

Embassy of the United States Minsk Belarus

SPEECHES

U.S. Chargé d'affaires Michael Scanlan's remarks at the International Conference "Future of Belarus" dedicated to the 20th Anniversary of Independent Research of Belarus and the Establishment of IISEPS

May 25

Vilnius, Lithuania

On behalf of the US Embassy in Minsk, I am honored to be here to mark the 20th anniversary of independent research in Belarus and the Establishment of IISEPS.

As Secretary Clinton recently said, "Together, the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association ...comprise what I've called the freedom to connect. The United States supports this freedom for people everywhere, and we have called on other nations to do the same, because we want people to have the chance to exercise this freedom."

The freedom to connect is the freedom to be informed, to share ideas, to have unfiltered access to information, to have context, and thus to be empowered to make informed decisions. Context is what independent polling and analysis provide. It forces discussions to be based on ground truths and holds people accountable for their statements.

Good governance in any society is only possible if there are informed decisions; and informed decisions cannot be made without reliable evidence-based data. The quality of informed decisions of citizens, government officials, and politicians, or for that matter businesses depend on the quality of the data and the analysis.

This is why the role of independent public opinion and research institutions are critical in any society, but even more so in societies that are not empowered by free and fair elections where a process of public debates, open media coverage of competing ideas, as well as a transparent counting of votes serve to hold governments accountable. In the absence of the latter, citizens can only gain context of the views that exist in society if independent polling and analysis institutes exist.

IISEPS' difficult journey, including being forced as an institution to formally relocate to Lithuania, where the freedoms I talked of are valued and affirmed, in many ways symbolizes the journey of Belarus as it seeks to evolve into a country of the people and for the people.

And thus today we recognize Dr. Oleg Manaev and his team for their significant contribution to ensuring that Belarusians have context, as it is their future and thus it should be guided by their informed choices.

After living in Belarus for three years, it is clear that there are many different views and opinions in Belarus, but the sharing of them mostly happens among family and close friends in the kitchens of Belarus....the ability to connect to larger groups and share views and different opinions continues to be obstructed. The work of Dr. Manayev and his team have helped to bridge those gaps. This will only accelerate with the growth of internet in Belarus.

The US government will continue to support programs in Belarus that promote the opening of space for the free expression of political views, the developments of a civil society, and the freedom of the media and entrepreneurial creativity so Belarusians may actively participate, and through their informed decisions guide their collective future as a nation and state in Europe. Thank you and best of luck with your conference.

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