

To remember is to engage.

Speech Jan Marinus Wiersma, Clingendael

Four Trees Commemoration, Eindhoven, 16th September 2012

The positive side of this event today is that it takes place and that it is an expression of a long standing engagement with Belarus of the people of the city of Eindhoven . But it is also very sad that we still have to demand attention to the fate of people that disappeared many years ago. There can be no doubt that the regime of mr. Lukashenko was responsible for that as it is still responsible for the very undemocratic state of affairs in Belarus. I very much welcome the continued struggle of Iryna Krasovskaya and many others to find out what happened to those who disappeared in Belarus.

My involvement goes back to the years between 1999 and 2004 when I was chairing the European Parliament delegation for relations with Belarus. Already then the issue of the missing persons but also of imprisoned opposition leaders was high on or agenda. The European Parliament was during this period involved in attempts to promote more pluriformity in the country. A troika was formed with the OSCE and the Council of Europe to organise a dialogue between the government and the opposition. As a concession to the regime the three institutions promised to observe upcoming elections. The whole effort turned out to be a useless exercise since the observed elections were a farce and were declared to be not free and fair by the international community. The dialogue collapsed completely and the OSCE was forced to more or less close its local office. And it became more difficult to raise the issue of the disappeared persons. I came to the conclusion that only a regime change could save Belarus and that we had to work towards that goal from the outside concentrating our political support on the opposition forces inside. That remains my preferred policy.

I do not have to repeat extensively that not much has changed since. Protected by Moscow, Lukashenko has been able to remain in power, rigging election after election while persecuting the opposition. Sanctions of the EU and active support to the opposition, especially by the European Parliament, have so far not had the wished for impact. Attempts by some individual new EU member states at a dialogue have failed. The demands to investigate the fate of the missing persons have been ignored - which is a gross violation of the human rights of especially their families who have the right to know what happened to their dear ones.

The trees planted here are symbols of the fight for democracy in Belarus. They grow as democracy will eventually develop in Belarus. When that will take place we will finally be able to find out what happened to the disappeared persons and their suffering will not have been in vain.

Keeping their memory alive by demanding a proper investigation into their disappearance is not only an act of solidarity with their families but , as important, is a signal to the people of Belarus that the fight for democracy should never be given up. While other post-soviet countries lack full democratic credentials, Belarus stands out as the last remaining dictatorship in our part of the world. We therefore have to insist that our government, the EU, the OSCE and the Council of Europe keep treating mr. Lukashenko as a pariah. Only his disappearance from the political scene will allow Belarus to turn towards real democracy.