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Ambassador David Johnson: "Give Belarusians a European chance"

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David Johnson, the head of the U.S. Delegation at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (Warsaw, September 28 - October 9, 2011), is interviewed by Alexander Lukashuk, the director of the Radio Liberty Belarusian service.

Lukashuk: From the beginning of this year the U.S. delegation to the OSCE has consistently and persistently demanded the unconditional release of political prisoners in Belarus. Are you happy with the development of the situation?

Johnson: I'm happy above all with the unity of positions of the United States, Canada, EU, Norway and Switzerland in the fact that the regime should release political prisoners. The authorities must do so without any conditions, and they must restore their civil and political rights, so that they could again be active in politics, travel as much as they need, teach Belarusian citizens their aspirations to build an open society in Belarus, where the citizens could freely elect their leaders and realize their economic interests without interference from the state.

Lukashuk: You used the phrase "without any conditions", when speaking about the release of political prisoners. However, the Belarusian authorities, in turn, hope that some of these conditions, for example, obtaining a loan, will be satisfied if the political prisoners are to be released. Is it true that if it happens, Minsk will receive international financial assistance?

Johnson: I don't specifically deal with this issue, but from what I understand, the IMF has made it clear that certain economic criteria must be met first; however it appears that this has not been done.

So I think that at least for the moment there is some chance to move forward. This decision will have to be made by the IMF. We have an important voice in the IMF, and in the past we have not seen the economic reforms that would justify the financial injections. So for now we seek the restoration of political rights of the opposition and genuine dialogue between the opposition and the government, which could lead to the elections. If such reforms take place, then the economic issues can be considered. However, it is difficult to hope for real progress in the economic field, while there are still unresolved fundamental issues of relations between the government and the people.

Lukashuk: Acute concern of families, friends, and colleagues of the political prisoners is not only for their release as soon as possible, but also for how they are being treated. Intimidation, blackmail, abuse, systematic humiliation and torture - this is what the prisoners, who have already been released, describe. At this time we do not hear any serious concerns regarding these reports from the West. Why doesn't the West notice this?

Johnson: We are all concerned about these allegations that the government can behave this way. To address this problem, it is not enough for me or any government just to express their concern. It is necessary that an impartial third party - for example, the Red Cross or the UN Rapporteur on Torture - could come to Belarus to meet with these people, to meet with government officials and draw their own conclusions that they could afterwards share with all of us. It must be some third party not connected with the authorities or those who complain about torture, who will review the case and form an independent opinion of what's happening. We are definitely concerned about it, like other governments. And this problem should be solved in the near future.

Lukashuk: It is often said that democracy is impossible without the rule of law. Lukashenko regime stresses that it does everything in accordance with the laws. Human rights activist Ales Belyatsky is arrested on charges of violating tax laws. Participants of the "silent protest" on the streets of the Belarusian cities are also being detained and fined, because they violate the laws on the assemblies. Police officers in plain clothes behave that way, because the law allows it.

Johnson: I would say that there is a clear difference between the rule of law and government through law. Any state can adopt laws that would restrict people's actions. However, to have a genuine rule of law, the restrictions must be imposed for the state - the state must obey the law, the state must fulfill its international obligations, in the case of the OSCE - it's obligations with respect to freedom of assembly, speech, association. The Belarusian authorities have accepted these basic obligations, and until they carry them out it will be a shame on their part to assert that in Belarus there is "the rule of law." Belarus must obey the rule of law, but so far we have not seen the slightest sign of it.

Lukashuk: What relationship can be seen between the development of the democratic process in Belarus in general and the development of the Internet? It is believed that the Internet can be a free platform to express one's views without government control. But we see that the government also understands that. Special departments are created that conduct "special operations" on the Internet, in the social networks. So does the Internet help in the development of democracy, or not?

Johnson: I think the Internet is a promising area for the development of democracy. Recently, for example, in the Mediterranean region, we have seen the citizens assemble using sophisticated new technologies of the Internet and social networks. One of the things

that we wanted to do - and we openly talk about that in the OSCE – is that the commitments that we made to one another, regarding the freedom of assembly, association, democracy - all this doesn't just exist in a meeting room, church, etc., all this also exists in cyberspace. And those willing to come together to discuss important things for them, should be able to do it in social networks as easily and quickly, as in any other place. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made it clear that she considers it an important priority. And we must emphasize that this is one of the fundamental rights of an individual - to have access to information and be able to meet online.

Lukashuk: The presentations of the U.S. delegation at the OSCE frequently cite examples of gross violations of democratic freedoms and human rights in many post-Soviet countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia. How would you rate the Belarusian regime in comparison with the regimes in other former Soviet countries?

Johnson: I would not give countries the assessments and would not rate them. I do not think this is a productive method of diplomacy - providing assessments. But what can I say - and I said earlier of Belarus - is that the Belarusian authorities are very far from fulfilling all its OSCE obligations in promoting democracy, civil and political rights of its citizens. And it is very important to us, and for the governments of EU countries. It was very clearly stated at the summit in Warsaw last week at the level of the heads of state that they are very concerned about the situation in Belarus, the lack of civil and political rights. So there is a large group of states - the leading countries of Europe, USA and Canada – deeply concerned about this. They look at the rules under which we all subscribe, and see a big gap between what was promised and what was done in Belarus regarding meeting the OSCE commitments.

Lukashuk: Mr. Ambassador, you say "very far", "big gap" ... If we imagine Belarus 5-10 years from now, would you be optimistic or pessimistic?

Johnson: I will say this. I've worked at the OSCE for several years. I had the privilege to represent the United States in the OSCE as a permanent representative from 1998 to 2001. And I've seen real change taking place in Serbia, Slovakia, with the help of the OSCE.

The OSCE has played an important role in creating the conditions for observation of elections, to promote free choice for the preparation of independent local observers. As a result of the parallel counting of votes it turned out that that Milosevic was not elected president. And for this reason I have hope. But we must be prepared to wait, we must be persistent. We can not just believe that everything is going well simply because it takes place day after day, all this requires a lot of attention.

We are sitting in Warsaw, some 500 kilometers away. And here, in Warsaw, we see what changes have occurred over the 25 years. I first came to Warsaw in the spring of 1983. Now

everything looks different. You can't compare. And I imagine that the same may be the future for the people of Belarus, if you give them a chance. And I think they should have that chance.

David Johnson - American diplomat, during his career he specialized in European security affairs, has worked in the American diplomatic missions in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Canada, Mexico, and Great Britain. In 1998-2001 he was the U.S. ambassador to the OSCE. Now he is a senior adviser at the Avascent International consulting firm.

Quotes:

"It is difficult to hope for real progress in the economic field, while there are still unresolved fundamental issues of relations between the government and the people."

"There is a clear difference between the rule of law and government through law."

"One of the fundamental rights of an individual is to have access to information and be able to meet online."

"The Belarusian people should have a chance."