

Jonathan Moore's interview to Charter97



The United States chargé d'affaires in Belarus Jonathan Moore recently gave an interview to Charter97. Below is the full text of the interview:

– Mr. Moore, an alarming tendency has appeared recently: some European politicians openly flirt with the dictatorship in Belarus. Despite of the gross violations of human rights, new political prisoners in Belarusian prisons, crackdown on peaceful rallies, they speak about some “liberalization” in Belarus. What would the policy of the new US administration be, enticement of dictatorships or support and encouragement of democracy?

– Thank you for your question, and I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today. I would describe the situation in different terms. Over the past year we have seen a variety of developments in Belarus. Some developments have been positive, others have not been. To go back to last August, the release of the last political prisoners was a positive step.

We were told that conditions would be much improved for the parliamentary elections. However, those of us who observed those elections and certainly OSCE report which was very comprehensive and professional, now that the election did not turned out as promised.

There have been protests which have occurred without any interference by the police. There have been some events that were allowed to occur, such as the congress of the Belarusian

Christian Democracy Party, and the Union of Poles; the distribution of Nasha Niva and Narodnaya Volya, and some steps to establish a broader dialogue with civil society.

At the same time, and we will be talking about it in the interview, there are some cases that are of concern to us.

In terms of Europe's position, of course Europe has many positions. There are 27 different member states that have 27 different opinions. I think it's important however to stress that both the US and the European Union have the same fundamental perspective towards Belarus. This is underlined by the fact that both the United States and the European Union recently took steps to prolong the suspension of some sanctions. But it also indicates that neither the European Union nor the US are in a position to be able to remove sanctions. The government in Washington made a decision to keep an Embassy here, to maintain a dialogue with civil society and the authorities. And that is an approach that the Obama Administration is continuing to follow.

We have made clear that we are prepared to take positive steps to encourage positive steps on the side of the Belarusian authorities.

We certainly have a very active dialogue with civil society. We appreciate the support of many people in Belarus to us through our diplomatic difficulties. But at the same time we are here to maintain dialogue with the authorities as well.

- Isn't there a confusion of terms when you speak about positive steps and you mean positive steps that are not substantial? Small steps like the congress of the Belarusian Christian Democracy or the two newspapers that are now distributed in kiosks (but their distribution is very small, 300-400 copies for Minsk, which is next to nothing) have almost no influence on the situation in the country. And the West is underlining and stressing that "liberalization" is

taking place, taking minor steps and insignificant changes as examples which do not influence the situation in Belarus. Meanwhile, new political prisoners appeared in Belarus, and serious violations are going on and remain unnoticed.

– I did not use the word “liberalization”. As we look at the situation, we look at smaller steps and at larger ones. We have many serious concerns and we’ve made that clear to the authorities. And we can talk about these cases in more detail, but we do not currently consider that there are political prisoners in Belarus. But I think the fact that U.S. sanctions have not been removed indicates that the United States is by no means satisfied that all the work is done in Belarus.

– **Over the past month human rights violations have taken place in Belarus: leaders of entrepreneurs Mikalay Autukhovich, Yury Lyavonau, Uladzimir Asipenka, Young Front activist Artsyom Dubski were imprisoned. Peaceful rallies on St Valentine’s Day and on Freedom Day were disbanded brutally. Youth leaders are forcibly drafted despite of their poor state of health. Why there is still no official reaction of the United States to these events?**

– Let’s talk about these issues separately. Certainly it is very much our belief that protests and meetings should be allowed to take place without interference from the police. Examples like the protests after the elections in September or protests of entrepreneurs in January showed that it’s certainly possible to have events and protests take place without police involvement. As far as I know (your information may be more up to date) the small protest that was held last night with regard to the Day of Remembrance, was not particularly marked by any action by the police.

– **But it only confirms that when the regime does not stage provocations, policemen do not beat up people, opposition can hold peaceful protest rallies.**

– In that context it should have been possible in February for the police to have not gotten involved.

With regard to the case against three entrepreneurs, we are following it very closely. Two of them are former political prisoners. They are in custody. However, the court proceedings have not begun. We have expressed interest in seeing the evidence in the case and have not had the opportunity to do so. And therefore it would be premature for us to come to conclusions in that case.

Similarly, in the case of Artsyom Dubski, we were present at his last trial. And if there is another trial we will be observing that as well. We are following these issues carefully, but we do not feel it would be appropriate to characterize them specifically at this time.

– The US imposed sanctions after the denial of Belarusian authorities to release political prisoners. When political prisoners were released, sanctions against two enterprises were lifted. Should these 4 people be detained, recognized as political prisoners by the United States and the EU, would the United States be fighting for their release as for the previous ones?

– I don't want to speculate at this time. There have been cases where people have asked questions about the motivations for the trials, but people had been found innocent, or they've been only sentenced to a fine. We'll have to deal with each situation as it develops. It is our hope that more positive developments will occur, which will allow us to suspend more sanctions.

– Belarusian human rights activists state there are hidden repressions in the country today. The regime has become more cunning. There are different concealed forms, for example, setting up criminal cases, falsified criminal cases against leaders, pressure like drafting youth leaders and pressure

with the help of tax inspection. For a person from the West it is hard to realize what is going on here. Is there any hope that the international community will follow and be attentive to such cases?

– I think we have open eyes: it's one of the reasons why we have an embassy here. As diplomats we are trained in observing these sorts of issues and situations all around the world. Like her predecessors, Secretary Clinton has been very clear: human rights are important for the United States.

We look at a host of factors and developments on many levels. And we also look at civil society very closely to understand what the policies are, what the motives of different organizations are. And certainly by paying that kind of attention, when we feel it's appropriate for us to act or speak out we will do that.

– **The ideals of freedom and democracy have always been precious for the US. The US stated it is necessary to promote these ideals all over the world. In most cases your country was adhering to principles when dealing with dictatorships. What is your attitude to the fact that Lukashenka's Belarus is becoming a part of the Eastern Partnership alongside with democratic Ukraine and Georgia, and to the invitation of the Belarusian dictator to the EU summit in Prague?**

– We view the Eastern Partnership as a very important initiative. It is of course the initiative of the European Union. The United States does not have a role in it. It already includes a number of countries; in addition to those you've mentioned, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan. And those countries are at different levels of political and economic development.

The EU is now discussing of course how they wish to approach the issue of invitations to the summit in Prague. There are good reasons for ensuring that Belarus is included, that

Belarus is not excluded from a group of the countries in this region. It would be wrong to exclude a sovereign, independent country like Belarus from a regional gathering like this. It is a very active debate, and how the Europeans will decide is their business.

– But fundamentally not the Belarusian nation is in question, but legalization of the regime called “the last dictatorship of Europe” by the US Department of State.

– The United States and many European countries maintain embassies and diplomatic relations with Belarus. I think we’ve been clear about our perspectives on the situation in Belarus. But even in 2006 the United States sent an ambassador here who presented her credentials to Alexander Lukashenka. I attend events at the state level, where he is also present.

European ambassadors here also presented credentials to Lukashenka. So this is not a case of Cuba where we do not have diplomatic relations, or Iran, where we have no embassy, no diplomats at all. So I don’t think that’s the critical issue for the Europeans.

– But Belarus’ becoming a member of the Eastern Partnership program would allow Lukashenka to say Europe recognizes him. He will ask for more loans to support his regime. Do you agree that dictatorship’s becoming a part of the European Partnership is more serious than giving credentials?

– Honestly, I do not see it that way. Solana was just here, Ferrero-Waldner wanted to come here and expected to see him. I think that indicated that Europe at a very senior level is prepared to engage directly with Alexander Lukashenka. And as I’ve said the invitation to the summit depends on the European Union. I think the different sides will make their own statements and competent conclusions about who gets invited and how it would be handled.

– What are the possibilities of making decision on tighter

sanctions against Belarus by the US should the human rights situation deteriorates further in Belarus?

– We are following the situation in Belarus, as we discussed earlier, very closely and with great interest. We recognize that we introduced comprehensive sanctions in 2007 against Belneftekhim and its subsidiaries. I can't promise what decisions would be made in Washington. I do not want to eliminate any possible future decisions of this president or the next American president. I can tell you however in the current discussions we are not talking about adding to the sanctions, we are talking about taking away some of the sanctions.

We feel that it would be better to be in a situation where we would be suspending and in fact lifting our sanctions. We track the situation; we do take note of some steps that have occurred. The government in Washington will be reviewing the situation again at some meetings in May. We have to take the next decision before this 90-day period expires on June 1. We'll see what Washington decides at that point.

– There is an opinion that EU being slow with sanctions caused the existence of political prisoners, and the US on the other hand, by introducing sanctions released political prisoners.

There are some differences in the approach and mechanisms of the European Union and the United States, but our policy is fundamentally the same. In our case we were able to respond very quickly in August and September last year. And of course our sanctions against Belneftekim do not have a European equivalent. But I would encourage everyone in Belarus, whether civil society or the authorities, to look at the fundamental views of the United States and Europe as the same. We work very closely together with them here in Minsk, in European capitals, and in Washington.

We are looking at the situation with the same fundamental

principles. With many European Union member states we share membership in NATO. We all, together with Belarus, are members of the OSCE. It's easy to find certain differences of opinion or differences of mechanisms. I have to tell you I personally do not see as a good thing when Europe is criticized and the United States is praised, or vice versa. I do not think that anyone will succeed in dividing the fundamental views of the United States and Europe. And this can be said in different contexts, but working together is more important than working apart.

– However, Belarusians note that the stand of the United States in the issue of human rights is very principled as opposed to approach of the EU.

– European concern about the human rights is the fundamental basis for their sanctions. Being one country instead of 27, and having different mechanisms, the United States did take steps the European Union is not taking. But we do not have fundamental differences with Europe. Europe is taking its opportunities to engage or to have a dialogue with the regime, to discuss issues that are also of interest to us.

We do feel that the sanctions that we introduced had a concrete effect. And from our side we took very concrete practical steps to suspend some of the sanctions when we felt that decision was justified.

– Now when the so-called “dialogue” of the Belarusian authorities with Europe is taking place, the Belarusian opposition states that this dialogue should be preceded by an internal dialogue between the regime and opposition. Do you agree with such an approach?

– Many people use the word ‘dialogue’ as if it were some magical solution. We want to see dialogue with results, dialogue that is genuine, is open; that leads to mutual conclusions and hopefully to progress. Exactly what form it

takes is up to the different participants in the dialogue to decide.

It is also important to have Belarusians talking to Belarusians in a practical way that can lead to more results.

Certainly I think it is an excellent advice to the authorities to have a very broad and very open dialogue with civil society.

– You observed the parliamentary elections in Belarus in 2008. They were recognized as not free and undemocratic by the world community. The same things happen in Belarus since the referendum held by Lukashenka in 1996 that changed the Constitution. Do you agree with Belarusian democrats who say today that the first democratic reform the Belarusian authorities must carry out is really free and transparent election?

– We support the dialogue of the authorities with the OSCE to provide some changes to the electoral code. The conduct of elections is very important for us. At some polling places the conduct was quite correct in September. So we were prepared – in fact, it was a part of our discussions, even in August – to make more positive steps with regard to sanctions if the elections would go well in September. We'll have to see how things will go on from here, but yes, free, democratic elections are extremely important to us.

– Once the US hoped that democratic liberal values would be enrooted in Russia. But that hasn't taken place. The opposite process is taking place. What conclusions are made from that by the United States?

– It's not really for the American Charge d'Affaires in Minsk to comment on Russia. We have a well-staffed embassy in Moscow that is responsible for these issues. But I will take one point from the recent bilateral discussions between Russia and the United States. Our Secretary of State presented Foreign

Minister Lavrov with a “reset” button. We are not yet in the position to have a reset button with Belarus. We have seen our diplomatic staff reduced by 90%. We have seen certain small improvements but there is much more that could be done. Extremely important for the United States, on a bilateral basis, is the release on humanitarian grounds of our citizen Emanuel Zeltser. His assistant has been released, but we still have no indications when Mr Zeltser might be released. There is great deal of speculations about him in the international press. We have one fundamental concern: he is an American citizen, and he is dying. We need this situation to be resolved.

– What is the possible way to resolve this situation when the Belarusian authorities do not listen to your calls you for the period of the year?

-Well, we hope at some point they will listen to our calls. In every discussion with the Belarusian authorities we have stressed the critical importance of resolving this issue.

– Once Lukashenka confessed that he asked \$5 billion loan form the US, but he was refused. However, Russia and the IMF have given loans to Lukashenka. Is it moral and economically expedient to give loans to the dictatorship? The dictatorship is supported in this way. It is obvious that the money is given not to the Belarusian people and not for holding reforms, but to support the existing repressive system.

– We were asked about a bilateral loan from the United States. In the present economic situation we are not providing bilateral credits. As with other countries, we recommended that Belarus pursue a loan from the International Monetary Fund. It was our hope that the credit from the IMF would have ties to structural economic reforms. Because we did not see that in the IMF loan, the US voted against it. We do not have a veto, we are just one of the countries that votes.

In any economic crisis there is always criticism of the authorities. It was certainly a very difficult and unpopular step – but a very practical one – to devalue the Belarusian ruble. That devaluation of the currency, and certainly the currency slipped somewhat further since then, helped to increase the amount of exports that Belarus can make, particularly to Russia. Although unfortunately so much of the economy in Belarus depends directly on the state and the state budget, it was a necessary step to devalue the currency.

We will see over time what other steps are necessary. The IMF is still in dialogue with Belarus. Credits that are tied to structural reforms would be received more positively by the United States.

And there are many ways: banking reform, changing property and real estate ownership laws, making privatization much more transparent, much more open. We will continue to watch the situation and have close consultations with the IMF.

The alternative to this is of course the economic collapse of Belarus. While there can be a discussion about the fundamental causes of such a collapse, I think that vast majority of people would agree that economic collapse would not be in the interest of Belarus' sovereignty and independence.

– As we see, the regime is just accumulating debts without making economic reforms. For today the foreign debt of Belarus is about \$20 billion.

– As for the United States, as I've said, there is no possibility of a bilateral loan. Regarding the IMF, there is currently no request for additional credit. I believe there is a possibility of a certain credit coming from the World Bank. But you should talk to the World Bank office about that. There is this recent currency swap with China, that is an interesting step. Russia is providing some portions of its loan to Belarus. I haven't discussed that at the official

level, but I understand that there has been a request for further 3 billion dollar loan from Russia. I'm not an economist, but I think the hope is that it would be possible to move through the crisis this year. We'll have to see what happens, but I don't think Belarus can succeed by simply getting more and more credits or expecting more and more credits.

– How the US estimate the stepping up of military cooperation between Belarus and Russia, namely, creation of the common regional air defense system and the collective rapid reaction force in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization? Some observers have already called them military groupings of “chasteners” created to crack down upon peaceful protest rallies in the countries of the treaty.

-We want to see Belarus continue to be a sovereign and independent state. We would like to see the people of Belarus choose the country's path of economic and political development. We are certainly very well aware of Belarus' close military cooperation with Russia. We do not fear that, we do not see that as a threat. We and other countries continue to inspect military units in Belarus, as Belarusians do elsewhere.

I think, based on some recent initiatives of President Obama, that there will be some more discussions about missile defense programs. That is a topic of interest for Belarus.

We hope that as part of our dialogue with the authorities – and at some point when we have a defense attaché in Minsk – that we can clarify to those people in Belarus who do not understand the purpose of the anti-missile system. We disagree with the perspective that the anti-missile program being discussed as any kind of threat to Russia or to Belarus. That's perhaps another topic to discuss with the authorities.

– You have spent a few years in Belarus. Foreign diplomats

usually speak about the country of their stay tactfully: they note a rich history and culture, wonderful landscapes and warm-hearted people; they speak about their preferences in the national cuisine. But it is not a secret to anyone that the work of a Western diplomat in Belarus is not the easiest one. What were the most positive and the most negative impressions during your stay in our country?

– The most difficult day for me in Belarus was May 3 last year, because that was the day that I escorted a convoy of eleven colleagues, their family members, and their pets to the border with Lithuania. I do not remember the number of vehicles that crossed the border, but it was at least ten cars. And just one vehicle with me, my wife and some of my colleagues and the American flag, returned alone to Minsk. And we knew that we had a job to do here in the embassy, and that we would have to continue doing it. It's been nearly a year since then. I'm very proud of how much we've been able to accomplish. And we still have some more to do before I leave in July.

In terms of positive impressions, there have been many. My first day in Belarus was a great source of satisfaction: to arrive here and embark upon a three-year assignment. I was very pleased to meet for the first time in August some of the last political prisoners who were released. We have gotten to know their families and worked for their release, but to meet them in person and hear what they had to say was very special.

Probably my proudest day in Belarus was July 4 last year when I hosted our Independence Day reception at the ambassador's residence in Raubichi. I was very glad to show our guests that the flag of the United States was still flying in Belarus. And I particularly appreciated the opportunity to host so many Belarusians and diplomatic colleagues who had been very supportive throughout the difficulties of last year.

But there may be more difficult days and more positive days,

we will have to see...

– All Belarusians who go abroad always say the same thing: it is easier to breathe in free countries. Returning back to Belarus, everybody notes how unhappy our people look. To your mind, what all of us have to do to breathe freely in our own country?

– We want to see the people of Belarus reach their own conclusions, make their own choices, to consider the situation in their own country, to consider conditions in other countries. I would encourage people here to practice the best principles of Belarusian hospitality, which means to welcome as many foreigners to this country as possible, even diplomats (laughs), but also when possible to travel to other countries and form their own impressions. The United States – I do not know whether it is a compliment or an insult – is called a “superpower.” I can tell you that after September 11, 2001, I do not feel that I am from a “superpower.” The United States is blamed for problems and never given credit for successes. I would like many more people from Belarus to be able to come to my country and form their own impressions. Then they can determine what they want and what they do not want for Belarus.

Source: [Charter97](#)

Forbes: Currency devaluation

a shock for Belarussians



MINSK, Jan 8 (Reuters) – A surprise 20 percent devaluation of the Belarussian currency has sent people rushing to shops before prices go up. The devaluation shocked many in this ex-Soviet state where President Alexander Lukashenko, widely known as 'Batka' or 'Dad', insulated the population from the turbulence of world markets by keeping much of the economy in state hands.

But the global turmoil has caught up with Belarus and has forced it to seek a \$2.5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund. The devaluation may have been linked to the loan as freeing up the currency system, cutting social spending to balance budgets and wage controls are common conditions set by the IMF for its loans to help rebalance ailing economies.

On Dec. 31 Minsk agreed to the IMF loan and on New Year's Day it devalued the rouble to 2,600/\$ from 2,200/\$. Belarussians rushed to the shops the next day to buy what they could in anticipation of steep price rises once the next set of imports hit the shelves. 'I don't remember such queues since the Soviet times,' said Marina, a 38-year-old housewife, out shopping in Minsk. 'I saw a woman grabbing onto a fridge and shouting that she got it first, while a man was telling her that he had ordered it.' 'We sold 10-days worth of stock in three days,' said Tatyana, a furniture store assistant.

'Today, there were a lot of unhappy people. People couldn't believe that we've sold out.' Read full text at Forbes.com.