



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

FAAE • NUMBER 014 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, December 1, 2011

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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1025)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Welcome to meeting number 14.

We're meeting with Ales Michalevic, recipient of the John Humphrey Award.

I believe Mr. Lalonde is going to start off with an introduction, and then Ales is going to give us a little time. Then we'll see how much time we have for questions and answers. But by all means, we wanted to have a chance to hear a bit about what Ales is doing. I'll just turn it over to you, sir.

Mr. Michel Lalonde (Director, Communications and Governmental Affairs, Rights & Democracy): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to all committee members for making room for this short meeting with Mr. Ales Michalevic, the 2011 John Humphrey Award winner.

The John Humphrey Award, created in 1992, is presented annually to an organization or an individual for their outstanding contribution to the promotion of human rights and democratic development.

A candidate in the 2010 Belarusian presidential election, Mr. Michalevic was arrested and wrongfully imprisoned by the government before the end of the election and before the end of his campaign. He was held, along with five other opposition candidates, for more than two months and subjected to torture for the duration. Since March 2011 he has been living in the Czech Republic, in Poland, after fleeing Belarus for fear of reprisal for his life.

[Translation]

In presenting the award to Mr. Michalevic, Rights & Democracy's international jury highlights his courage, determination and perseverance, and also recognizes his ongoing efforts to make Belarus a free and open democracy.

Now I am going to give the floor to Mr. Michalevic, who will talk to us about the situation in Belarus in general.

Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Ales Michalevic (As an Individual): First of all, thank you very much. It's my pleasure to speak here.

I have just heard your previous discussion about Ukraine, so I would like to start with a joke about how we explained the difference

between Belarus and the Ukraine before. It does not apply now, unfortunately. We had a joke that in Belarus we had governance but we had no democracy, and in Ukraine they had democracy but they had no governance. At the moment, the situation in Ukraine is slightly changed according to Belarusian standards, but I will finish my speech with some more comparisons.

First of all, I was a presidential candidate during the election of 2010. We had an election on the 19th of December, so in several days it will be one year since that election. The election process was relatively democratic. Definitely, we still did not have free media and so on, but the election campaign was relatively democratic. But everything changed immediately after the election—in fact, during the day of the election—when 800 people and seven presidential candidates were arrested, and after that for two months I was in prison. I was in the detention centre of the KGB.

What I experienced in the detention centre is very difficult to explain because we were tortured. We had pressure from the KGB to cooperate with them and to speak with them. After all the torture I was released, because they just forced me physically to speak to them, and they forced me to sign a cooperation agreement with the KGB that I would be something like a secret agent. Immediately after I was released I organized a press conference to speak about conditions in this detention centre, about torture, and about being forced to cooperate with the KGB.

After two weeks in Belarus I was mentally broken. I was really in very bad physical condition, so I decided to leave the country. At the moment I live in Prague and Warsaw, so I am meeting with politicians and media, and I am cooperating with the United Nations special rapporteur on torture about Belarus.

First of all, I would like to speak about some other people.

Ales Bialiatski—a human rights activist, vice-president of the International Federation for Human Rights, and head of the Human Rights Center “Viasna”—was sentenced to four and a half years of imprisonment just several days ago, because Lithuania and Poland gave Belarusian authorities his private bank accounts, which he used, for example, to collect money for legal support of imprisoned people. He was a human rights activist. His organization was closed several years ago, so his only opportunity was to collect money in private bank accounts. He was accused of not paying taxes in Belarus, and at the moment he is sentenced to four and a half years of imprisonment.

Two presidential candidates, Mikola Statkevich and Andrei Sannikov, are still in prison. Altogether we have 13 people who are political prisoners in Belarus.

Also, I would like to speak about...we definitely have no freedom of press in Belarus. We have no access to electronic media, as a majority of Belarusian independent newspapers were closed. All independent radio stations were closed. We have no access to TV nor any opportunities to register or develop it.

Also, there is a very important case that I would like to tell you about. After the presidential election, at the beginning of this year, we had a terrorist attack at the Minsk metro station in Belarus. Two young boys were sentenced to death two days ago for organizing this terrorist attack. According to public opinion polls, 80% of the Belarusian population don't believe those people organized it, so in support of them we organized an international campaign to waive this penalty. We really hope the death penalty will not be executed in Belarus. For me, privately, it's not only about whether they are guilty or not, because I'm against this penalty itself, but as I told you, 80% of Belarusians don't believe they are the ones who organized it.

I have some last remarks.

• (1030)

During the last 15 years, Belarus became an authoritarian contagion. What we see at the moment in Russia, what we see at the moment in Ukraine, is a spreading of the Belarusian contagion. The Belarusian illness is spreading to other countries, even some democratic countries, such as the one my colleague from the Lithuanian Parliament, Zingeris, is from. Lithuania is very much influenced by Belarus because the biggest Lithuanian seaport, Klaipeda, is totally dependent on the Belarusian market. About 80% of the income of the Lithuanian seaport is generated from Belarus, under Belarusian state-controlled agreements.

Authoritarian Belarus even has some control over the civilized world, over some countries of the European Union. You will see in Russia a "presidential vertical"; I mean when a president is nominating governors and mayors. This system was introduced after Belarus. First of all, we introduced it in Belarus, and then Putin realized, yes, the system is very good. Why should they elect their governors themselves when the president can nominate them?

What we see in Ukraine at the moment with the last political process, the last political prisoners...everything is organized according to the Belarusian scenario. Belarus became an authoritarian contagion.

But at the same time, I'm absolutely sure that Belarus has a unique chance, together with Georgia, to become a success story of democratic development in post-Soviet space, because we have relatively very well-developed infrastructure, very good roads, very good railways. We have a very good energy system. We have several modern profitable enterprises.

I'm absolutely sure that it's possible that economic development and democratic development will come together. After last year's huge economic crisis, which was because of Lukashenko's unpredictable economic decisions, we still have the opportunity to become a success story of democratic development. I'm absolutely sure that with the Belarusian economy it's possible to ensure stable and sustainable economic growth in Belarus and to convince the majority of people that democracy and economic growth come together.

I'm absolutely sure that we can ensure future democratic development in Belarus.

Thank you very much.

• (1035)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll start with Ms. Sims.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Thank you very much. I really appreciate this opportunity for us to engage in a dialogue. I hope your dinner last night was delightful. I was supposed to be there, but other things got in the way.

One of the fundamentals that's necessary in a growing democracy is the freedom of the press. What kind of an impact is it having in Belarus, this lack of freedom for the press to speak out and report? Who actually controls the media right now? What exists in the way of media? What I'm looking for is what kinds of opportunities or spaces are there for critiques of the current government? There are probably not too many, but I'd like to know what there is. You always look for hope.

Mr. Ales Michalevic: Thank you very much for your question.

I would like to stress that the Internet in Belarus is the same. Belarus is a very urban country; 75% of the population lives in cities. The majority of people have access to the Internet. Access to the Internet is the same as in Canada, as in Poland, as in Germany, so it's the same. At the moment it's the only source of access to independent information. Also, in some smaller places people have access to satellite television, unlike in Minsk where it's mainly cable, so it's not allowed to play it. But in smaller places people have access, so they have access to independent Belarusian television, Belsat, which is broadcast from Poland. But the people who are getting independent information are getting it from the Internet.

The circulation of the biggest independent newspaper is 15 times smaller than the biggest official one. It's because of state control over the distribution system. There are several independent newspapers that still exist, but they have no access to a distribution network. Their economic conditions are much worse and they're paying ten times more for distribution than the official one.

At the moment, independent Internet websites and social media, like Facebook, are of the greatest importance. Lukashenko is closely cooperating with China on methodologies for controlling the Internet. He is blocking, for example, access to several websites, to several social networks, simply to ensure that people are not getting independent information. Still, from day to day it's possible to get access through the Internet as the main channel of information. We have no other access. We have no access to media. TV and radio are totally controlled by the state. As I said, circulation for the biggest official newspaper is 15 times larger than the biggest independent one.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: What is the day-to-day impact on the lives of the citizens in Belarus with this kind of a tightening of information, when you're only dependent on the Internet? What does that do to people being able to organize civil society groups?

Mr. Ales Michalevic: They are organizing civil society groups where they live, such as through newsletters, private communication. They're using the Internet, which is also a very powerful tool. They totally don't believe in TV and electronic media.

We have a joke. One man comes to another one and says he would like to live in Belarus, and the other man answers, "But you live in Belarus." The first man says, "No, I would like to live in the Belarus that I see on TV."

•(1040)

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: I have to tell you that even in democracy we have jokes very similar to those, where we say, this is the kind of democracy we would like to see. So it's never really just in one area.

A follow-up question for me, having a background in education, and education being a key component, is this. What is your education system like and how is it funded?

Mr. Ales Michalevic: Our educational system is very much post-Soviet. We had in the Soviet Union a very well-developed education in technical subjects, like mathematics, physics, and chemistry, but we had a lack of civic education. It's more or less the same system. It's the same system as was in the Soviet Union. Even Lukashenko ruined some of the best parts of the Soviet educational system.

At the same time, I would like to say that the Belarusian labour market is still one of the most highly educated markets in terms of engineering, in terms of technical sciences. The system stayed more or less the same.

You should remember that Belarus was the most privileged part of the Soviet Union in terms of high education. So the percentage of people with a university education in Belarus was always very high.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Is education paid for by the state?

Mr. Ales Michalevic: Education is mainly paid by the state, but if you would like to enter the social sciences or law, you would pay for your education yourself. It would definitely be much cheaper than here and much cheaper than in the States, but still it's very unaffordable for the majority of the population.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to finish up with Mr. Goldring.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for appearing here today. And congratulations on receiving the John Humphrey Award.

We know there are some difficulties today, and seemingly there is a slippage in democracy in Ukraine. We had the discussion with a couple of the other countries just before you came here. Can you give some insight as to what is behind this? Obviously, it's for power-brokering purposes. How does that manifest itself? Is there any movement towards changing that, or is there any interest in changing that? If you're jailing as many people as has been commented on here—800 arrested and a former presidential candidate also arrested—and you yourself are having difficulties... is there a light at the end of the tunnel? Is there any progression and movement towards democracy?

The final question would be this. What can we do? Probably as a member of the OSCE, because it's a common body for Belarus as well as 56 countries—Canada, the United States, and 54 European countries—is there not something we can do to bring this discussion forward and try to collectively come up with some ideas?

The other final thing here would be on the sanctions that have been placed by the United States and others against Belarus. It's my feeling that sanctions don't necessarily work, that it's probably better to engage. Is that a way of looking at it with Belarus? Certainly I would think that would be the thought with Ukraine or with other countries. What about Belarus? Have the sanctions been working? And do they make any difference?

Mr. Ales Michalevic: Thank you very much for the questions. All of them are very important.

It's possible to speak about Ukraine and Belarus for hours. Those countries are really very different. In Ukraine, there are oligarchs. Oligarchs from eastern Ukraine have completely different interests from Russia. The situation in Ukraine, as I said, is very much different from Belarus.

In Belarus, Lukashenko has no choice. If he were integrated with Russia, if he were going for close integration with Russia, he would be dismissed by Russians, because both Putin and Medvedev hate him. He's an unpredictable and unreliable partner, and he would be dismissed by them.

If he begins to integrate with the European Union, it means he will release political prisoners, he will organize at least slightly democratic elections and so on, but he will be dismissed by his own population. Either way, he will be dismissed.

The situation in Ukraine is much different.

If we speak about sanctions, I believe the only way to deal with people such as Lukashenko is to play on the strategy of good cop and bad cop. Unfortunately, the European Union would never be a bad cop. I told you about Lithuania, which is controlled by Belarus through the seaport. If they lost this seaport and the profit from this enterprise, they would lose something like 3% of their GDP. So definitely they're controlled by us, and the European Union would not play the role of bad cop.

That's why I'm absolutely sure that the United States of America and those countries that can afford it—and Canada is one of those countries that can afford to play such a role—should play that role. Some other countries should play the role of good cop, so they can communicate with Lukashenko's people, because I still believe that Lukashenko is ready to defend his power until the very end. He's ready to kill his own people.

My idea is that we should have channels of communication with his people, with people from the police, the army, with different kinds of *nomenklatura* people—people from the establishment—and the European Union can do it. Some countries of the European Union can do it.

So my answer to your question about sanctions is yes. Sanctions should be there. Otherwise, Lukashenko will be absolutely sure that he can do anything, and the international community will still cooperate with him and will still speak to him. So it should be the bad and good cop strategy toward Belarus. I'm absolutely sure that sanctions are working, because Lukashenko is speaking about them. All the Belarusian press is speaking about them.

At the same time, more than 95% of the Belarus population are sure that the economic crisis there is not because of sanctions. They're sure that Belarus' economic crisis is because of bad economic decisions of the president. So I think, yes, the system is working.

We should not expect that sanctions will change the situation in half a year or in one year. We should be prepared for a long-term strategy.

From the other side, I'm absolutely sure that in two to three years—maybe five years maximum, but I think three years—we will have changes in Belarus. Our president will be dismissed, first of all, because of the economy, because of our people, and also because of Russia.

• (1050)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Before we wrap up, I had been told we could vote on the supplementary estimates (B) on Tuesday, but we double-checked and we have to vote on them today. If we don't vote on them today, which is an option that I will put to the committee, they will be deemed reported the way they are.

We can vote on them today. If we decide not to vote on them, they will be deemed reported back as they are.

I defer to the committee. Do you want to vote on them?

An hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. Why don't we do that then?

We have lots going on this morning. Thank you for your flexibility here. We are not finished with the meeting yet because we have to deal with the supplementary estimates (B). We'll be done very quickly.

I want to thank you very much for taking the time to be here this morning. And congratulations, once again.

It's Foreign Affairs and International Trade's votes 1b, 5b, 10b, 15b, 17b, 30b, and 45b. No vote can be increased. They can be reduced or carried the way they are. I will ask the question.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Department

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$6,353,680

Vote 5b—Capital expenditures.....\$1

Vote 10b—The grants listed in the Estimates.....\$7,561,132

Vote 15b—Passport Office Revolving Fund.....\$1

Vote 17b—Payments, in respect of pension.....\$1

Canadian International Development Agency

Vote 30b—The grants listed in the Estimates.....\$5,000,000

International Development Research Centre

Vote 45b—Payments to the International Development Research Centre.....
\$861,700

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Can you give us a moment, so we know what we're voting on, please?

We're just trying to get in touch with our vice-chair, H el ene, who is the lead on this.

The Chair: If we don't vote on them today, they're all going to be deemed reported as they are.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: As they are already.

The Chair: Since there were no questions on the supplementary estimates (B) today—

An hon. member: I have a question.

The Chair: She cut you out. She cut your knees off.

An hon. member: If they had a question, it would have been a first.

Ms.  eve P eclet (La Pointe-de-l' le, NDP): Even Mr. Baird said he never had a question in 10 years on the estimates—

The Chair: On the supplementary estimates.

Ms.  eve P eclet: I think that's a little bit crazy.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): I move that we report them back as presented.

The Chair: Is that all right? You're okay with that.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Okay, we'll have them reported back as they are.

Shall I report the supplementary estimates (B) 2011-12 to the House?

Some hon. members. Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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