

OPENING STATEMENT BY  
CHAIRWOMAN JEANNE SHAHEEN

UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN AFFAIRS HEARING: "CRACKDOWN  
IN BELARUS: RESPONDING TO THE LUKASHENKO REGIME"

JANUARY 27, 2011

Thank you all for coming. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on European Affairs meets today to discuss the brutal crackdown on the citizens of Belarus following last month's fraudulent presidential election. I would like to thank Chairman Kerry and Ranking Member Lugar for their support for this Subcommittee hearing while the full Committee is determining its agenda and structure for the new session.

Before we begin, I want to make it clear that this Subcommittee stands firmly behind Secretary Clinton and calls on the Lukashenko regime to release all political prisoners immediately and without preconditions.

We remain committed to the principle that the Belarusian people be allowed to express their political will freely and without threat of harassment, imprisonment, or violence.

The government's legacy of fraudulent elections has drawn the attention of the U.S. and its European partners, and the OSCE has repeatedly declared that the country's elections fail to be either free or fair. Violence against pro-democracy activists and arrests of political opponents have repeatedly revealed the nature of the cruel regime under President Aleksandr Lukashenko (LOO-kah-shen-koh).

The U.S. will continue to make one thing clear: the pursuit of democracy, freedom, and improved human rights in Belarus is in the interest of not only the Belarusian people, but of the government itself.

The recent violence perpetrated by the police against a peaceful rally of thousands of Belarusians, the arrest of several opposition candidates for president, and the crackdown on independent media and democratic forces show

how far the cause of democracy has been set back in Belarus just in the last few weeks. However, the recent crackdown is not an isolated occurrence, but part of an appalling pattern of abuses.

As the government's intimidation tactics have broadened, so has its abuse of its legal system to charge opposition forces and threaten them with years in prison. Independent democratic forces must be allowed to make their case without harassment, and the OSCE mission in the country must be allowed to resume its work.

In the days to come, the U.S. and its European allies will announce measures to respond to Lukashenko's tactics of intimidation. We should be clear that the pursuit of sanctions, asset freezes, and a ban on travel by the regime and those involved in the latest crackdown are intended to compel the government to treat its people fairly. I would like to commend the European Parliament for its resolution last week condemning the crackdown and its calls to resume measures urging the government to change course.

The U.S. and Europe will stand together in support of the Belarusian people, and we encourage other nations – including Russia – to do the same. The immediate release of opposition candidates, party leaders, and civil society members must be the first step and should occur without delay.

With this in mind, we are here today to discuss how the U.S. and Europe can ensure that the government lives up to its commitments to democracy and human rights. We will hear from members of the Administration regarding the path forward and outside experts with critical insights on the regime.

Philip Gordon has served as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs since May 2009. He previously served as Director for European Affairs at the National Security Council and at the Brookings Institution.

Thomas O. Melia (Mel-EE-uh) is Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and is responsible for Europe, South and Central Asia, and international labor rights. He has also held prominent posts at Freedom House and the National Democratic Institute.

In our second panel, David Kramer serves as the Executive Director of Freedom House. He has had a distinguished career in government and in the private sector, serving as Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs.

Kenneth Wollack is the President of the National Democratic Institute, and has had a long career in foreign affairs, which has included extensive travel in the region supporting democratic elections and civil society. Under his leadership, NDI has strengthened its outreach to more than 70 countries to support democratic institutions, civic engagement, and political empowerment abroad.

Natalia (Nah-tall-ee-ah) Kaliada (CALL-yah-dah) is the General Director and Co-Founder of the Belarus Free Theater, a group that has shown enormous bravery in exercising its members' rights to free expression despite brutal repression. Just a few weeks ago, Ms. Kaliada and other members of her company were detained in Belarus following the crackdown. We thank you for your willingness to speak out, and for the bravery of the members of your company.

We are also pleased to have Senator Durbin, who recently returned from a trip to Belarus, join us, and I understand he would like to make a brief statement following Senator DeMint.

Thank you all for coming here today to discuss what the U.S. and Europe can do to take a strong stand and halt the violence and repression in Belarus. We look forward to your testimony. Senator DeMint.