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Brussels Forum

Belarus: A Forgotten Story

Rush transcript. Check against video.

Mr. Ivan Vejvoda: Thank you very much. I hope everyone had a good lunch. The offerings were very rich. We do not have a Siesta time at Brussels Forum yet. We do have the child care, maybe we'll think of Siesta for next year. My name is Ivan Vejvoda. I'm the Vice President for programs at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and I will, in the span of two, three minutes, describe a very significant part of the German Marshall Fund activities in terms of support to democracy in civil society.

The German Marshall Fund celebrated 40 years of its existence last year and for the past 20 years, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the historical changes that happened in Europe, we have been engaged in a series of activities to support democracy in civil

society throughout the post-communist world beginning with a central and east European trust for civil society that we partook in with five other private foundations. There was work in the Carpasian region and GMF saw itself as a pioneer in these activities along with other governmental and nongovernmental donors.

The fund pioneered a new model in 2003. Ten years ago, a private public partnership with strong local buy in and that was the Balkan Trust for Democracy, which I had the honor of leading for eight years and it is being led by Gordana Delic, who's in the room here, and that became a truly transatlantic private public partnership.

The success of the model was that it was lean. It really helped grass root initiatives, reconciliation in the Balkans, and cross-border and regional cooperation. And in terms of modus operandi it was flexible; it was quick response and really gained the trust of civic and democratic actors in the region. Based on that model,

we created the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, that was also helped by the Romanian government. It's based in Bucharest and lead by our director Alina Inayeh, who's also in this room. They just celebrated five years of that trust.

On the basis of this model, we launched, two months ago, in Tunis, a Middle East North Africa Partnership for Democracy and Development. It is in its startup phase. The intention is to build on the experiences and the networks that we have to help those who rose for their dignity and freedom throughout that part of the world. We will draw on actors from the regions where we have worked, Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and also the region of the Black Sea. We hope that this will be as successful. We are humbly approaching this task because we know the difficulties and challenges of this world. Our eyes are wide open, but that does not avert us from addressing this task again, with other donors. And the attention here also, is to work in a spirit of the transatlantic

relationship so a number of European partners have already expressed their desire to join and some have already contributed to this effort.

Last but not least, we also have a dedicated program to help democrats and activists in Belarus. For the past eight years we have had such a program and this is by way of introduction to welcome Andrei Sannikov here among us today. Belarus, as the newspaper headline goes, is the last dictatorship in Europe. It is the only country that isn't a member of the Council of Europe. It is one where activists and democrats have struggled to have their voice heard and as many of you know, after the elections in December 2010, that, for which there was much hope, many of you ministers and others traveled there before the elections hoping that there would be an opening and of course, this was a false dawn. False because there was a massive crackdown. All the major opposition leaders were put into jail. The opposition presidential candidates, of which Andrei Sannikov, you will hear,

was the major opposition leader. Andrei was put in jail, was tortured, and was released finally under huge international pressure in April of last year. Andrei has been a regular here at Brussels Forum. We missed him for two years. On his behalf and those who were fighting for democracy in Belarus, two years ago you may remember Tom Stoppard joined us graciously and spoke very elegantly and emotionally about the work and support for Belarusian democrats. So it is with huge emotions and huge excitement that we welcome Andrei Sannikov, again, among us, and I would elect to ask, Andrei, to take the floor and give us his view on his country.

Mr. Andrei Sannikov: Thank you, very much. Thank you, Ivan. It's really a very special and very emotional occasion for me. First of all, I'd like to thank you all for the support.

Two years ago, I was at this time, I was in KGB prison in Minsk a famous prison known since times of Stalin (inaudible) and still serving its purposes in

dictatorial Belarus. And my lawyer more with gestures than with words managed to pass me the information that at the Brussels Forum they spoke about Belarus, about political prisoners, that Craig Kennedy asked to convey the support of participants of Brussels Forum and expressed his hope that I will soon rejoin you and it was extremely important for me. It gave me a lot of strength. Thank you and thank you, Craig.

A year ago, I was in a penal colony and deprived of any information that was specific about how they kept me there, deprived and isolated from the information, but miraculously through some prison grapevine, inmates told me that you were mentioned and your friends were mentioned in Brussels again. And again, it was strength for me, hope for me, because at that time, was little hope that I ever will be released. And no one, it was not only me that hoped to see the reaction of the world towards dictatorship in the European states. Craig Dowell and what was happening after that but the prisoners themselves were hoping to see a strong

reaction coming from Europe. And I know what I'm talking about because I went through at the time, a year ago already, went through four prisons and three penal colonies and there is no justice in Belarus. And so the hopes that prisoners have a day here, the strong rebuff from Europe, from Euro Atlantic community, from the democratic world, was connected with the hope to have some justice in Belarus, because Belarus is in Europe. And I only can echo what Timothy Garten Ash said that I'm speaking as a passionate European. And it's not just words because my presidential campaign was based on the principle of integration of Belarus into Europe. And it got a tremendous response from the people. It got a very active, proactive I would say, reaction because we do share the same Values. The values are the same in Europe and Euro Atlantic community these values can be protected, where in Belarus they're abused. And the virtue is to abuse the values of (inaudible) based. I think that's what Tom Stoppard two years ago tried to tell that and he tried

to warn against taking abnormal situation as normal and trying to deal with this at abnormal situation as if it is normal. And I think that Belarus is today and freedom fighters in Belarus are in the forefront of fighting for the values in Europe and Euro Atlantic community. And I want, since we're on the record, I want to first of all name those who are in prison, the political prisons because I think, that at every occasion, I'm using every occasion, and I want to use this occasion to hear their names. So here: (inaudible names)

These people are fighting for our values, for our common values, and I think that the world is not doing enough to release them. When I (inaudible) in Europe and (inaudible) I also must say the dictator is also in Europe and he's quite active in the Euro Atlantic community. He has sometimes a very effective manner of dealing within the European context. For example, like (inaudible) and Poland over the border traffic agreements, which he's holding back, demanding

political concessions from them, or indignant about the law against child adoption that was adopted in Russia against the United States, but nobody knows that (inaudible) is using the child adoption issue to blackmail the Italian government. Blacklisted people can travel to Europe since recently. There are (inaudible) providing their services to (inaudible) like PR agents. That was the case with (inaudible) in Great Britain in the past. That is the recent case of Jamestown Foundation that sent the so-called analysts, or maybe analyst, but they then printed the stuff favorable about Lukashenka. You know the fundamentals of the free world (inaudible) and dictators are very effective incorporating and forging their alliances. And they are, sometimes, more effective than democratic world. That's why we have to listen to what the democratic opposition says. And for example, they were recently several statements coming from the Syrians living in United Kingdom. They were appealing the peace in Great Britain, not about Syria. We'll talk

about Syria a lot in this forum, but they insisted to put more pressure on Lukashenka because he is cooperating with (inaudible) regimes and there is a lot of support going from one dictator to another.

I think that today the situation in Belarus is probably the most difficult, but Europe and Euro Atlantic community has all the experience, long and last experience to take right conclusions and to draw right conclusions and to develop strategies that would not be based on appeasement of the dictator. There was a statement coming from a well-known politician (inaudible) recently in an interview. She's very well-known in Belarus. She has headed the Adhoc group of parliamentary assembly (inaudible) here in Belarus for 15 years. She's known for trying every means of establishing dialogue with the authorities. She was instrumental in recognizing Lukashenka so called, parliament and depriving the legitimate parliament of the supreme (inaudible). And what was her conclusion. I failed, I think it said. It said very usual but very

brave confession of the renowned politician. And when asked how would she characterize Lukashenka she said one word, criminal. You cannot deal with criminal with diplomatic matters. We have to remember this. And to save our values, our European values, we have to be more resolute. I think today, as I said, there should be extra effort, first of all, to release political prisoners because already now, there are some trends that we saw before let's establish some kind of channels so involvement of dictator into the context of Europe. That will be wrong because people will die in prison. I was released because sanctions were introduced. I told her that I didn't have much hope to be released, but then the sanctions were introduced and I was released, together with my friend, (inaudible). Sanctions stopped and all the people, including presidential candidate, including famous Human Rights defender from Belarus (inaudible). Well, I think that is our priority.

Second don't try to help the [inaudible] Regime.

Try to help the recent of the democratic movement. Try to help independent media. Try to help civil society. Try to help the families of the repressed, we need it. And be bold, I'm appealing to Europe people to make unilateral decision to have (inaudible) visa's for all Belarus citizens. It will change the situation. I think it will change the situation immediately. I thought that today probably we're living in the most difficult situation in the Belarus but I'm optimistic and do you know why because I, in prison, after prison, I saw a kind of solidarity all over the world in Europe, in United States, and all over the world that never been here before as regards to Belarus and including the Belarus itself. And I think this solidarity, this support that is coming from ordinary people, from civil societies is a reason enough for optimism, and I have a material proof of this kind of solidarity because impossible is possible and in prison I got a letter from a great European and I was not supposed to receive this letter. The letter expressed support for human rights in Belarus and it was delivered to me miraculously and I have it with me and I have it with me almost everywhere I go. You'll

recognize the signature. This letter from a great European as I had said Vaclav Havel, and here is the prison censorship stamp over it and this is for me is not only a token and a symbol; it is a commitment of the conscious of Europe to the cause of democracy in the Belarus, European Belarus.

Thank you.