belarus, prisoners must pay a daily fee for the "privilege" of residing in a cell – as well as medical assistance to those who had been beaten, and humanitarian aid to prisoners' families. Doctors promised to rehabilitate the injured and private businessmen pledged to hire those who had been dismissed from their jobs.

Perhaps most importantly, the Guardian Angels provided a human touch to those whose bodies had been beaten and whose dignity had been trampled on for exercising their right to assemble peacefully. They comforted the families of the detained and stood vigil outside the prisons in solidarity with those "inside." They greeted those released, provided them with rides home, and passed along information on where to get medical treatment.

It's not possible here to read even a fraction of the heartfelt responses to the Angels. But what is clear is that, while the prisoners were grateful for the parcels, it was the solidarity that was the true gift. One prisoner explained: "It wasn't just about clean water or clean clothes. When you're locked away and helpless, it was important to know that people remember and care for you." Another wrote that "without these packages many of us would have left prison with just one thought – to leave this country as soon as possible, forever. But because of them, we came out believing in better times." It should come as no surprise that the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs awarded the Angels its "Hero of Belarusian Civil Society" Award.

This social solidarity and self-organizing wasn't just a response to the election repression – it has continued throughout 2011. When the office of *Nasha Niva* (Our Field) was raided and its equipment seized in January, it was able to keep publishing because its loyal readers donated more than 30 computers to the independent newspaper. In the spring, when a teacher was fired for her political activities, 117 of her colleagues contributed part of their salaries to help her. During the “Silent Protests,” one group of volunteers gathered more than \$4,000 in money, water and other supplies for those detained. There have been many more examples like these. As one newspaper article put it, “a wave of repression has caused a tsunami of solidarity.”

Mr. Chairman, as inspiring as these examples might be, they are even more remarkable because Belarus remains a hard-core dictatorship. 2011 has been a year in which more Belarusians than ever before were beaten, arrested and repressed in a myriad of ways. It is a country where working for an unregistered organization is a criminal offense. And Lukashenka continues to tighten the screws. On Sunday, he signed two controversial laws that will make it even harder for Belarusians to exercise their right to freedom of assembly and receive foreign assistance for civil society activities such as supporting independent media and human rights.

Against great odds, independent media outlets, human rights groups and citizens' solidarity campaigns in Belarus have performed admirably since the election, producing tangible and compelling results. But given the worsening conditions there, we cannot only laud Belarusians' drive and determination. Civil society needs our continued support and solidarity to complement and enhance their brave efforts. I would offer three recommendations:

- 1) Support for civil society in Belarus should be maintained at current levels. Due to the crackdown, the US government increased its support to \$18 million dollars in 2011. Much of this support went directly to aid independent media and human rights victims. Since December 19th, NED was able to increase its support to independent media by 30 percent and to human rights groups by 236 percents. But the Belarus budget is expected to

decline to \$11 million by 2013. I ask that we try to hold the line on the Belarus budget so that we can continue to help brave people like Ales Bilatski and Ales Michalevich. It is the right and moral thing to do.

- 2) Support should go directly to the Belarusian independent journalists, human rights defenders and civil society activists who are doing the good work I've described. Too much US assistance goes to US contractors for soft, non-democracy programs fostering engagement with the regime. It is the Belarusian democrats who are struggling to change their country for the better, and it is their efforts should be supported.
- 3) Finally, the most effective type of support is that which is provided consistently, over the long-term. NED has been assisting independent media in Belarus since 1993, and human rights groups since 1996. I first started worked with Ales Michalevich when he was still in college and I was a part-time grad student, back in the mid-1990s. Short-term and one-off programs have had little impact or lasting effect in Belarus. In a dictatorship, it takes time for independent publications to build their capacity and audiences, human rights groups to build networks and trust, and NGOs to engage citizens who have much to lose by opposing the regime. The outstanding work of Belarusian civil society in the post-election period is the payoff of years of investment. Please help us to maintain this commitment and it will continue to reap dividends. Despite the crackdown, momentum is building for change.

Thank you very much for your support and for considering these points.

Chairman Smith, on behalf of those who suffered for the cause of democracy in Belarus after the December 19th election, I would like to personally thank you for taking part in the "Voices of Solidarity" campaign that recited their names to the world over Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty during that difficult Christmas period. It is my pleasure to give to you a CD produced by RFE/RL and NED with the entire program.

I am happy to answer any questions you might have.