

CEEC Policy Forum, July 25, 2012, Introduction by Alice Kipel

Hello. My name is Alice Kipel. I am with the Belarusian-American Association, and I would like to welcome you to today's Policy Forum hosted by the Central and East European Coalition, or the CEEC as we call ourselves.

I am going to take a few minutes to tell you a little about the CEEC – who we are, and why we have put together today's Policy Forum.

The CEEC is comprised of 18 American ethnic organizations, whose members trace their roots to central and eastern Europe. Our constituent organizations are national and membership based, representing over 20 million Americans. Our members have the following ethnic heritages: Armenian, Belarusian, Bulgarian, Czech, Estonian, Georgian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian, Slovak and Ukrainian. We are a non-partisan coalition and operate by consensus.

The CEEC was founded in the early part of the 1990s, as the countries of the central and east European region were emerging or re-emerging as independent states, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Americans, it was important to us then, as it is now, that the United States adopt policies towards the region that would help cement independence and democracy for the countries from which our ancestors had come. This was and is important to us because of our ethnic heritages, but also because the CEEC believes that strong engagement by the United States with the countries of central and eastern Europe is in the best security interests of the United States.

A constant concern for us – again, historically and currently – is that the Soviet Union not be replaced with an undue Russian sphere of influence in the region. And here, I must point out – the CEEC is not, and never has been, an “anti-Russia” organization. Rather, our focus is on the other independent countries in the region. We understand that it is important for those countries to have good relationships with their neighbors, including Russia, and we also support the promotion and preservation of democracy and respect for human rights and the rule of law in all of the countries of the region, including Russia.

However, because of our concerns regarding a possible sphere of influence, as well as with backsliding on democracy in the region, we feel it necessary to address the issue of so-called Russian “soft power,” which can be used to create a sphere of influence. Belarus is a poster-child demonstrating how economic support from the Kremlin and from Russian oligarchs is being used to prop up the dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenka.

In a July 17 op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, in calling for the release of political prisoners in Belarus, one of the last independent journalists in that country -- Andrej Dynko -- wrote the following:

“None of this will happen without Moscow's approval, of course, or the end of Moscow's influence. Mr. Lukashenko's regime will receive more than \$4 billion in oil and gas subsidies from Moscow in 2012. And for good reason: Belarus is the last vestige of Russia's colonial

influence westward. Former Communist bloc countries couldn't gain their freedom until the Soviet Union collapsed. The failure of President Vladimir V. Putin's model might be the only thing that could pave the way to a "Eurasian Spring."

Other examples of undue Kremlin influence are less glaring, but no less troubling. Hence, the reasoning behind today's Policy Forum.

Now I am going to turn the podium over to my colleague from the Georgian Association in the US – Dr. Nino Japaridze, who will be the moderator for today's event. Thank you for your attention.