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DEAN, NEW JERSEY DELEGATION

*Excerpts of remarks by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) in the House
of Representatives during debate on H.R. 8428,
The Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and
Sovereignty Act of 2020
November 18, 2020*

Madam Speaker, I urge swift enactment into law of the bipartisan [Belarus Democracy, Human Rights and Sovereignty Act of 2020](#) which I introduced.

And here's why this legislation is absolutely needed now.

Belarus was perhaps the nation most mired in its Soviet past, with an inefficient economy and a strongman autocrat in charge for over two-and-a-half decades. Yet the indomitable spirit of freedom stirred among the people of Belarus, and when a patently false election result was announced on August 9th declaring Alyaksandr Lukashenka the winner, the people took to the streets.

The OSCE Moscow Mechanism, reported November 5 that there is "[overwhelming evidence](#)" that [Belarus's August 9 presidential election results were falsified and that "systematic" human rights violations have been committed by the country's security forces in response to the peaceful demonstrations the vote sparked.](#)"

Now, reports out of Belarus indicate that police are using increasingly violent tactics against these peaceful demonstrators.

The BBC summed it yesterday in an article [Belarus protesters battered, bruised but defiant after 100 days](#) which said in part:

"Opposition protesters remain defiant in Belarus despite police brutality, 100 days after they first took to the streets to denounce the re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko.

"Police in helmets and body armour throw women holding flowers and balloons into police vans. Officers tear-gas elderly people on a pensioners' march...

"Yet every Sunday thousands still pour into the streets of the capital Minsk, condemning what they see as Mr Lukashenko's fraudulent 9 August victory...

"Alesya, a 31-year old worker in the IT industry, regularly attends the Sunday rallies. On 15 November, however, things turned nasty very quickly.

“When she arrived at the square where the march was supposed to start, it was already packed with security forces. As more people gathered, officers fired stun grenades and started hitting people with batons to disperse the crowd.

"They attacked us again and again. It was awful. They ferociously beat people, twisted their arms and took them away," she said.

“She ran away into courtyards following other protesters, but police in their minivans quickly caught up with them even there. She was saved by a stranger who hid her and several others in his house.

"It felt like World War Two, when people tried to hide Jews from the Nazis. It was terrifying, we were shocked."

“That march was called in memory of Roman Bondarenko, an activist who was beaten in detention and died in hospital last week.”

I reiterate [Secretary of State Michael Pompeo’s November 12](#) appeal to Lukashenka: “...We once again call on the Belarusian authorities to immediately cease the escalating use of violence against peaceful demonstrators... .”

Madame Speaker, the people of Belarus—especially the pro-democracy leaders—desperately need our help.

And they need it right now.

As my colleagues know, the leading opposition presidential candidate Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya—who almost certainly won the election in August—formed the [Coordination Council](#).

The democratic opposition is united, smart, principled, tenacious and extraordinarily brave.

[Ms. Tsikhanouskaya](#) ran a courageous campaign but today is in exile in Lithuania where she continues to rally the Belarusian people and the world and demand democracy and human rights for all the people of her nation.

Last night I read portions of the [transcript of a hearing I chaired in 2011](#)—after another fraudulent Belarusian election. Then, as now, and on many other occasions, Lukashenka’s bullies beat, jailed and assaulted peaceful protesters.

The big mistake of the past—fatigue or lack of commitment and perseverance by the international community—can’t be repeated this time.

(On two separate occasions, I met with Lukashenka in Minsk and came away resolved to accelerate the struggle for democracy and freedom.)

My bipartisan bill, H.R. 8438—the [Belarus Democracy, Human Rights and Sovereignty Act of 2020](#)—updates, strengthens and expands the [Belarus Democracy Acts of 2004, 2006, and 2011](#), laws that I also authored, and renews the personal economic and visa sanctions on an expanded list of actors in the Belarusian Government and Russian individuals complicit in the crackdown.

Yesterday, [Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya again called for the sanctions embedded in my bill](#). The time to act is now.

Among its many other provisions, the legislation:

- Calls for new elections.
- It recognizes the Coordination Council as a legitimate institution to participate in a dialogue on a peaceful transition of power.
- It calls for the release of all political prisoners.
- It supports the aspirations of the people of Belarus to exercise their religious freedom.
- It authorizes assistance to promote democracy and civil society in Belarus.
- It unequivocally states that it is the policy of the United States “not to recognize any incorporation of Belarus into a ‘Union State’ with Russia.
- It requires a U.S. strategy to promote broadcasting, internet freedom and access to information.
- In addition, it gives much needed support to the Belarusian media, and to the IT sector.

By passing this bill today followed by approval in the Senate and signing into law by the President, we can not only reiterate but significantly expand our support and solidarity with the great people of Belarus.