

Byalyatsky Event Remarks, September 25, 2012

Sunday in Belarus was Ground Hog day. A depressing repeat of 18 years of democracy denied. Here's what the OSCE had to say about Sunday's parliamentary elections:

“OSCE commitments including citizens’ rights to associate, to stand as candidates, and to express themselves freely were not respected. The elections were not administered in an impartial manner.”

This is a regime that maintains its rule through cynical manipulation reinforced by repression. After the presidential elections on December 19, 2010, the authorities in Minsk decided to crack down on protests, arresting and beating citizens who were courageous enough to speak out against the regime.

No one is beyond the reach of the regime. Those brave individuals, like Andrzej Poczobut, whose work for *Gazeta Wyborcza* has landed him in prison on more than one occasion, continue to speak out and report about the situation in Belarus despite the regime's efforts to suppress the truth.

The consequences for the people who are imprisoned are plain enough. And so are the consequences for the society. Belarus, a country with great promise in the heart of Europe is isolated and in economic distress. With inflation at over 50% in 2011, and increasing isolation from the West, Minsk will continue to struggle in providing economic security and opportunity for its people.

Jest wielu Białorusinów, którzy odważnie walczą o lepszą przyszłość. Kilka takich odważnych osób jest tu dziś z nami. Bardzo się cieszę, że jesteście państwo z nami. Dziękuję też za przybycie wszystkim Polakom i Amerykanom, którzy wspierają działania Białorusinów.

[Now, there are many Belarusians who are bravely seeking a better future. We are joined by some of them here today, as well as by many Poles and Americans and who support them and others attending the OSCE meeting in Warsaw.]

Jednym z najodważniejszych jest Aleś Bialacki, którego wspólnie dziś uhonorujemy. Szkoda tylko, że nie może odebrać nagrody osobiście.

[One of the bravest is Ales Byalyatsky, who we honor today. We only wish he could be here to receive this award in person.]

He is a founder of the Belarus Popular Front, Belarus's first pro-democracy movement and its first human rights organization, Belarus Witness. . And the founder of the Vyasna Human Rights Center

Instead of celebrating its bravest and most courageous citizens, the Lukashenko regime imprisons them.

Ales Byalyatski has been arrested more than 20 times. Today he is serving a four and a half year prison sentence.

Today is the 50th birthday of this great man, and all of us wish he could be here to receive this award.

I met Ales in Wroclaw in 2011. The Wroclaw Global Forum which we established in Poland in 2010 has become a meeting place for democracy activists. Ales was there along with other Belarusian activists, including Natalia Kalida of the Belarusian Free Theater and Zhanna Litvina, Chair of the Belarusian Association of Journalists. (Zhanna are you here?).

Ales received the Atlantic Council's Freedom Award together with other courageous people, including Minister Sikorski, on behalf of the Polish people, Moldovan Prime Minister Vlad Filat, Adam Michnik and Helena Łucywo of *Gazeta Wyborcza* , and U.S. Senator John McCain. Here's what Ales said on the occasion:

“In its 1,000-year history, Belarus was always linked to Europe. We have to do everything in order to join or rejoin the European nations. We can’t allow an authoritarian regime to rule in Belarus. There is no place. Our organization’s name is Viasna: springtime. Spring is the time when nature usually changes. And when we were setting up this organization, we had changes on our minds and we hope for the changes to happen.”

America and Poland are working together to support the changes that Ales talked about. We are co-funding programs and speaking out. Two weeks ago, Deputy Foreign Minister Pomianowski and I in Foksal held a press conference to discuss American joint funding of Polish democracy projects through the Emerging Donors Fund.

Diplomatically, America and Europe are one in applying sanctions targeted on the regime and its henchmen.

Our position is clear - the Belarusian government must respect the democratic and human rights of its people and must release and rehabilitate all political prisoners. Poland and America are natural partners in promoting democracy. And Poland brings special credibility because of the success and immediacy of its example. And it's no accident that the HDIM is here and I welcome our HDIM delegations from both Washington and Vienna.

Today, however, we are here to celebrate a man's courage on his 50th birthday. And we are honored to be joined by Natalia Pinchuk (Pin-SHOOK). She has worked to have her husband freed, and has been a brave example for all of us. She has represented him and the principles he has fought for so well at home in Belarus and beyond.

We wish you and your family well. And we thank you for being here today to give us an opportunity to show our support to you, your family, and to your country.

Thank you.

Let me ask our Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Rights, my good friend and democracy advocate Tom Melia, to say a few words.

It is now my honor to ask Chairman of the Sejm Committee on Foreign Affairs Grzegorz Schetyna to say a few words. Chairman Schetyna has had a long career in politics, representing the Polish people in the Sejm. Before the momentous changes of 1989, he was the Chairman of the Independent Students' Association at Wrocław University and he represented opposition students' organizations during Round Table talks in 1989. Mr. Chairman –

Now I have the privilege of presenting the Human Rights Defender award from Secretary Clinton, an award which has previously gone to Damas de Blanco of Cuba and Yulia Latinina of Russia.

I will read from a message that Secretary Clinton has sent us.

Present the award. Ask Mrs. Pinchuk to speak.