

U.S. sanctions against Lukashenka regime extended

U.S. President Barack Obama extended for another year sanctions imposed against certain Belarusian high-ranking officials on June 16, 2006. "The actions and policies of certain members of the Government of Belarus and other persons continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States. Accordingly, the national emergency declared on June 16, 2006, and the measures adopted on that date to deal with that emergency, must continue in effect beyond June 16, 2010.

Therefore, in accordance with [...] the National Emergencies Act [...] I am continuing for 1 year the national emergency," says the Notice* from Barack Obama to the U.S. Congress released on June 8. According to the U.S. president, despite the release of internationally recognized political prisoners in 2008 and the U.S.'s continuing efforts to press for democratic reforms in Belarus, serious challenges remain.

According to RFE/RL's Belarus Service*, Belarus has called continued U.S. sanctions against it "pointless" and "confrontational." Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrey Savinnykh said the extension signaled the United States' lack of political readiness to normalize relations with Belarus. "The abolition of all types of sanctions is a fundamental precondition for the renewal of dialogue," Savinnykh said. But David Kramer, a former U.S. State Department official, said any improvement in ties was in Minsk's hands. Kramer served during the George W. Bush administration as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, responsible for a region that included Belarus.

"Belarus and the Lukashenka regime know what they need to do if they want to improve relations with the United States and

with the West," Kramer told RFE/RL. "And that is to stop cracking down on people's rights [and] liberalize their society. But I fear the situation is only going to get worse as Belarus approaches a presidential election [in 2011]."

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Press Freedom Act: Government in Belarus imprisoned journalists



Belarus was mentioned in the text of the Daniel Pearl Press Freedom Act signed into law by President Barack Obama last Monday, May 17. According to the Voice of America [*](#), the U.S. State Department will be required to evaluate press freedom in countries around the world and highlight governments that condone and facilitate repression of the press. Pressure on journalists has recently increased in Belarus. Two criminal cases have been initiated against independent news website [charter97.org](#). According to [charter97.org](#)[*](#), their office was searched and computers were seized and journalist Natallya Radzina was beaten during the search. The editor of the opposition newspaper "Tovarishch" Syarhei Vvaznyak has recently been arrested after a search in his apartment.

*Obama Signs Press Freedom Act Voice of America Editorial
The United States continues to be a staunch defender of
press freedom. In support of this fundamental liberty,*

President Barack Obama recently signed the Daniel Pearl Freedom of the Press Act. The law is named in honor of the American journalist who was kidnapped and beheaded in Pakistan by terrorists on February 1st, 2002. The Daniel Pearl Freedom of the Press Act, said President Obama, "sends a strong message from the United States government and from the State Department that we are paying attention to how other governments are operating when it comes to the press." Under the new law, the State Department will be required to evaluate press freedom in countries around the world and highlight governments that condone and facilitate repression of the press. "Oftentimes, without this kind of attention," said President Obama, "countries and governments feel they can operate against the press with impunity, and we want to send a message that they can't." The attention is warranted. In a recent statement on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, President Obama noted that last year was a particularly bad one for freedom of the press worldwide. While people gained greater access than ever before to information through the Internet and cell phones, governments like North Korea, Ethiopia, Iran, and Venezuela curtailed freedom of expression by limiting full access to and use of these technologies. More media workers were killed for their work last year than any year in recent history. The high toll was driven in large part by the election-related killings of more than 30 journalists in the Philippine province of Maguindanao. In addition, journalists were killed with impunity in Somalia and Honduras. Even more journalists have been imprisoned. "Iran, following its crackdown on dissent after the last elections," said President Obama, "now has more journalists behind bars than any other nation. Governments in Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, North Korea, Tunisia, Uzbekistan, and Venezuela imprisoned journalists who wrote articles critical of government leaders and their policies." The United States honors those who carry out the vital task of reporting the truth to their fellow citizens,

despite the many challenges and threats they face. All nations should. Article 19 of the United Nation's Universal Declaration on Human Rights protects freedom of expression including the right to a free press. There can be no doubt that a free and independent press is central to a vibrant and well-functioning democracy.

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U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing “Advancing U.S. Interests in the OSCE Region”



Excerpts on Belarus from the US Helsinki Commission hearing held on October 28, 2009 in Washington, D.C.:

Present: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs; Alexander Vershbow, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Michael H. Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

REP. CHRIS SMITH (R-NJ):

...Mr. Chairman (referring Sen. Benjamin Cardin – D-MD), you and I visited Belarus this past July along with other members of the Commission. And we had, as I think most people know

certainly in this room, had a private meeting with Alexander Lukashenka.

Lukashenka was aggressive in that meeting demanding that our government revoke certain sanctions put on his government by the Belarus Democracy Act, which first became into law back in 2004 and was reauthorized in 2007 and major provisions of it which were adopted into this year's State Department authorization bill. I know from countless meetings with the Belarusian democratic reformers and human rights activists how these sanctions sustain them against the dictator both materially and morally.

And we saw with our own eyes that the sanctions are a big factor in the dictator's thinking. He wants them removed. And so they have to say – if they're going to have it removed, there needs to be substantial progress in the realm of human rights and they must treat those dissidents with respect and not the scorn, and really much worse than scorn, with which Lukashenka and his thugs have done so in the past...

REP. SMITH:

...Secondly, I'd like to raise – and if you want to comment on that in a second, I appreciate if you would – on Belarus. Our chairman led us to Minsk. We had an excellent meeting. We had more than a dozen members in a face-off friendly but firm with Lukashenka. And I know, Mr. Gordon, I think on the 14th of August, you met with Lukashenka as well. I believe that was the date, whatever date it was.

MR. GORDON: I didn't actually meet with Lukashenka –

REP. SMITH: Okay, but it seemed as if he wants to obviously see a reversal or a amelioration of those sanctions. My hope is not until we have real deeds and not promises or even minor deeds. We need some substantial deeds from this event. And again, that's the message we heard from our friends in the dissident community. If you could speak to that. ...

MR. GORDON:

... On Belarus, indeed I appreciated the opportunity we had to compare notes on this after your trip and before mine. To clarify, I spent some time with the Belarusian leaders, but didn't meet with President Lukashenka. That could happen at some other time, but we felt this time it was appropriate to do business at a different level. And the business was what we discussed. And I think we had very much the same message, which is that as the Administration has mentioned in other cases, we are open to dialogue and engagement. And we have noticed a couple of signs, not nearly enough, but enough from Belarus to merit talking further about this. And I went to Minsk with a very clear message. And I was the most senior official to go to Minsk for 10 years from the State Department. And we wanted them to notice that as well. And the message was that if they want a better relationship with the United States and certainly if they want any scope for lifting the sanctions that have been put on them, then they need to go about their democracy and human rights practices differently. And that's the core of the issue.

There're other things we care about, like getting our embassy fully staffed. We welcome the fact that they released an American citizen, Mr. Zeltser, thanks in part to your good work. We took that as a sign that they might want to different and better relationship. And some other modest steps that they had taken about registering NGOs and media. But I made clear to them that they still have a very long way to go and that there was linkage between the two things. So we'll see what comes of that. I think it was a good thing that you all went. I think it was appropriate for me to go and let them know the different future that could be available if they do different things at home, but also that there won't be a different future if they don't. And we'll see what comes of that. From our point of view, we're going to sustain this approach, but we will need to see results from them before there's a

significant change in our policy.

We're also, I should add, working very close with the Europeans on this, who I think have a similar approach. They also have sanctions on Belarus. They also focus on democracy and human rights. And we're more powerful when we work on this together because if one of us slips, then you lose the leverage of the entire West pushing them on the issues that we care about. ...

For full hearing transcript go to www.csce.gov.

Senator Cardin's Statement on Zeltser's Imprisonment in Belarus



WASHINGTON – Yesterday Senator Benjamin L. Cardin, Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, addressed the U.S. Senate with a statement on Emanuel Zeltser's imprisonment in Minsk. The new Democratic administration [continues to put pressure](#) on Belarusian authorities to release the U.S. citizen kept in the Belarusian KGB custody for almost a year.

Here is the text of Senator Cardin's statement:

BELARUS IMPRISONMENT – (Senate – February 11, 2009)

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, as chairman of the Helsinki Commission, I would like to bring to the attention of the Senate a situation which is literally a matter of life and death for an American citizen, Emanuel Zeltser, who has been

imprisoned in Belarus since March 12, 2008. Mr. Zeltser is in desperate and immediate need of serious medical treatment—including a coronary bypass operation.

The poor human rights record of President Lukashenka's regime is well known. No American—indeed no human being—should be subjected to the kind of treatment Mr. Zeltser has been forced to endure during his incarceration. Despite Mr. Zeltser's grave health condition—he suffers from heart disease, type 2 diabetes, severe arthritis, gout, and dangerously elevated blood pressure—Belarusian authorities have repeatedly refused to provide Mr. Zeltser with his prescribed medications.

He was initially denied two independent medical evaluations and he has reported being physically assaulted and abused while incarcerated. Amnesty International has urged that Belarusian authorities no longer subject Mr. Zeltser to "further torture and other ill-treatment."

Mr. Zeltser was convicted of "using false official documents" and "attempted economic espionage" in a closed judicial proceeding. The U.S. Embassy in Minsk criticized the proceedings, noting that it was denied the opportunity to observe the trial. The State Department has repeatedly called for Mr. Zeltser's release on humanitarian grounds. So have others in Congress, especially my colleague on the Helsinki Commission, cochairman Representative Alcee Hastings.

But now the situation appears dire. Earlier this month, Mr. Zeltser was examined by an American doctor. It was only the second time an American physician has been permitted to see Mr. Zeltser. The doctor concluded that "there is a clear and high risk of sudden death from heart attack unless the patient is immediately transferred to a U.S. hospital with the proper equipment and facilities. Refusal to transfer Mr. Zeltser to a U.S. hospital is equivalent to a death

sentence." Specifically, Mr. Zeltser is in dire need of a coronary bypass procedure. The doctor also determined that because he had been denied prescribed diabetes medication, Mr. Zeltser's left foot may need to be amputated.

In response to a press inquiry in December, the State Department called for "the Belarusian authorities to release Mr. Zeltser on humanitarian grounds before this situation takes an irrevocable turn." Based on the recent doctor's report it is apparent that such an irrevocable turn is imminent unless this American citizen can be brought home promptly for the medical treatment necessary to save his life.

Belarus has taken some tentative steps to improve its notably poor human rights record, in particular the release of several political prisoners last August. However, Mr. Zeltser's continued, and potentially terminal, imprisonment threatens to override those initially encouraging signs. As such, I strongly urge the Belarusian authorities to release Emanuel Zeltser on humanitarian grounds so that he may obtain the immediate medical treatment his doctor has concluded is required if he is to live.