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Government of Belarus: Crushing Human Rights at Home?

Statement at Joint Congressional Hearing on Belarus
Subcommittee on Europe, and Subcommittee Africa, Global Health and Human Rights
Chairman Chris Smith (NJ-04)
April 1, 2011

Good afternoon and welcome to this joint hearing of the Human Rights subcommittee and the Europe subcommittee, which will explore the recent mockery of an election and the crackdown on democracy activists by the Lukashenka dictatorship in Belarus. We will also seek to answer questions about how we can most constructively hold the Lukashenka dictatorship accountable for its crimes and best assist the Belarusian people in their struggle for freedom, human rights, and democracy.

After the presidential election of December 19, 2010, thousands of Belarusians peacefully protested the massive electoral fraud – the Lukashenka dictatorship sicced its security forces on the crowds, indiscriminately clubbing demonstrators and detaining over 700. In a manner reminiscent of the late Soviet era, the dictatorship has focused its ongoing crackdown on the democratic political opposition, independent media, and civil society. The dictator’s brutal campaign has been marked by the abuse of those jailed, by unfair trials and harsh sentences of up to 4 years, and by harassment and intimidation by the KGB, including interrogations, raids, and other forms of pressure on families of opposition leaders, their lawyers, journalists and democratic activists.

Recently, I have been meeting with relatives and friends of the imprisoned presidential candidates. They have told me heartbreaking stories about the mistreatment of their loved ones. And one of those who remains imprisoned is my personal friend Anatoly Lebedka – a courageous and long-time leader of the democratic opposition.

We have to keep in mind that the post-election crackdown is not over. Within the last few days alone, a correspondent for Poland’s largest daily newspaper was charged with ‘insulting the President’ – a crime in Belarus – and the Belarusian KGB interrogated another journalist. On Tuesday the dictatorship’s

courts sentenced a democratic activist to 3 ½ years of imprisonment for taking part in the December 19 protests – his was the eighth in a series of show trials. Just yesterday, the Belarusian government forced the closure of the Minsk Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, despite many OSCE efforts to keep it open.

As part of a Helsinki Commission visit to Minsk in June 2009, I had the opportunity to press Lukashenka directly on his dismal human rights record and denial of democratic freedoms. While making clear our support for Belarus' independence, the delegation reiterated the long-standing message that the only way to improve relations between our two countries was and is for him to take steps to increase political freedom and respect human rights. We told Lukashenka that the ball was in his court. There were even small, tentative steps in the right direction, but since December 19 any hopes for change have been quashed.

Alexander Lukashenka continues to turn a deaf ear to all criticism of his government. At a press conference after the election, Lukashenka said that Belarus will have no more “mindless democracy,” clearly manifesting his sneering contempt for the Belarusian people, many of whose lives he has ruined – and whose country he stole 16 years ago, transforming it into a grotesque anomaly, Europe's ‘last dictatorship.’

The US and the EU have responded to the electoral fraud, violence, and repression with strong condemnations and some additional punitive measures, at least for now. I would encourage both – especially the EU – to look for additional ways to hold Lukashenka to account. The scale of the post-election violence and the severity of the crackdown have far exceeded anything Lukashenka has done in the past. For the time being, the US and the EU are not tempted to placate Lukashenka, to try to change his rule by rewarding it.

This is one reason why we need legislation to address the human rights tragedy and other issues created by the Lukashenka dictatorship: to ensure steady focus and policy consistency. This will require continued and even strengthened economic and travel sanctions against the dictatorship and its senior leaders and security forces. All this until Lukashenka releases political prisoners and dramatically improves his government's human rights record. And this is exactly what the Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011, H.R. 515, which I introduced in January, provides. Most of these issues were also successfully addressed by the Belarus Democracy Acts of 2004 and of 2006, both of which I authored and which were signed into law.

The Belarus Democracy of 2004 brought the US into the struggle for freedom in Belarus, decisively on the side of the Belarusian people, who wish to live in a country where human rights are respected, democracy flourishes and the rule of law is the norm. I remain convinced that the time will soon come when Belarus will be integrated with the family of democratic nations. We must continue to stand at their side as they continue to work their way out from under the oppressive yoke of Alexander Lukashenka.