

Who'll Vote for Freedom? Elections in Belarus and Ukraine

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: Thank you.

Colleagues and friends, I am at a disadvantage here because I'm in the presence of people who know the situation on the ground in Ukraine and Belarus better than I do. We have a former Ambassador to Ukraine sitting with us, Steve Pifer. We have a former Ambassador to Russia, former Ambassador to Turkey, former head of the Soviet desk back in the 1980s, so I'm in the presence of expertise on these issues.

Let me review with you where I think we are, where the Administration thinks we are with respect to the upcoming elections in two very different countries. We're here to discuss Belarus and Ukraine. In Belarus, we have to deal with what is called the last dictatorship in Europe, the "last outpost of tyranny" as Secretary Rice has said, where we are seeing the kinds of abuses which are familiar to us from study and life in other repressive regimes.

In Ukraine, by dramatic contrast, we are seeing an election which promises to be free, fair, and open. It is an open election because we have, none of us have, any idea who is going to win. In Ukraine, we are dealing with the problems of a post-communist messy democratic transition. In Belarus, we are dealing roughly with a pre-democratic set of tensions.

Now to step back, to put this in a larger context, the question we are all dealing with is how far in Europe will the democratic wave that began in 1989 extend? How far will the frontiers of freedom move? And the question of whether and if so how far democracy can establish itself within Eurasia, the territory of what used to be the Soviet Union, is a question with profound implications for a continental sized area.

The Bush Administration, in fact, frankly the Clinton Administration that preceded it in which I also worked, did not believe, we do not believe that certain countries or certain peoples are pre-ordained to succeed or fail with democratic transformation. If we believe that we would have accepted the views of most

experts that democracy would probably not succeed in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary because that was, you recall, the prevailing view in 1989.

If democracy could succeed in those post-communist countries under conditions whose difficulty now is scarcely remembered, then it can, in principle at least, succeed anywhere in the post-communist hemisphere. And if it can succeed anywhere then the question is not whether one country or another is doomed to failure, but what conditions make it possible for democracy to succeed?

So the question of Belarus and its democratic evolution and the question of democratic consolidation in Ukraine have a profound impact on us all.

The question of democracies consolidation in Georgia, democratic progress in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, the possibility of reform and democracy even in Uzbekistan will also be affected by the results in Belarus and in Ukraine, as different as those countries are.

Now, let me turn to Belarus and review it. The news is obviously not good, and you needed no one from the State Department to tell you that. We are witnessing increased detentions, harassment, seizures of persons as the election approaches. The Belarusian regime is attempting to create a climate of fear and intimidation.

Opposition candidate Alexander Kozulin was beaten and detained on March 2nd. He may face criminal charges. One of his assailants was the notorious Colonel Pavlichenko who is said to be connected with some of the disappearances in 1999 and 2000.

I note also that the regime security forces roughed up the press that was covering Kozulin, which also tells us what kind of a regime we are dealing with.

Today, in Minsk, a court sentenced several members of opposition candidate Milinkevich's campaign team, including Mr. Viachorka, whom I know personally, to 15 days for supposedly taking part in an illegal demonstration. Activists from the Civil Society Organization Partnership have been detained under the rather fanciful and frankly absurd claims that they are engaged in a violent revolutionary plot led by Americans. I note also that NDI has been accused of seeking to foment violent revolution and with all respect to my friends in NDI, I have trouble imagining Nelson Ledsky engaged in anything like that. He sends good e-mails about detention of activists. He doesn't do anything like the regime is charging him with. This is Soviet-style in its absurdity.

So we must assume that there will be a deeply flawed election, in fact, an election which may not deserve the name.

What can we do in this circumstance? Principally, what we, the United States government, and we, the larger community of those in the United States, North America, and Europe who support democracy, is to shine a bright light on Belarus and the regime's record. We can help those activists who are struggling for democracy, to promote democratic change in the longer run. We can break the regime's stranglehold on information, and most importantly we can, through our support of an election process and our support for the opposition's efforts to open up that process, create a sense that there is a different future for Belarus than perpetual rule by Lukashenko and an eventual dictatorial successor.

The Congress and the Administration have worked together to this end. I must mention and must applaud the passage near unanimously in the House yesterday of House Resolution 673, which urged the government of Belarus to conduct a free and fair election and expressed support for efforts of the Belarusian people to establish a full democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights.

For our part, the Administration has invested \$12 million in Freedom Support Act assistance to implement programs to support Belarusian efforts to build democracy in that country. We plan to sustain that level of funding this year and will try to do so, Congress willing, into the future.

The President of the United States has personally engaged in this effort. He met with widows of two disappeared opposition figures and he has spoken out, including yesterday, in remarks on International Women's Day, about the plight of those whose husbands have presumably been murdered by the regime.

Secretary Rice, Under Secretary Burns, my Deputy David Kramer and I have all met with leaders of Belarus' opposition and civil society. David Kramer was in Minsk two weeks ago to deliver a message to the authorities that we would watch them closely and we would take steps appropriate to the level of election fraud that we found taking place. He also met, obviously, with representatives of the opposition, the civil society, students, and independent media to reassure them directly that the United States, with Europe, has not forgotten Belarus and will not forget it.

I myself met with opposition candidate Milinkevich in Warsaw briefly and again in Brussels. The United States has not taken a position about which candidate we favor, but I must say that I am impressed by the courage of the opposition in Belarus. They know that they are in what can be accurately put a farcical campaign, but they are nevertheless doing what they can to use this campaign to spread their message among the Belarusian people.

We are working also with the European Union. I tried myself to go to Belarus on a joint mission with Robert Cooper, my European Union counterpart. We had intended to go together to deliver a message to the senior Belarus leadership about the need to act responsibly in the elections. The Belarusian authorities refused to receive us at the same time. They first said that my European colleague could go, but I could not. Then they said that I could go but my European colleague could not. In the end, we decided that we would go together or not at all. I regret that Belarus declined this opportunity for dialogue with the United States and Europe.

Well, that is the character of the Belarus regime. We know that it is engaging in a process that will lead to its increasing self-isolation. We know that the Presidential administration plays a large role in the economy, including maintenance of separate reserve, presidential reserve fund, which stands apart from the state budget. Lukashenko once himself admitted publicly that that fund possessed a billion dollars and noted that that fund was supported by secret arms sales from Belarus to countries around the world. We have reports that link Belarus to the transfer of weapons and other military equipment to Syria, the former Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein, and others.

It is said in Belarus that Lukashenko is not only the richest man in Belarus, he is one of the richest men in the entire former Soviet Union, which is saying something.

What can we expect on March 19th and what will we do afterwards?

It is a fairly easy prediction to say that the elections will not be free and fair. It is also a fairly easy prediction to say that the opposition will emerge from those elections with a greater sense of itself with an identity, with a self consciousness. We must, we the supporters of freedom and democracy in Belarus, must be prepared for a long game. We must be prepared to work for the years it will take to build on the base that the United Opposition has presented, and to work with civil society in Belarus, and to make our message clear. The United States will be engaged on behalf of the Belarusian people for the long haul.

Let me turn from this to a radically different situation, which is Ukraine. Two hours ago I had the pleasure of attending the meeting between Secretary Rice and Foreign Minister Tarasyuk. I must say it is a pleasure to be working with a government which is conducting an election, which is by all accounts going to be the freest and fairest of any election in that country.

Ukraine is in the midst of a post-democratic political turmoil. The Orange Coalition has found that governing is the hard part and that the Orange Revolution turned out to be, in retrospect, easy though no one thought so at the time.

This is not unique to Ukraine. Almost every democratic coalition that has come to power since 1989 has faced a period usually of some years of post-democratic political turbulence. Most of those countries, in fact almost all of those countries, have managed to get past this initial period and move forward, and we hope the same will be true of Ukraine.

It was a pleasure that in this meeting between the Foreign Minister and the Secretary, the two Ministers were able to note the real progress in U.S.-Ukrainian bilateral relations recently. To note some of the achievements in the last two months:

The United States has restored the generalized system of preferences, GSP trade benefits to Ukraine. The United States has accorded Ukraine market economy status. We recently signed a bilateral WTO market access agreement. Just yesterday the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to graduate Ukraine from the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which follows on similar Senate action earlier this year.

Each of these steps required prior actions by Ukraine. They were not unilateral American gifts to that country. They were the result of our response to Ukraine's reforms.

So when I speak of a post Orange Revolution period of political turbulence, it's also important to keep in mind that the Ukrainian government did, when given the opportunity, manage to push through reforms, which made possible our positive response.

It is true to say that Ukraine faces a very tough road ahead. We have watched the Orange Coalition develop fissures. We've seen turbulence at the top. The Ukrainians themselves have admitted that they've missed some opportunities.

We're looking forward to dealing, however, with the next Ukrainian government, and we will judge that government, assuming as I do assume, that the elections are free and fair we will judge that government on its actions.

Many of us were enthusiastic and welcomed the Orange Revolution, but it is up to the Ukrainian people to give us the government of their choice; and up to us to work with a democratically elected government on the basis of its actions.

Now as an analytic statement, many believe that a reconstituted Orange Coalition will be best for that country's reforms. But again, there is a difference between analytic judgments and the Administration's policy. What we want to work with is a reformist Ukrainian government that fights corruption at home. That pursues a policy of integration with the Euro-Atlantic community abroad and which stands in its region for democracy, for good relations with its neighbors, for which Ukraine bears only half the responsibility. And for cooperation with the EU and with NATO in our joint efforts around the world.

I'm happy to report that, by all accounts, we are not witnessing any kind of the systematic abuses of Administrative resources that we dealt with in the previous election. So we must now start to look past those elections and think about our response afterwards when we get the next government.

We do look forward to partnership with Ukraine. We do support its aspirations to move ever closer to the institutions of Europe. We're going to think about our policy steps, what we do as we see the new government emerge.

Let me stop here and take questions, but one final thought. We don't know and should not seek to draw great conclusions from the current state of democracy or the current state of relations among the different states of the former Soviet Union and Eurasia. We don't know where history is going to end. We don't know that the current very mixed picture of democratic reform is the final picture.

We have to be very clear about what it is we seek, which is democracy spreading as far as it can and cooperation with NATO extending as far as it can. Then the work is the responsibility of the peoples and the countries of that region.

We must be very clear about what we want, very patient about what we can achieve in any given year, in any given election, and we must remember that change is sometimes for the better, even though we deal with the problems of the moment.

With that, thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[Applause].

QUESTION: [Inaudible] from [inaudible] News Service.

You spoke about International Women's Day that the President had met widows from Belarus's disappeared. In Ukraine, we have some very good women friends who are fighting against trafficking, who are law professors, and maybe it's a generalization, but the more enlightened women in Ukraine despise the convention of International Women's Day because it is a Soviet bureau thing. It's as if, it makes some men yawn, but it's as if women have that one day and yes, we'll bring you flowers and so on, but there's a great deal of inequality in the way that women are treated in many of these countries and Ukraine unfortunately is still one of them. I'd just like to hear your take on this. And maybe the Administration needs to think in those terms.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: Well certainly – [Laughter] – I work for a Secretary of State who has very strong views on issues of gender equality. [Laughter]. There is no mistaking who runs the Department of State, and there is no mistaking President Bush's views. He has said many times that he enjoys working with the strong women in his Administration.

With respect to gender inequality, post-communist societies generally – I won't disagree with you about your characterization of the way International Women's Day was usually conducted in the former Soviet Union. I know what you're talking about. The post-communist societies are modernizing very quickly. As part of that modernization process, and I say this as an observation rather than a policy prescription, gender equality and moves towards gender equality has become one of the facts on the ground.

There are various reasons for it. I had one Polish sociologist once explained to me that in post-communist Poland women in the economy performed the classic role of previously excluded outsiders and that meant in practical terms they were less connected to the corrupt Old Boys pre-1989 networks, and therefore if you wanted

to appoint someone as head of an equities fund, the odds were slightly better that a woman would be more honest. Now this was a sociologist's observation. I don't know whether that's true, but I do note that in the process of post-communist transformation women did tend to advance rather rapidly.

Now I don't dispute the way you characterize Ukraine. You have the example of Yuliya Tymoshenko. But more broadly, I think that as Ukrainian society modernizes the same phenomenon may hold true.

QUESTION: Adam Bartic, [inaudible] American Interest.

Dan, that was a really good speech, and I'm something of a connoisseur. It was such a good speech that you managed to speak about Ukraine for something like 15 or 20 minutes and never mentioned the 800 pound gorilla in the room, which is the gas deal. Obviously I don't expect you to comment publicly on the dynamics of all that, but what I'm curious about is I've heard a different range of views about how important what happens in Ukraine will be to the future of Russia, and I'm wondering if we and the Europeans, as we discuss this together, have a similar assessment of that larger question.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: I'm very happy to comment on the gas deal, in fact I remember vividly how I spent New Year's Eve and New Year's morning. [Laughter].

Secretary Rice was quite eloquent on the subject. She spoke of the problem of the evident use of gas as a political tool. She spoke about this almost immediately. She was, as she is always, very clear about her views. But let me be clear about the nature of the problem of that deal. It was not that anyone objects to Russia being a major source of gas for Europe or Ukraine or anywhere else. Russia is and will be a source of gas. That's fine. Under the best scenarios Russia will be making buckets full of money selling oil and gas.

Nor is it necessarily a problem that Russia wants to move gradually to market prices, although what market prices are in gas is not quite the same as what they are in oil. But that's not a problem. There ought to be no problem in principle with moving to beyond subsidized Soviet-type prices.

The problems that critics have raised with respect to the Ukrainian gas deal have to do with transparency with some of the terms and frankly with the role of the

middle man firm, RosukrEnergo, which is widely regarded to have rather dubious connections. Transparency is important. Openness of the industry is important.

As a government we want to see openness and transparency characterizing the energy markets in that part of the world so that we don't find ourselves in similar situations. The Ukrainian government is obviously debating within itself the terms of this deal. It's a tough business and this issue will be with us for some time.

The impact of Ukraine on Russia - well, many people, Dr. Brzezinski for one, have said that if Ukraine succeeds in consolidating its democracy and developing strong relations with the West it will have a beneficial impact on Russia. I would put it this way that Ukraine's success will demonstrate that any country in the former Soviet Union, not just the Baltic countries, which we never regarded as having been part of the Soviet Union can succeed in a post-communist democratic free market transformation.

If Ukraine can do it, so to speak, well, any country can. And that includes Russia. I do not believe – It's common in Washington now to say that Russian democracy is finished, that it's doomed, it's the return of the Soviet Union, all of that. I don't think so. I think we should take a longer view and recognize that Russia's own evolution hasn't ended, and we should think about our own time horizons as we analyze it, and I think Ukraine's progress will be beneficial in this context.

QUESTION: Dave Welnik of the Atlantic Council.

There have been electoral systems likely to produce different outcomes. Ukraine changed its electoral system from mixed to wholly proportional. Do you believe this is an appropriate system for Ukraine? What can we expect in terms of results in this election?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: No American government official should really express an opinion, we're not very well equipped to express opinions on the details of electoral counting. We don't have proportional systems in this country. We have what the British call "pass the post", so we really don't understand the different models. They have different effects, sometimes unintended.

What we look for in the elections is a rough sense that the playing field is level. It seems to be the case in Ukraine today.

The polling data, I think we all know that it generally shows regions, Yanukovich's party is ahead; it shows Nasha Ukraina in second place; Tymoshenko's party in third; Lytvyn's party after that. The question is going to be what the numbers are and what this translates into in terms of seats. We'll deal with the result, but I'm certainly not going to comment on the details of the electoral process.

QUESTION: You mentioned [inaudible]. I have a very specific question about Belarus. You've mentioned that one of the future actions after the upcoming election, depending on the result, that the U.S. Administration envisions is the [inaudible] of information campaign, bringing more information to people in Belarus.

Intermediate [inaudible] work for the past several years there, we've been doing public opinion, shows a clear connection between the people that receive information from international broadcasters. This group of population [inaudible] less closely to [inaudible] and they're also less optimistic about the future of Belarus. They are more concerned about it. Yet the [inaudible] budget that the Administration proposed, 13.5 percent increase in budget to the Middle East. There really is not a budget increase to programming directly in Belarusian language [inaudible] and indeed, as you said, it's one of the last tyrannies in that part of the world.

Is this just an omission or do you think that the number preventing [inaudible] available or the venues by which [inaudible] is sufficient?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: We have increased our programs, our media programs with respect to Belarus, and we've worked with Europe as it has increased its media programs for Belarus. I know that Poland, which has a very deep knowledge base about Ukraine is doing much the same.

If you're asking me whether I would be happy with additional funding for Belarus or any other democracy programs in my domain, well, I wouldn't complain. But we think we've got – the budgets we have are sufficient to do a good job. Could we do a better job? Well, perfection is – Sure. You can always do more with more. But the question is, are we able to put together media programs, which have the potential to be effective and I think the answer is yes. There are a number of them. Some of them are rather innovative. They're internet programs. It's not just radio that nobody can receive. So we've been pretty, we and the Europeans, have been pretty creative on this.

QUESTION: [Inaudible]. You mentioned that official Washington doesn't really care about the color of the [inaudible] coalition that you're willing to work with the reformist [inaudible] basically. But the leaders from the Orange Revolution put it in much more dramatic fashion. They are saying that this election again presents a [inaudible] choice when [inaudible] that Ukraine will again be facing some of the crossroads.

Is there any concern in official Washington about the potential reversal of democratic gains over the last year if for example Mr. Yanukovich becomes [prime minister], given his record and background and so on?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: Look, I appreciate the question. This is a very legitimate question, but I'll stand by what I said. We supported democracy in Ukraine, and we supported the Orange Revolution. That is the Orange Revolution that called for free and fair elections. Not because we were partisan. It is not our job to make a choice that the Ukrainian people should make. It is our job to support the right of the Ukrainian people to make that choice and then to work with the government that the Ukrainian people chooses. That's the point of what I said.

It's not for me or any other official from the United States to get up and say, well, this party or that party is better for Ukrainians. We have done what we have done so that Ukrainians can make that choice. Then we will judge the next government by its actions.

As an analytic statement, we've had a lot of experience since 1989 in dealing with parties that win elections that are free and fair that themselves don't have very good records rooted in their past. I mean the ex-communist parties.

The question that you posed initially came up with the Lithuanian and Polish elections of '92 and '93 and the Hungarian election a little while later. And there was a great deal written in the mid '90s about the wave of democracy being reversed, the post-communists are back, and it's the end.

It turned out not to be the end. In fact, the post-communist parties generally governed as social democrats. We've worked with many of them, and we learned to work with governments on the basis of what they did, not the basis of who they once were. But we were always mindful of governments' past, and we looked hard.

Now that may not be a fully satisfactory answer, but it's actually the best I can do, and it is the truth.

We all supported – all. We had a great deal invested in the Orange Revolution not because it represented particular parties but because it represented democracy. It was the Ukrainian identity crystallizing itself in a democratic form.

Now it's up to the Ukrainian people. It's their choice.

QUESTION: [Inaudible], George Washington University. Based on the voting results you also mentioned you are seeing that the largest faction in the Ukraine [inaudible] will be [inaudible]. [Inaudible] as opposed to Ukraine's membership in NATO. The largest faction [inaudible] membership.

Will this fact and possibly the fact that maybe [inaudible] Ukraine will be the governing coalition have an impact on whether NATO will invite Ukraine into a membership action plan [inaudible]?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: We support NATO's further enlargement, and our general rule in considering the particulars of NATO enlargement is whether a given country first wants to join NATO, and second, is it ready to join NATO.

When countries want to join NATO and are ready to join NATO, well, the experience since this debate started in the mid '90s is that they generally do join NATO.

We will look and see what the next government of Ukraine wants. There is obviously a question as to whether NATO will offer a membership action plan to Ukraine later this year. The issue is not so much for NATO, and it has never really been so much a NATO choice as it has been a NATO response to the choice that nations make.

NATO's not the Warsaw Pact. We don't want countries in that don't want to be in. Being in the alliance is hard work. NATO's soldiers are engaged in, for God's sakes, Afghanistan, and they're increasing their numbers. We want countries in the alliance that have a commitment to NATO's purposes.

Ukraine has made outstanding contributions in Kosovo, in Iraq. Ukraine has provided lift for NATO. So I have no doubt that Ukraine possesses the ability to contribute to the alliance but we have to see.

So we will see what kind of a government we get. I'm aware, of course, of Region's current position. We'll see how they evolve or if they evolve.

QUESTION: Morgan Williams with the Sigma Bleyzer Private Equity Investment Company. We invest in Ukraine.

In terms of Ukraine, there are a lot of observers that are becoming very concerned about democracy in Ukraine, not because of the election being free and fair, but democracy is much more than just a free and fair election. You have very few electoral choices in Ukraine now under the new system. The people only get to vote for a party. They don't get to vote for any member of the parliament directly. Most seats they say in Ukraine are now for sale. Anybody that has \$5 or \$10 million can easily get into the parliament, and they only want in the parliament for two reasons. One, they get immunity from the law; and secondly, to protect their own business interests. Then when you can be a member of the parliament and never show up and vote every time there's a bill that comes up before the floor, you can have a 100 percent voting record and never be there. Then when the governors are all appointed. Now you have immunity down at the local level. They say there's 10,000 or 15,000 officials in Ukraine now who have total immunity.

So when you add all that up it's not a very democratic system, even though the election's going to be free and fair. And most of the representation in the parliament will not come from across the land, it will only come from Kiev, Kharkiv, a few places where most of the wealthy businessmen live.

So all in all, they're very concerned about what the new parliament's going to look like. It's going to be totally dominated by millionaires who never have to be there to vote, don't have to participate in a committee process. So there's a lot of very alarming things going on in Ukraine in terms of the total democratic picture not related to a free and fair election.

So your comment about the total democratic picture in Ukraine, not just this election.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: Well, I have no trouble stipulating that corruption is a major problem both in Ukraine and more generally in most post-communist countries. We've seen the problem of corruption is one of the chief problems that arises in the period between the collapse of the command Soviet type economy and the rise of institutions relevant to a modern economy. Every post-communist country has faced this problem in one or another form. The records of post-communist countries dealing with it has been mixed. Some better, some worse. I see no reason to claim that Ukraine is any different. Although I would say, and I will stand by this, that if I had to judge the general overall level of democracy in Ukraine now as opposed to say the last year of President Kuchma's rule, I would pick now. So that is a better trend line.

I don't want to comment on the particulars except to say that anti-corruption action is essential and an anti-corruption platform will in Ukraine sooner or later be seen as effective, and I hope it's sooner. And I hope the next Ukrainian government takes care of problems of corruption, of transparency, and of business interests going beyond their proper sphere.

If it does, it should do so in a way consistent with the rule of law. That is not by repressing business people, but by creating institutions appropriate to a modern economy that performs the proper regulatory functions. Ukraine isn't the first country to deal with these things.

So I'll take the point and just say that post-communism takes a while and it requires leadership to overcome these problems, which are serious.

QUESTION: Walter Stankievich, Belarusian Review. You stated that long term haul is the key element in State Department's policy. Long term haul sounds great, but unfortunately some of the implementing agencies that exist in other countries that help the civil society to grow have been thrown out starting with the open society by Soros, NDI, IRI, IREX, USAID, all of them operate from outside the country. So it would be interesting to know if there are any specifics as to how the long term haul will operate.

One of the areas that is very much needed was mentioned before, is the ability to provide alternative information to the information that's available in the country. Since that is one area where you don't need implementing agencies within the country, that should be the area that lots of money is spent right now. I know that the United States government has supported the European newly created venture, but what is needed, for example here, Voice of America has never had a Belarusian

service. The time for it is now. However small, however modern, however influential it should be, it should be done now. This is something we can do here. Thank you.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: I agree with you that media is critical. We discuss this. The people in the State Department responsible for the media programs and for democracy assistance have come up with some creative ways to proceed. I'll certainly discuss with them the possibility of VOA, but we look at the mix of what's available and what's effective.

Yes, you're right. Many of the implementing agents, open society institutes, a lot of other NGOs have been tossed out of Minsk. I wouldn't be surprised if the pressure increases. This is not unknown and human rights groups and groups that support civil society have actually some experience working in conditions like this. It isn't new. It isn't new. There are people who know what they're doing even under tough conditions.

MODERATOR: I know there is a kind of movement among people who are interested in this to study, Belarus may end up being a leading case in the study of alternative technologies and modern technologies for breaking information blockades. So there's a chance to be a leader in the world.

QUESTION: [Inaudible], PBJ Holding Corporation. I have a question about the EU enlargement. Would the United States when the time comes, lobby in Brussels for the EU enlargement to the East like it does for Turkey now?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: If I said something forward leaning now I would get a phone call within the hour, in fact phone calls, within the hour from some of my European friends politely urging me to say no more.

The European Union is having its own debate about enlargement. This is wrapped up with the constitution, it's wrapped up with a lot of other issues. Our European friends have urged us, they have said thank you for your contributions about Turkey, but can you step aside?

Seriously, what we say to our European friends is look, we understand this is difficult. Just don't shut the door.

Ukraine would not, in the best of circumstances, be ready for EU membership even if this were an active offer for many years. By the time it is ready the European

Union may have gone through this debate. So I think simply keeping the door open in principle is what we want without raising this issue too high a profile.

QUESTION: Shannon Wendell, the Belarus Country Director for Office of the Secretary of Defense. I just have a quick question.

You spoke earlier about continuing engagement with the Belarusian civil society for the long haul. I'm curious what is your view on possibly increasing engagement with low level government and military officials to expose them to the West in the hope that we have contacts that we could possibly use in the future?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: How novel, an interagency meeting right here and on camera. [Laughter].

MODERATOR: CSIS likes to be a leader. [Laughter].

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: Yes, and thank you so much.

This is a serious question and a worthy one. After the elections how much engagement with the Belarus regime, how much discrimination among the elements of the regime, that's a fair question. Analogies are always weak, so forgive me in advance, but I do remember that during the worst period of Meciar's rule in Slovakia we maintained ties with the Slovak government, and, in retrospect, we were glad we did. That is not to say the situation is the same. It's not the same. In Belarus, frankly, it's worse. But it was pretty bad in Slovakia for a time.

We will have to think through the best way to proceed. Some of our European friends have urged us not to isolate completely Belarusian authorities, and we will work through this question, no doubt consulting with and hearing the views of my colleagues in the Defense Department.

QUESTION: I'm Nancy Donaldson. I work at Dotko Worldwide. We have had the privilege of working with you and many colleagues on some of the elections this year, so we're observing the rather wild discussions about the Administration's pro-democracy effort and promotion.

I just want to say one of the things we've learned is that in a world where anti-Americanism is very popular, the response of so many people of the business sector and of opposition leaders to President Bush's commitment to promoting

democracy around the world is to have a large hope grow, and to really believe and unfortunately to have huge expectations about what that might mean.

So I wonder if you, and including the private sector, that's been the most interesting thing for us, to see the engagement of the private sector in elections.

I wonder if you would comment on your earlier point that you're looking at conditions as much as countries when you're looking for democracy, about that aspect of conditions and what, if you will, what you and everyone are learning about this pro-democracy drive. It's a general question, but it's also very important in terms of the debate.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: It is an important question. President Bush in his second inaugural outlined a very forward leaning strategy of support for freedom, the so-called Freedom Agenda. In it, and these are my words, not his, he embraced America's support for democracy and democratic movements. He did not accept the argument of so-called realists, that democracy is something that we should give second order attention to. And he is someone, the President is someone who speaks clearly. He's been accused of many things, but lack of clarity is not one of them.

Now we have to be clear about what we seek. We, the Administration, we have to be clear about calling things the way they are. But we also have to be clear about what it is possible to accomplish in any given country in any given time.

For example, if a country in the former Soviet Union is moving by fits and starts in generally a good direction but isn't a democracy, what should be our response? I don't want to get into specifics, but I want to talk about a principle.

Well, if a country's moving in the right direction, I think we will want to be more patient and more supportive. If a country is moving radically in the wrong direction, I'm not going to be much interested in arguments that democracy must wait a generation or two generations because that's just what dictators say.

So the challenge the Administration faces, and I'll admit this frankly, is how to operationalize a very bold vision with what it is possible to accomplish every day. And that poses a set of choices. And it generates questions like yours or tougher questions. But frankly, I would rather have to deal with those questions than deal with the problems generated by a cynical policy of pure real politic, which didn't regard the internal arrangements of countries as any of our business.

This question often is posed with respect to the Middle East and usually in terms a lot rougher than you just posed it. It's usually posed in some form like this: "What do you think you're doing supporting democracy when you get Hamas?" Something like that.

The answer is, well, what did we think we were doing all those decades when we supported dictators? Did we not try that other route, and nothing else for all our years? What did it give us?

I would much rather deal with the problems of support for democracy, recognizing that there are problems, than the problems of the alternative.

QUESTION: Asta Banionis, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Mr. Fried, could you tell us if the U.S. government has taken a position on Russia's government expanding its broadcasting into Europe? Specifically, Voice of Russia two years ago signed an agreement with the German government and has been using very powerful AM transmitters to broadcast in Russian, German and English to countries in the entire region. They just reconfirmed that contract and are now expanding. They do 18 hours a day. Does the U.S. government welcome this addition to the broadcasting family?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: I can hardly complain about broadcasts into Europe. I will say I assume that means we will always enjoy the understanding and support of the Russian government for American and European efforts to support broadcasting of information into places like Belarus or Uzbekistan.

Therefore, on that basis of presumed reciprocity and a mutual understanding with respect to freedom of information, I have nothing bad to say about it.

QUESTION: Vygaudas Ušackas, Embassy of Lithuania. If I may complement the candid interagency discussion with a transatlantic dialogue, I just want to assure that whenever you make that call to [inaudible] Ukraine you may be expecting calls of disagreement, but you will also be receiving calls of strong support for Ukraine's prospective. And I think unfortunately from the national perspective, Lithuania is that EU wasn't able to provide that perspective to date which have been empowering encouragement to the Ukrainian people. That's our national point of view.

But coming back to Belarus, and having read many reports and articles on developments in Belarus, many also suggest that the key of the regime change in Belarus lies in Moscow. How would you comment on that and whether there is anything United States and European Union could do in that respect? Thank you.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: First Ambassador, let me thank you, thank the government of Lithuania for all you've done to support democracy in Belarus. Your government, the Polish government, others who have deep knowledge of that country are critical.

I hear it said from time to time that the key to change in Belarus, and you used the phrase regime change, not me, just for the record. The key to democratic progress in Belarus is in Moscow. I'm not sure I agree with that. I don't think we can hold Moscow responsible for Lukashenko. I don't think that Moscow created Lukashenko. And I don't think it is in Russia's interest to make Lukashenko, and his regime, their problem. They don't have to. That is, they didn't put him into power.

That said, I would, it's up to Russia to define its own interests. I would think that Russia and would hope that Russia would find it in its interest to have a democratizing, prospering Belarus to its west, rather than a Belarus engaging in increasing repression. Stability, which is a legitimate and natural concern that Russia has about the countries of this region ultimately comes through reform. To choose at random an example, let's take Lithuania. You are a stable democracy, a prospering country, a member of the EU. I am not aware of any problems that you have, serious problems with any of your neighbors, including Russia, at the moment. A perfectly good neighbor. The alternative might have been a country which was not prospering, not democratic, problems with the neighbors. The business we saw between World Wars I and II.

Obviously it's better for Russia to have reformist neighbors to its west, therefore they ought to support reform in Belarus, but that's me speaking, and the Russians will decide what they want.

I would welcome the chance to work with Russia for the sake of reform in Belarus.

QUESTION: Julia Nanay, PFC Energy. I was wondering if you have thought at all about a Russian-Belarus union and how you think that might progress by 2008.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: We would not recognize a decision, an undemocratic decision, to join Belarus and Russia. That has been the policy for some time. I don't think this is likely. I think it's talked about, but I don't think it will happen. But in any event, these questions if they're decided need to be decided on the basis of a free, democratic choice. That choice is not currently available to the Belarusian people.

QUESTION: Sarah Mendelson, CSIS. I too would welcome the Russian government supporting democratic and human rights activists in Belarus but that would premise probably another administration in Russia that also supports its own democratic and human rights defenders.

Just thinking ahead, and we can pose this in all sorts of hypotheticals. There's a large country in Eurasia that has a close relationship with a smaller country. To what extent do you and your European colleagues, as the U.S. and the EU are looking forward to March 20th for example, should there be some kind of violence in Belarus. How much do you see of a replay of what happened in Ukraine in the fall of 2004, where there's a sort of wall? It happened also in 2000, of course, with Serbia where the U.S. and the Europeans are on one side; Russia is on another side. In a year, and in a few months, where we're going to be meeting in Petersburg around the G8. What's the kind of thinking, what kinds of signals are you sending?

And understanding that the EU is not always consistent. Their response, their press release for example on the Chechnyan parliamentary elections in November 2005 was odd. It was sort of saying elections that the OSCE refused to observe. No Europeans were there, no Americans were there. The EU was sort of saying we applaud this electoral process. There's not going to be any kind of message like that on the Belarusian election I assume, either from the U.S. or the Europeans.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRIED: Well, the European Union has been quite staunch, and European governments have been quite strong. Milinkevich was in Europe, he was received by the French Foreign Minister; he was received well in Berlin. I sense a very strong consensus in Europe in support of democracy.

Now the OSCE which has a mandate and expertise to make calls on elections is present in force in Belarus. They're going to make a call. We're going to pay attention to that call. I am fairly confident in predicting that the United States and the European Union will back the OSCE, that our statements will be similar, and that problem will not exist.

I very much hope that Russia does not take an opposite point of view. I think it would be extremely odd if the OSCE of which Russia is a member, and the OSCE election mission to which Russia has sent observers, were to take a radically different national position than the rest of the OSCE. That would be strange. I hope that doesn't happen.

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