

# EU Shows Support for Belarusian Gov't Before Elections



Amid tense waiting for presidential elections in Belarus and possible Russian attempts to influence the situation, 20 October, the President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania visited Minsk. It was a good sign for Belarusian president Lukashenko. After talks, his Lithuanian counterpart made some meaningful [statements](#):

*Lithuania is an EU member and next year it will preside in the OSCE. Using it, we want to help Belarus, be alongside it during the elections. We want to help it to be more open and recognized in Europe.*

While Moscow is clearly continuing anti-Lukashenko information campaign and is allegedly trying to reign him in or even oust him altogether, such a visit from the EU and NATO country should be considered as a prudent support from European side. Due to particular nature of relations between Belarus and Russia the West cannot move too openly in supporting Minsk against Kremlin's pressure. Belarusian leader himself [admitted](#):

*We are in unfavorable conditions now, and we should think about how we could ensure our independence.*

In addition to general strategic support, Belarusian and Lithuanian leaders discussed more specific issues. Minsk has recently enhanced and intensified its regional diplomacy and this time it declared the intent to increase trade with Lithuanian up to one billion US dollars. What about democracy?

Ms. Grybauskaitė [told](#) of her hopes for Belarus becoming more open and defend human rights after elections.

*Lithuania as well as the EU is hopefully looking to Belarus and new elections. Europe is willing to recognize the elections' openness, if you will demonstrate it.*

She elaborated more on it,

*For a decade Europe as if built a Chinese Wall between itself and Belarus, and it should not be there.*

There was also one more important point. Lukashenka publicly emphasized that two countries can successfully cooperate in energy. Lithuania could provide transit route for Venezuelan oil bought by Belarus to balance the country's dependence on Russian resources. While Venezuela is interested in new markets for its oil, it uses Belarus as a pilot partner to explore Eastern European market. Anyway, Lithuania could gain a lot on transporting oil for Belarus, though Lithuanian route is not definite choice since Minsk is also considering such transit option as Ukraine (dangerous one now that pro-Russian party came to power), Estonia and Latvia.

Of course, Russia does not like Belarusian oil endeavor, since Moscow is considering the region its own backyard. Interestingly, Lukashenka in his quest for non-Russian oil could really make some difference in the region, in particular by implementing his second oil idea – in the Middle East. Minsk could bring first oil by tankers, yet it is quite feasible to merge Caspian oil stream and Middle Eastern and send them for Europe.

Bringing Middle Eastern oil into pipelines meant for Caspian one would be a historical moment for the whole Europe. Especially easy it would be for Iranian oil – there is some infrastructure in place already – but the US are strictly opposing any projects with Iranian involvement. There are nevertheless other sources of oil in that region as well –

like in North Iraq. This project could not be implemented by Belarusian or any other single government, but it requires creation of an international consortium. Belarus, however, could show the way by importing Middle Eastern oil. It is not easy for a landlocked nation to use tanker option, but the energy security issues can interest the neighboring countries. The Lithuanian president showed interest in regional energy cooperation.

*It is, of course, the entire Baltic Sea region, where we can be useful for you [Belarus] regarding the sea access. Both Belarus and Lithuania are interested in energy independence, or at least in having choice regarding energy resources.*

Furthermore, she added,

*I am glad to find common language with the Belarusian president as for ensuring energy independence of both states. ... We are willing to openly cooperate. It does not contradict European interests. The EU is interested in energy independence and in maximal diversification of its [energy resources] shipments dependency.*

Regardless of oil ambitions, it seems that after a series of Russian moves, the EU finally decided to react and actively engage in Belarus. If so, a Great Game in Eastern Europe is going to be really big one.

SB

---

**US                      Politicians                      Better**

# Informed about Belarus than a Top EU Official

Thanks to Representative Chris Smith of New Jersey Belarus was at the center of discussions at the hearing held by US Congress Helsinki Committee earlier this week. Joao Soares, the President of OSCE Parliamentary assembly shared his views on political processes in Belarus with a group of US congressmen.



Joao Soares admitted that he did not follow what was happening in Belarus over the last months . His knowledge about Belarus was limited to a recollection of a meeting with Alexander Milinkevich and a general observation that Belarusian elections look fine the vote counting.

On the other hand, the US congressmen appeared much better informed about problems in Belarus. In particular, Rep. Smith, a long standing advocate of Belarus interests in Congress, shared his concern that China might provide Belarus technologies to censor internet. Representative Alcee Hastings mentioned that there would be a special hearing on the Belarusian issue this September.

Below are the excerpts from an unofficial transcript of the hearing.

*Hearing :: Global Threats, European Security and Parliamentary Cooperation*

*CAPITOL VISITOR CENTER, WASHINGTON, D.C., [SEN. BENJAMIN CARDIN, CO-CHAIRMAN, CSCE], MODERATING*

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 16, 2010

REP. SMITH: Mr. President, one last question, how would you assess our mission, the OSCE mission in Minsk? I've met with both groups of dissidents, men and women who have been in and out of prison within the last month, and they are very conceded about the accommodation mood that they think the Minsk mission has taken. Do you have any thoughts that you might want to share with us on that?

MR. STOARES: I have a good impression of the Minsk mission. Of course there are always human factors that we cannot control, absolutely, as you know better than me. But I remember the head of the – the previous head of the Minsk mission was a German diplomat and I remember the meeting that we have done there with – (inaudible) – who are responsible for the Belarusian dossier and I talked about it.

We made initiatives as far as Milinkevich is concerned and I think we played a good role and I think we can – I don't know how the changes. I don't have recent news from the last months after the changes took place there. But my evaluation as far as what I could have seen in the previous years is a positive evaluation.

Of course it's always difficult and sometimes I have seen in other places sometimes some diplomats that are sent in a seconded way. That's another problem. That's another problem that you should solve. Sometimes some diplomats tend to be too much in compromise with the power. I've seen it.

REP. SMITH: I do have one last question. Again, meeting with the opposition – (inaudible) – and some of the others in Belarus.

MR. STOARES: Milinkevich.

REP. SMITH: They've made it very clear at the Chinese government is assisting Lukashenko in developing a capability to use the Internet to repress the human rights and pro-democracy forces there. Have you gotten any information on that?

MR. STOARES: I know that the Chinese are very good experts in this kind of matters.

REP. SMITH: They are, right.

MR. STOARES: And they shouldn't be proud of that. But we have to find ways of – and of course of dealing with it and pressing them not to do these kind of problems. But there are many other countries in the OSCE area where we have these kinds of problems.

REP. HASTINGS: I met with those opposition leaders as well and Chairman, hopefully Robert McNamara was meeting in one of the meetings and I indicated that I thought what would be helpful is for us to have a hearing to deal with the Belarusian issue and to do so – I forget the date or time in September – Robert is nodding to me and I hope we can accomplish that. All right, thank you. I'm sorry.

MR. STOARES: Belarus is a very good case where of course there is an authoritarian system. That came, if we see the beginning of the president, it came on a democratic way but after it turned on some non-democratic matters.

But where there are credible and popular opposition, people, leaders – I personally like very much Milinkevich and the role I was there with Alcee when we had a very nice press conference saying clearly that the elections were not free and clear because they were not free and fair and it was among all of them where I've been – and I've been in more than 30 – it was the worst I have seen and I remember that specifically with Congressman, Republican from Illinois, during this mission around Minsk and I remember very well

*this mission and in the end.*

*During the day it was absolutely marvelous. You have been there, music, food, children in every polling station. But after the problem was the counting. The counting we could not see.*

*SEN. CARDIN: There's no question – there's no question of the problems in Belarus from the point of view of democratic institutions. We took a delegation there last year. So we were in Minsk and had a chance to meet with the president.*

*We had an opportunity to bring home an American who was being held inappropriately in their prison and if there is any hope here for some progress, it's current desire to be more dependent from Russia, which might give an opportunity for some progress to be made. But there are certainly issues that Congressman Smith has raised on the human rights issues that are pretty egregious and we would like to see some positive steps.*

*We don't expect change overnight but we do expect progress and that's a country of great interest to us. We are not giving up on any country in the OSCE as far as meeting its commitments under the Helsinki Final Act. Mr. President, you've been extremely generous with your time.*

Read the full text at <http://csce.gov>.

YK

---

# 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](http://www.csce.gov).