House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus

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Window on Eurasia

Fifty years ago, one of my professors at the University of Chicago dismissed the Belarusians as "a backward, peasant, anti-Semitic people" unworthy of independent statehood and at best part of a larger Russian nation. Despite all that has happened in the intervening decades, many in Moscow, Western capitals, and unfortunately in Belarus itself believe much the same thing. Among them is the man who has usurped the presidency of that country, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has treated his own people with contempt and merely as a prop for his own power and aspirations. Nowhere is that clearer than in the three bad bets he has made about them and the future, bets that must be understood and recognized as such if the West is to play a more positive role in the development of a free and independent Belarus and the Belarusian nation is to take their proper place in the world as a proud and free people.

Today, I would like to consider each of them, explore why they are both individually and collectively destructive given how much Belarus has changed in recent decades, and then consider how the West must respond to help those in Belarus who on a daily basis are standing up to Lukashenka and demonstrating just how wrong he is.

When Lukashenka emerged on the Belarusian political scene from his post as a Soviet collective farm director, he made his first bad bet. He assumed that he could rise to power by promising to maintain the Soviet system rather than allow Belarus to go through the trauma of transition that Russia and other post-Soviet states were then passing through. His predecessor and opponent had assumed that the West would provide Belarus with tough love in the wake of the collapse of communism; but what in fact happened was that Western countries, delighted to have won the cold war and all too happy to claim a peace dividend, extended to Belarus and the other post-Soviet states what might be called "weak neglect," praising them for the overthrow of communism but not helping them nearly as much as they needed. In that situation, Lukashenka's bet, as horrible as it turned out to be over time, looked like a good one.

In the short term, he was elected Belarusian president in a relatively free election by people who feared what would happen to them if the economic arrangements they knew were

suddenly discarded. Russia was no longer able or willing to help, and the West hadn't provided the aid they hoped for and needed. Not only was Lukashenka's position popular among Belarusians, but – and this was especially important for him personally -- it was winning his fans in Russia and elsewhere, allowing the newly elected Belarusian president to aspire to lead a revived Moscow-centric empire from the Russian capital, two things that today are often forgotten given how much has changed.

Lukashenka's second bad bet was that the West would have no option but to support his country even if Belarus backed away from making the transition away from communism because of the country's geopolitical position. As is often forgotten, it is Belarus, not Ukraine, that lies between Russia and the West, one of the reasons that it has been so often the site of wars between the two. Up to a point, Lukashenka guessed right. The West did recognize Belarus as an independent country, but both Russian claims about Belarusians being part of a larger Russian nation, claims that have grown in volume under the Russian presidency of Vladimir Putin, and Russian promotion of the increasingly authoritarian Lukashenko as "the last dictator in Europe" have led many in the West to view both him and his country through a Russian lens and to give it less support in the hopes that this would by itself change the direction Lukashenka was taking. In short, Lukashenka was again right in a limited short-term way but profoundly wrong in reality and the longer one given that the West really does care about human rights even if it often does not know how best to promote them.

And Lukashenka's third bad bet was that even minimal Western interest in his country would leave Russia with no choice but to continue to subsidize his economy and thus keep him in power. Until the last several years, that did not appear to be a mistake. Moscow did feel compelled to provide him with massive aid, mostly in the form of subsidized energy prices, lest he turn to the West as he constantly threatened to do if he didn't get what he demanded. Putin now has clearly signaled that this can't go on and that Lukashenka must yield to Russian demands that his country be folded into the Russian Federation. Given that, the Kremlin leader almost certainly would have moved to replace Lukashenka if the latter were not being confronted now by a massive public protest against his continuation in office. For the authoritarian Russian dictator, pushing Lukashenka out now might appear to be a concession to the Belarusian people, something he views as even more unacceptable than Lukashenka's playing with the West. But given Russia's own financial problems, it seems clear that this third Lukashenka bet is nonetheless turning bad because Moscow simply can't afford to continue its assistance at current levels.

As can be seen, each of these bets has proven increasingly bad not only for Lukashenka but for the Belarusian people; and they have been so not only individually but even more because the Belarusian dictator has continued to make all three at once. That has had the effect not only of intensifying the negative consequences of each but of ignoring a fundamental reality, one that can be seen every day on the streets of Mensk and other Belarusian cities and that has been reinforced by developments beyond that country's borders in every direction.

If Belarus at the end of Soviet times was a predominantly rural country, it is now more urban than almost any other post-Soviet state; and if its urban employers in the past were most Soviet-style heavy industry, now its primary employment centers are in more advanced technological sectors. As a result, the Belarusian population is far from the stereotypes that many in the West held and that Lukashenka appears to retain. Its people are increasingly urban, increasingly educated, and increasingly familiar not just with Russia to the east but with the rapidly developing and democratizing countries in all other directions, including the Baltic states to the north, Poland to the West, and Ukraine to the south. Belarusians may watch Russian television but they want to live like Poles or Lithuanians.

Today's Belarusians, both the hundreds of thousands who have taken to the streets to demand Lukashenka leave the office he occupies in violation of their country's laws and constitutions and the many in his government want a different future, one more like their western and southern neighbors than like their eastern one, especially because Russia is an increasingly unattractive option. Its economy is in disarray. Its government is moving from authoritarianism to totalitarianism. And its aggressiveness is leaving it isolated in ways that Belarusians want to avoid. They're not interested in having an enemies list like the one Moscow recently has compiled; they want to be friends. And they know that they can be friends with the West only if they are able to push Lukashenka and his camarilla from power.

Many in the West find it hard to believe that Belarusians are as different from Russians as they are. Western commentators, following Moscow's lead in all too many cases, constantly point to the fact that Belarusians often speak Russian better than they speak their national language, that they watch Russian television, and that they share some of the Orthodox Christian cultural values of their eastern neighbor. But in doing so, they forget something critically important: having the same language does not make two peoples part of the same nation, just as the US and Canada are not the same nation even though they speak the same language. And even a people who has been forced to give up its national language by foreign occupiers may be more nationalistic when speaking the language of the occupier past or present than it was when it spoke its own. The cases of Ireland and India are instructive in that regard.

Many leaders of the post-Soviet states have observed to me and others that they can't make their countries democratic until they ensure that they are countries that are going to last. Given Putin's aggressiveness, some of them fear they have no such assurance. And that makes progress toward democracy and human rights far more problematic. No country of those which emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union has faced such a great threat. Indeed, as many in the West prefer to forget, Lukashenka's authoritarianism, although he is the nominal author, was made in Moscow and has lasted as long as it has because many Belarusians fear that without someone as wily as he, they will lose their country. And they know that without their own country, they won't have their own democracy. That is perhaps the most important lesson those in the West who want to see Belarus become a real democracy need to learn.

It is a lesson the West and especially the United States should have no trouble learning given our experience with the Marshal Plan and NATO in Western Europe. By blocking the Soviet threat, the US gave the countries of that continent the time and space they needed to recover as democracies and free economies. What that means in the Belarusian case now is clear: if the US wants to promote democracy and human rights in Belarus, it must broaden its focus away from just those issues and recognize that it must make such developments possible by providing the security and support that will allow the Belarusian people to move in the directions they and we both want.

And that in turn means, as long as Russia is unwilling to respect the international order that the US has sought to promote for more than a century, including the primacy of nation states over empires, the primacy of citizenship over ethnicity, and the primacy of the 1991 settlement over Russian efforts to change it – the United States and its Western partners must provide Belarus and other countries threatened by Moscow with a pathway to security that future membership in NATO and closer integration in the European economy provide. Anything less can and will be used against it by Moscow, thus delaying the day when the democracy and human rights both we and the Belarusians hope for can be realized there.