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Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011 – H.R. 515

HON. CHRIS SMITH OF NEW JERSEY
(*Author of H.R. 515*)

I thank the distinguished chairwoman for yielding and join her first in mourning the passing of Vaclav Havel, the great President and human rights crusader, one of the founders of Charter 77, a magnificent human rights manifesto, that took the Helsinki final act and turned it into a very durable and tangible program of action for the people of Czechoslovakia. Charter 77 has been replicated all over the world, including in Belarus—it's called Charter 97 there—as well as in places like Vietnam, where it's Bloc 8406.

I would note parenthetically that, back in the 1980s, I and some members of the Helsinki Commission, including Steny Hoyer, sought to meet with members of Charter 77. Only one, Father Valclav Maly—now Bishop Maly—got through to our meeting. The rest were detained by the secret police, including Vaclav Havel.

It's interesting and very important to point out that Vaclav Havel, before he

passed away, tragically, sent a strong letter to the people of Belarus encouraging them to hold firm and expressing his overwhelming solidarity with the people of Belarus as they seek their universally recognized human rights. Again, this man never ceased in his promotion of human rights anywhere—from Burma to Belarus—including to his dying day, sending this very important letter to the Belarusian people.

Mr. Speaker, I do rise in strong support and urge my colleagues to pass H.R. 515 again. We passed it last July, but it came back from the Senate with a couple of additions which are very much appreciated.

I especially want to thank Chairman John Kerry and Senator Lugar for their cooperation in helping to bring this legislation back to the House; and I want to thank the distinguished gentlelady for her leadership, and Howard Berman, as well as the Speaker and Eric Cantor, for bringing this legislation to the floor.

This is a very timely piece of legislation. As was noted, it is exactly one year ago today since the bloody December 19, 2010, election-night crackdown in Belarus which swept up more than 700 opposition supporters, many of whom I know personally, who dared to challenge the rule of Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko.

On this day of remembrance, we are here in the House to pass legislation that we know President Obama will sign—he supports it—that demonstrates our country's support for the human rights of the Belarusian people for democracy and the rule of law in Belarus through sanctions targeted against the dictator Lukashenko and his senior officials.

This legislation tracks legislation that I authored in 2004 and '06, which is current policy, called the Belarus Democracy Act, and it builds on that framework of trying to target those who are actually inflicting the abuse. It's timely and necessary. As I said, those jailed—and remember, there are many who have been jailed and more that are being jailed as we meet—have been subjected to degrading and humiliating treatment, and some have been tortured. More than 40 were convicted, and about a dozen, including several presidential candidates, remain imprisoned to this day. At a Helsinki Commission hearing that I chaired only last month, we heard shocking, heartbreaking testimony from one of the presidential candidates who had endured torture during his two-month stay at a KGB prison—and, yes, Mr. Speaker, in Belarus, it is still called the KGB, reminding one how little Belarus has strayed from its dark, Soviet roots. In addition to the arrested, the families, the lawyers, the independent journalists and the democratic activists who are not yet in prison continue to be harassed

and intimidated and their homes watched by the KGB. This has been the worst political crackdown in Europe in well over a decade.

The postelection crackdown has followed the pattern, however, of repression that has characterized Lukashenko's nearly 17-year rule. Through a series of rigged elections, large-scale intimidation, and the suppression of independent media and civil society, the dictator has long consolidated his control over virtually all national institutions. His dictatorship has the worst record for human rights by far of any government in Europe.

Specifically, and significantly, the sanctions outlined in the bill are aimed at the senior leadership of the dictatorship that displays utter contempt for the dignity and the rights of the Belarusian people. With these sanctions we stand with the Belarusian people and against their oppressors.

H.R. 515 requires the State Department to issue a new report to Congress on the sale, delivery, or provision of weapons or weapons-related technologies or training; Lukashenko's personal wealth and assets; and cooperation by the Belarusian Government with any foreign government or organizations related to censorship or surveillance of the Internet.

H.R. 515 states a U.S. Government policy of strong support for the Belarusian people in their struggle against Lukashenko to live in a free, independent country where their human rights are respected. The bill encourages those struggling despite overwhelming pressures from an anti-democratic regime. It calls for a full accounting of the 1999 to 2000 disappearances. This morning I was with a woman whose husband disappeared, presumed to be dead by this regime, and she

continues to this day struggling for human rights on behalf of her people now in exile.

It calls for and supports radio, television, and Internet broadcasting to Belarus, specifically Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, Voice of America, European Radio for Belarus, and the satellite television station BelSat.

It calls for a release of all of the political prisoners. We can't say that enough. We can't say it one day and forget it the next. We need to redouble our efforts, beginning today, to promote a free Belarus where all can live in peace, freedom and prosperity without that knock in the middle of the night by the KGB.