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Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on European Affairs

CRACKDOWN IN BELARUS: RESPONDING TO THE
LUKASHENKA REGIME

January 27, 2011

Chairwoman Shaheen, Ranking Member DeMint, Members of the Committee:

Thank you very much for inviting me here today to discuss the situation in Belarus. We should all be concerned by the very disturbing recent events there, specifically the government's crackdown on the opposition, civil society, and independent media in the aftermath of the disputed Presidential election. This is a crucial moment, and I am glad the Senate is focusing attention on the actions of the Belarusian government. I welcome the opportunity to speak with you today on how the U.S. Government is responding.

Today, I would like to do three things. First, I would like to give you an overview of U.S. policy with respect to Belarus in recent years, which will provide a backdrop to the current situation and our policy response. Second, I would like to describe the actions that the United States has taken so far to respond to the repression in Belarus and to support free political competition, civil society, and the independence of media. Finally, I will also discuss possible next steps we, along with our European partners, can take to address the situation.

The United States has repeatedly condemned the actions taken on December 19 and the continuing suppression of political and human rights in Belarus. That this crackdown occurred in the heart of Europe in the 21st century is particularly troubling. The international community must speak with one voice to support the democratic aspirations of the people of Belarus, and we are committed to doing our part.

Backdrop to our current policy

The Obama Administration has continued a bipartisan policy of principled engagement with Belarus that centers on our consistent advocacy for democracy and human rights. Long before the recent crackdown, we were pressing for reforms that would allow space for civil society, independent media, and the political opposition to operate. I did so personally during my trip to Minsk in August 2009, when I made clear to the Belarusian government that only steps toward democratic reform and respect for human rights could lead to better relations with the United States.

Unfortunately, the failure of Belarus to respect human rights or uphold democratic standards is not a new development. In the aftermath of flawed elections and the abuse of human rights in Belarus in 2006, the Bush Administration first imposed sanctions against the Lukashenka government. These sanctions included a travel ban and asset freeze on certain officials, followed in 2007 and 2008 by trade sanctions against the state-owned oil and chemical company, Belneftekhim. The Belarusian government reacted in 2008 by asking that our Ambassador leave the country and requiring that we cut our embassy staff in Minsk from 33 to 5. The European Union imposed a travel ban and assets freeze of its own in 2006.

In 2008, following the imposition of sanctions, the Belarusian government released all of its political prisoners. Let me also take this opportunity to commend Senator Cardin, Senator Durbin, Congressman Smith and others, who have been pressing for democracy and human rights in Belarus for many years, and who helped secured the release of American citizen Emmanuel Zeltser in July 2009. In recognition of the Belarusian government's positive step in releasing political prisoners, the United States issued a general license temporarily authorizing U.S. persons to do business with two subsidiaries of Belneftekhim in September 2008. We told the government at the time that the United States would reciprocate if the government took further positive steps. Sanctions against Belarus -- the visa ban and financial sanctions against selected officials and Belarusian entities -- remained in place and were continued by the Obama Administration. The EU suspended its travel ban, but it continued its assets freeze.

In the run-up to the presidential elections of December 19, 2010, the United States and many other countries urged the Belarusian government to take steps to improve its respect for human rights and democracy, including an

invitation for an OSCE international monitoring mission to observe the elections. The government did allow the monitoring mission and allowed nine opposition candidates to register and to run against President Lukashenka. On balance, the campaign represented an improvement over the one in 2006, despite continuing problems. Voting was relatively uneventful. However, the government did not conduct a transparent vote count and did not allow opposition parties to monitor that count. The OSCE election observation team subsequently singled out this major factor in its criticism of the process, saying that counting of votes in nearly half of the constituencies was deemed “bad or very bad.”

The evening of December 19, between 20,000 and 40,000 people rallied against the official claim of Mr. Lukashenka’s overwhelming victory. While we may never know all the facts of what happened that night, we know one thing: the government’s reaction was brutal, and its subsequent actions can only be interpreted as a campaign to crush the opposition and severely weaken civil society and independent media.

Some 600-700 individuals were detained, initially including seven of the opposition candidates for president. Many of the protestors were sentenced to 5-15 days of detention without legal representation after hearings before a judge that often lasted less than five minutes.

Five of the candidates, along with at least 32 others, however, now face charges that could lead to 15 years in prison if convicted. Twelve more remain suspects and may be charged. On January 11, Amnesty International declared 16 detainees “prisoners of conscience,” and urged the immediate and unconditional release of all detainees.

However, this is not just about what happened the night of December 19. In the wake of the protests, authorities have continued to raid homes and offices of activists and staff linked to the political opposition, civil society groups, including the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, and journalists.

The government has refused to extend the mandate of the OSCE office in Minsk. This office must now close by March 31 unless Belarus reverses its decision, as we and other governments have urged it to do.

The U.S. policy response and next steps

The United States responded immediately and directly to the situation in Belarus. Hours after the initial detentions on December 20, the White House issued a statement condemning the violence and calling on the government to release all detainees. On December 23, Secretary Clinton issued the first of two joint statements with EU High Representative Catherine Ashton calling the elections and their aftermath an unfortunate step backwards and reiterating the call for the detainees' release. On January 6th, Secretary Clinton met with Belarusian and Belarusian-American activists to hear firsthand from participants about the election aftermath and to emphasize our condemnation of the crackdown and discuss how we might help those facing the greatest pressure, including the detainees and their families.

While publicly and privately urging that the detainees be released, the United States has been putting together a package of actions if the Government of Belarus does not change course, which now unfortunately appears to be the case. There are three specific sets of actions we are planning to make clear to the Belarusian government the consequences of continuing on its current course: We are pursuing additional sanctions against Belarus; providing assistance to opposition forces and independent civil society groups; and working closely with the EU to send a unified international message to the government.

The steps we are considering include: 1) the revocation of the general license authorizing U.S. persons to do business with the two subsidiaries of Belneftekhim that first was issued in September 2008; 2) an expansion of the list of Belarusian officials subject to the travel ban; and 3) imposing additional financial sanctions against Belarusian individuals and entities.

As we consider measures against the government, we are simultaneously planning to increase our support for democratic actors and the victims of repression. Last year, the United States provided \$11 million in assistance towards supporting civil society, access to information and political competition, and providing opportunities for more interaction between Belarusian citizens and the outside world. In response to recent events, we will increase such assistance by nearly 30 percent this year. Our assistance includes support for human rights advocates, trade unions, youth and environment groups, business associations, and think tanks. We continue to support independent newspapers, websites, and electronic media operating in the country and broadcasting from Belarus's neighbors. In addition, we

provide assistance to democratic political parties and movements to more effectively compete in this challenging environment.

Finally, we are working closely with our European Union partners to make sure policy toward Belarus is coordinated, to send the strongest and clearest message to the authorities in Minsk. The Belarusian people seek to be part of Europe, and we wish to see the type of government in Belarus that can be part of Europe. The EU's Foreign Affairs Council is scheduled to decide on additional measures with respect to Belarus on January 31. To emphasize the strong transatlantic concern regarding the crackdown in Belarus, we plan to announce certain additional measures against the government on that day as well.

On February 2, a U.S. delegation will join Europeans in a donors' conference in Warsaw to assist non-governmental actors in Belarus. At that conference, which is being organized by the Polish government, we plan to announce our proposed increases in assistance to Belarusian activists and encourage others to do likewise. The United States and our European partners both understand that even as we take steps affecting the Belarusian government, we must do what we can to protect and foster the organs vital to any democracy: political competition, a vibrant civil society, and an active independent media that provides citizens greater access to information.

Conclusion

Madame Chairwoman, Members of the Subcommittee:

We have no illusions that helping persuade Belarus to adopt a course toward democracy and the rule of law will either be easy or happen quickly. Our commitment to enhancing democracy and respect for human rights in Belarus is long-term and will not weaken. I hope we can count on continuing bipartisan support for this approach. We must maintain a resolute stance, both with respect to the government and in support of those seeking a democratic Belarus. As Secretary Clinton and EU High Representative Ashton said in their joint statement on December 23, "the Belarusian people deserve better."

With that, I look forward to your questions.

