

Political and Economic Situation in Belarus

Council of Socialist International

July 1-2, Athens, Greece

Dear Fellow Social Democrats,

My name is Aliaksandra-Volha Tyhrytskaya. I am the Vice Chairwoman of the Belarusian Social Democratic party (Hramada).

My speech is devoted to Belarus, which is located in the middle between Poland, Ukraine, Russia and Lithuania in Eastern Europe.

I wish to share with you an update on the situation in Belarus and to discuss the potential for changes, which recently have come and aggravated the political and social situation.

Thank you for possibility that the Belarusian voice can be heard here, among social-democrats from different part of the world, and people who intensively work for democracy!

First, **economic changes**. The “Belarusian miracle” of economic stability has vanished as sources of foreign credit have been exhausted and currency reserves have declined precipitously. In May, the Belarusian ruble was devaluated by 56 percent leaving many pensioners, small businesses and average citizens in financial ruin.

The country is now running one of the widest account deficits in the world at 16 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and worries intensified in last month when Standard & Poor’s downgraded its debt to “junk status”. Belarus’ foreign reserves shrank \$1.4 billion to \$5.5 billion in the first two months of the year alone as the government tried to cover the account deficit.

The population is in a panic. The average salary now amounts *to only 250 dollars, reduced by 50%*. There is now an open black market for currency in Belarus. Neither citizens nor legal entities can buy foreign currency legally – especially dollars and euros. This makes it much more difficult to travel outside of Belarus. Such situation returns

currency market to the year 2000. Massive layoffs at state and private industries are rapidly increasing unemployment. People storm shops, buying out goods, people try to find all possible, incredible ways of turning cheap Belarusian rubles into other currencies.

The same time, government and the head of state deny crisis. At a news conference on June 17 in Minsk, the Head of state Alexander Lukashenko made the outrageous statement that there is no crisis in the country, and that the people are guilty of panicking. Meanwhile, experts estimate that about nine billion U.S. dollars are needed to avert the crisis. And at the same time there are no moves from the government to improve situation, only populist promises.

“The collapse is complete,” stated the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt .

Rapidly falling living standards are swelling protests against the authorities. In June, an Internet campaign called "Revolution through Social Networks" was organized. The campaign calls on people to come to the central squares of their cities every Wednesday at 7 p.m. to express discontent with the authorities through silent rally involving no slogans or banners. And even mass silent irritates authorities. On June, 22 during these silent protests over 460 people across Belarus were detained. In Minsk, police detained 220 protesters, including several journalists, foreign nationals and diplomat David Emtestam, the first secretary of the Swedish embassy in Belarus, who was later released. Some of the detainees were eventually released without charges. Others were beaten and charged with “disorderly conduct”. Internet activists are being harassed by the authorities. According to the Human rights Center Viasna, hundreds of them were interrogated and oppressed by agents of the secret police.

After the protests against the falsified presidential elections in December 2010, Lukashenka even arrested seven of the former presidential candidates and launched a series of repressions. According to information of the Human Rights Center Viasna, there 7 were accused

in the criminal case of fomenting mass riot. Since then, 5 of them were released after signed documents not to leave the country but 2 of them left anyway. In addition, another 28 people were sentenced to prison terms, 2 – to fines, and 1 – to personal restraint without direction to an open penitentiary institution. Among them are fellow social democrats Mikalai Statkevich, Aliaksandr Klaskouski, Siarhei Martsaleu...

The government has cracked down on both the political opposition and civil society. The repressive regime of Lukashenko through constant oppression has weakened our forces, but through thick and thin, we continue our struggle against the regime for transparent elections, a free civil society, independent media, local democratic governance, an independent Judicial framework. We fight for a free and democratic Belarus! Zive Belarus!

And we are very grateful to Socialist International, and especially to Secretary General, Luis Ayala that Belarusian social democrats are not forgotten.

We thank our international partners who have given us technical and moral help ... it is National democratic institute for Foreign affairs office for Belarus and Olof Palme Center.

We also call upon our neighbors, especially socialists from Poland, the Baltic States, Ukraine, Russia and other countries for solidarity, which we will put into cooperation.

The Belarusian social democratic party (Hramada) in accordance with PACE Resolution 1790 (2011) appeals to Socialist International and the international community for help in securing the release of all political prisoners, we also call on you to take active measures to support all democrats in Belarus by providing assistance to the imprisoned leaders and their family members and to opposition political parties.

Belarusians are isolated from whole world now but our hearts are open for cooperation with world! Zivye Belarus!