

**STANDING
COMMITTEE**

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NATO Parliamentary Assembly

BELARUS

1. At the invitation of its Lithuanian delegation, the NATO PA co-organized a seminar in Vilnius on Friday and Saturday 23 and 24 September on the current situation in Belarus. The seminar brought together representatives of the democratic opposition and civil society in Belarus with NATO PA members and representatives of other international organizations. The aim was to assess, with the help of the Belarussian representatives, what further action the international community, and particularly the NATO PA, could take that will assist the country to return to democracy.
2. Members of the Belarus parliament have not participated in the NATO PA since 1997, when the status of Associate Member (granted in 1991) was suspended as a result of the increasingly undemocratic activities of the Lukashenko regime.
3. According to the various presentations made at the Vilnius seminar, conditions in Belarus continue to deteriorate. Every aspect of society is strictly controlled by the regime and the private sector is vanishing fast. There is regular harassment at all levels of civic opposition to the regime whether it is media, academia, NGO's, or even local authorities. This harassment is pervasive and relentless and appears in many guises – impossible regulations, extortionate fees, provocations, beatings, imprisonment and even the ultimate, disappearance. It succeeds not only in stifling all forms of opposition but also in keeping the Belarus population in ignorance of the outside world. This total unawareness coupled with nostalgia for the Soviet past, deliberately encouraged and exploited by Lukashenko, explains why the regime continues to command support among much of the Belarus population.
4. In view of the monopoly on information, the provision of alternative information for the Belarus population through external broadcasting has become a top priority. Such broadcasting might be done from the neighbouring countries, with involvement of the independent Belarussian journalists. The information should be broadcast in Belarussian as well as Russian languages.
5. The influence of Russia remains key and can also be said to explain the frequently muted reactions of certain member governments. President Putin, it was said, does not like President Lukashenko but he fears revolution even more. The "encouraging" examples of Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine were discussed but Belarus representatives were quick to point to the many differences that in their view invalidate such comparisons.
6. One positive note from the presentations was the fact that the opposition is attempting to create a degree of unity and planned at the forthcoming Congress to select a single candidate for the elections in 2006. (This turned out to be the case and in early October, over 800 delegates from the country's main opposition groups and nongovernmental organizations chose Alyaksandr Milinkevich to run against President Lukashenko.)
7. There was agreement among the leaders of the Belarussian opposition that contact with the higher echelons of the Belarus regime - the President and his ministers, including the parliament - should be strongly resisted: it was felt that they were "nothing more than puppets", and any official contacts would be used to strengthen the image of Lukashenko in the eyes of Belarussians as an important international figure. Since the policies of Western governments and international organizations have failed to bring any benefits to the cause of democratisation in Belarus, the seminar tabled, among other things, proposals to discuss the possibility of looking for constructive cooperation with some Belarus officials.
8. It was agreed that all international organizations should keep the issue on their agendas in order to maximise pressure on President Lukashenko. Parliamentary organizations, it was also agreed, have less leverage than their governmental counterparts, however, they have greater freedom to express views more frankly. Their principal contribution lies in raising and sustaining public and parliamentary awareness. These interparliamentary efforts should be better

coordinated. However, as real influence lies with governments, a better synergy should be achieved between the executive and legislative approaches.

9. Among the NATO PA participants at the seminar, there was general agreement that the democratic forces in Belarus should receive active support and encouragement. However, it is not evident how this could be achieved. The following options were suggested as meriting consideration by the Standing Committee.

- Examine the possibility of NATO PA activities in Belarus itself, but without going through formal channels and avoiding contact with the regime. At first sight this would appear to be impractical. Nevertheless, two possibilities could be looked at.
 - a) Visits by NATO PA members to Belarus, it was agreed, would be helpful. However, as these should avoid formal contacts, they could be difficult to organize.
 - b) Likewise, a Vilnius-type seminar with representatives of civil society would be welcomed, but would be subject to the same constraints above.

The feasibility of the above options could be investigated with the advice and help of the Lithuanian mission in Minsk (the NATO-lead Embassy) and also in consultation with NATO to see if any of the low level activities of PfP cooperation could be used for such purposes.

- In the event that activities in Belarus are not feasible, a further Vilnius-type meeting could be foreseen in Vilnius or another equally accessible venue.
 - The Standing Committee could consider whether, how, and in what form to make Belarus a regular part of the Assembly's agenda, in which case the Political Committee or the Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security could be asked to take it on.
 - In view of the urgency of the existing situation, the Assembly's President, in consultation with the Lithuanian delegation, considered it appropriate to invite representatives of the democratic opposition and civil society to the annual session in Copenhagen. The Standing Committee should consider whether this should be done on a regular basis in order to allow them to further internationalize their situation. Belarus "opposition" representatives were invited in the past but the practice was stopped in 2001 because of disagreements over who to invite.
 - Belarus could also be made the subject of a NATO-Russia Parliamentary Committee meeting. In Copenhagen, the Committee is discussing the situation in the Caucasus with the NATO Special Representative as speaker. However, the intention of putting Belarus on the agenda at future meetings could be raised.
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