

## (March 14, 2006) Balarusians in danger of losing freedoms

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What comes to mind when you think of the KGB, a single-ruling party, and a state-controlled press? Maybe a green-suited first party secretary over-adorned with medals, or perhaps a military parade in Red Square, but most likely something related to the former Soviet Union.

Today, unfortunately, the signs of authoritarian rule are present in Belarus. Sandwiched between a democratic Poland to the west and an autocratic-leaning Russia to the east, Belarus is singly ruled by Aleksandr Hrygorevich Lukashenka. Since rising to power in 1994, Lukashenka continually has tightened his grip over the Belarusian people. By altering the Belarusian Constitution and using the KGB (yes, they never changed the name) he has harassed, arrested and intimidated the independent media and political opposition.

As Balarusians gradually are losing their freedom, it is important that people around the world, and especially in the United States, stand and take notice. The people of Belarus must not be forgotten.

While Lukashenka never has been shy about using the state security forces to strengthen his authority, in recent years the repression has increased and Belarus has drifted toward strict autocratic rule. Currently, all television and radio are state controlled. After two warnings from the central government, any form of media can be shut down. According to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), on March 3, Lukashenka closed the independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya (250,000 copies). The combination of draconian laws and state control of the media has stifled the Belarusian opposition.

One of the people speaking out and fighting back is Iryna Vidanova. Born in Minsk, the 28-year-old Ph.D. candidate edits a pro-democracy, youth magazine titled Studenckaya Dumka, or Students' Thought. Though officially banned, Studenckaya Dumka is written in her native Belarusian tongue and stands out against the gray background of the state-controlled publications.

For Iryna, political activism is a family affair. Her father, Aliksei Karol, currently is a member of the Belarusian opposition and during Gorbachev's Perestroika founded one of the first noncommunist parties in the Soviet Union. When not attending class at John Hopkins, Iryna promotes democracy in her native Belarus, by working part-time for Radio Free Europe. When speaking of the current situation in Belarus, Iryna says, "Before Belarus was slightly totalitarian, but now it is getting worse, it is almost a totally totalitarian country." Unfortunately, she could attest to this as on March 1 one of her close friends was rounded up with five others on charges of working for an unregistered nongovernmental organization.

In Belarus, Iryna's voice joins other Belarusians in calling for democratic change. Commemorating the disappearance of two opposition leaders on Sept. 16, 1999, the 16th of every month is designated as a day of protest. Those courageous enough to protest turn off the lights in their houses and light candles that are then put inside their windows. Students across Belarus silently protest the Lukashenka regime by wearing blue jeans. As Ukraine had their "Orange Revolution," blue denim has come to symbolize the greater democracy movement in Belarus.

Despite recent crackdowns this month and the severing of the Internet and phone lines, the "Blue Jean Revolution" is attracting international attention. On Feb. 16, at a demonstration in front of Belarusian Embassy in Washington, Rep. Thaddeus McCotter, R-Mich., used a megaphone to speak to the crowd and demand free and fair elections. Together, McCotter and Rep. Daniel Lipinski, D-Ill., are rallying grassroots support for the Belarusian democracy movement across the country from students involved in local College Republican and College Democrat clubs.

In response to upcoming Belarusian elections Sunday, College Republicans and College Democrats are sending pieces of denim to Washington to create a massive blue jean rally flag to be unfurled at the Belarusian embassy Thursday. Also, on March 8, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H. Res. 673, originally sponsored by John Shimkus (R-Ill.), by a vote of 419-1. The Shimkus resolution drew attention of the widespread human rights abuses and called for free and fair upcoming elections.

Most Central and Eastern Europeans tasted freedom after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, but Belarusians still struggle daily to achieve the freedom many of us have enjoyed our entire lives. We must not forget the human rights abuses of the Lukashenka regime and the courage of Belarusians fighting for their freedom. While it is difficult to force Lukashenka to relinquish power, we must draw attention to human rights abuses and assist indigenous democracy movements to ensure that Belarus never reverts to a situation like its position as a former "republic" of the Soviet Union.

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