

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus

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Dear Co-Chair McGovern and Co-Chair Smith, Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission:

I'm grateful for this opportunity to appear before you today on an issue near and dear to my heart: democracy and human rights in Belarus. I greatly admired the passion and dedication the late Congressman Tom Lantos had for human rights not just in Belarus but around the world. This Commission is a wonderful tribute to his great and enduring legacy. I've also had the privilege of working with both co-chairs back when I served in the U.S. Department of State and when I was president of Freedom House, and it is fitting that the two of you, longstanding and steadfast supporters of human rights, co-chair this commission. Co-Chair Smith, given today's subject matter, let me pay special tribute to you for your authorship of the Belarus Democracy Act and its various updates. And Co-Chair McGovern, your support for the Magnitsky Act was invaluable.

My last visit to Belarus was in 2007, when I was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, but I since have followed developments there closely and have been inspired by the determination of the Belarusian people to live in a free society, if given the opportunity. That opportunity, however, has been denied repeatedly due to the dictatorial rule for the last nearly 27 years of Aleksandr Lukashenka, with support from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

While Lukashenka came to power in 1994 through an electoral process, he quickly concentrated power into his own hands and has run the country into the ground. Frequently referred to as the last dictator in Europe – a title Putin seems to be vying for these days – Lukashenka has a track record of disappearing critics, attacking journalists, imprisoning opponents, torturing detainees, and enfeebling his nation. The result is that

he has left Belarus more vulnerable to Putin's whims and virtual takeover while isolating his regime from the respected part of the international community.

Events last August did not happen in a vacuum. Lukashenka has a history of rigging elections and cracking down on the people of Belarus. I was the point person for Belarus at the State Department when this happened in 2006. In response to that fraudulent election and the ensuing crackdown and imprisonment of opposition figures, the United States, together with the European Union, imposed sanctions on the regime, including on Lukashenka himself, to secure the release of the political prisoners. After the United States ratcheted up the sanctions several times, Lukashenka gave in and freed the political prisoners being held at the time. Achieving even that modest objective took several years, but we secured the freedom of those unjustly imprisoned.

As if watching the movie Groundhog Day, the same thing happened again in 2010, when Lukashenka resorted to violent means to put down protests over his election thievery back then. Sanctions again were slapped on Lukashenka and a number of Belarus entities. And again, the West eased up on the sanctions over time – only to relive the experience one more time last summer, albeit on a much worse scale.

Even before last summer's election, repression was increasing. Divorced from reality at the same time he was desperately seeking to preserve his grip on power, Lukashenka grossly and negligently mishandled the coronavirus pandemic and ignored the concomitant economic meltdown. Having rigged previous elections by eliminating or marginalizing serious opposition to him, Lukashenka thought he would sail to victory again last August. He underestimated the unhappiness and frustration with his inept and authoritarian rein. Younger Belarusians, having experienced no leader other than Lukashenka their entire lives, wanted change.

After 26 years of corrupt, authoritarian rule under President Alexander Lukashenka, the vast majority of Belarusians, not just the young generation, decided they wanted a change in leadership. Despite disqualifying and arresting several opposition candidates, Lukashenka allowed the wife of one, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, to run against him. It was clear according to exit polls and other means that she won. And yet Lukashenka declared himself the winner of the August 9 election. Such blatant fraud triggered massive protests, unprecedented in size in the country's 30 years of independence.

Lukashenka responded to the hundreds of thousands of Belarusians protesting peacefully in the streets the only way he knows how – by ordering his security forces to use brutal violence against them. Nearly 40,000 demonstrators were arrested, and a number of opposition figures, including Tsikhanouskaya, were forced to flee. Ensuing nationwide strikes and ongoing demonstrations – the largest in the country's history – inspired hope that Lukashenka's time might be up. Every leader in the democratic

community of nations stated that the election in Belarus was neither free nor fair. That makes Lukashenka a thoroughly illegitimate and discredited leader.

His security forces used brute force, including lethal weapons (some imported from Russia) instead of measures for regular crowd control, leading to more than 1,000 reports and allegations of torture, including rape. He detained journalists who were reporting on the protests, including a number associated with RFE/RL and other Western outlets. More recently, Lukashenka concocted an absurd conspiracy that the United States, together with Belarusian democratic leaders, was behind a planned coup d'état. His accomplices in the judicial system have deemed activists and opposition leaders “extremists” and “terrorists”, empowering the authorities to block their accounts and impound their property.

So far, Lukashenka has managed to hang on, aided in part by Putin, who came to his rescue with a \$1.5 billion loan, deepening Lukashenka's dependence on Russia. Even though Putin is known to despise Lukashenka, the Russian leader does not like to see like-minded leaders fall from power, since that might give Russians the idea that they could try the same in their country.

In inviting me to appear today, you asked me to speak about how best we can use sanctions to promote democratic values in Belarus. Sanctions are a tool, sometimes a very effective tool, but they must be part of a larger strategy and used systematically. They need to be ramped up on a regular basis until they achieve their desired goals. On their own and without clear objectives, they are less likely to work. They also need to be implemented more quickly; otherwise, Lukashenka has an opportunity to regroup and adjust to them. A new Executive Order from the President would lend the effort a needed boost for more and faster action.

Sanctions need to be part of a larger policy that entails:

- Lukashenka's departure from power,
- free and fair elections,
- release of all political prisoners, and
- accountability for the gross human rights abuses perpetrated by Lukashenka and his thugs.

Truly free and fair elections would require Lukashenka's disqualification from participating in them. Only his departure from power will open the possibility for Belarus to start a new chapter and regain the hope of living in a democratic nation.

The United States and the European Union have imposed a series of sanctions on Lukashenka and others in his regime. Unlike the EU, which had lifted virtually all sanctions before, the United States still maintained sanctions on a number of officials. A

number of previously targeted individuals have been returned to the sanctions list. And still Lukashenka continues his egregious behavior. Thus, it is time to cast a wider net.

This should include the so-called moneybags, individuals connected to Lukashenka who prop him up financially. These include Russian figures who have been instrumental in Lukashenka's staying power, as well as Belarusians. Cut off the flows from them and you water down the thin ice on which Lukashenka stands.

Sanctions should be targeted against Mikhail Gutseriyev, a Russian-British oligarch who is very close to Lukashenko. Gutseriyev helped Lukashenka replace TV presenters who quit in protest over the crackdown and replaced them with RT fill-ins. His son bought the fifth largest bank in Belarus, and his oil company Safmar was the only supplier that continued to ship oil to Belarus after Putin cut shipments in January 2020.

Also on the list should be German Gref and Sberbank. Sberbank has invested hundreds of millions of dollars into Belarusian real estate and has its own Belarusian subsidiary. Gref has expressed his full support for Lukashenka during numerous visits to Minsk. Three other Russian state banks – VTB, VEB, and Gazprombank – play key roles in the Belarusian banking system and should be sanctioned.

Gazprom, Slavneft, Rosneft and Uralkali should be added, too. All have their eyes set on taking over respective assets in Belarus. Uralkali has long desired to acquire Belaruskali, the world's biggest potash producer, and U.S. sanctions on both would make such a takeover less likely.

Russian propagandists – including employees of RT – should be added to the list. They were brought to Minsk to fill in for Belarusian presenters who resigned over the crackdown, with Gutseriyev's help, as noted above. They are not journalists – they are dangerous propagandists and should be targeted. RT as a whole should also be sanctioned; it is not a journalistic outlet but a propaganda arm of the Kremlin.

Targets should include those in the Middle East as well. The UAE in particular is a country where Lukashenka has established close business connections. The Emirates and others in the region need to choose: support Lukashenka or stay in the good graces of the United States.

Then there are those in Belarus who have enabled the Lukashenka regime. It is vital that there be accountability for those involved or complicit in the repression. Friends from Belarus have provided lists of government officials, judges and prosecutors, propagandists, members of polling station commissions, security apparatus officers, businessmen supporting the regime, educational institutions' officials, and state enterprises' directors. They are important to sanction both for purposes of justice but also to send a signal to others who might contemplate supporting the regime.

We also must block the sale of arms and other products from Belarus to other countries. We should move forward with sectoral sanctions and those on state-owned enterprises (which means they are controlled by Lukashenka). Lukashenka has concentrated the economy into his hands; some 70 percent of it is owned by the state, which means by Lukashenka and his circle.

There are no pain-free ways to go about tightening the screws. Indeed, it is naïve to think that sanctions will not have spillover effects, but these measures must be accompanied by clear messaging that while this will cause some hardship on the people of the country, the people of the country are not our targets. Lukashenka and his accomplices are. They include Victor Sheiman, Alexey Oleskin, Nikolay Vorobey, Aliaksandr Zaitsau, Aliaksandr Mashenski, Vladimir Peftiev, among others.

We also need to ensure that no American citizens or companies are doing business with Lukashenka and thus helping to prop him up.

We also must make clear to the Kremlin the costs of any military takeover of Belarus. As it is, we are witnessing the not-so-slow Russian takeover economically of Belarus, and that, too, needs to be stopped. We have wanted to avoid turning Belarus into an East-West clash, but we also need to be mindful that our caution can get in the way of doing what's right.

We have let Lukashenka off the hook before, and the people of Belarus have paid a steep price. We must not make the same mistake again. As long as Lukashenka remains in power, illegitimately, Belarus has no hope of a better, brighter future. With him gone, Belarus has no guarantee of a better, more democratic future, but for the first time it will have such a possibility.

The sooner a peaceful transition of power occurs, the sooner political turbulence in Belarus will end. Then, Belarusians will finally be able to pursue the path of peaceful and democratic development, as well as good relations with all of their neighbors, while also determining their own destiny, starting with new fair and free elections.

Officials in the United States and Europe should recognize that “normal” relations with Minsk are impossible as long as Lukashenko — a master at pitting Russia and the West against each other — is in power. They must work together to maximize the impact of additional sanctions.

The West needs to prepare to support Belarus when it finally reaches the day when Lukashenka no longer runs that country into the ground. It will need lots of help, and the people of Belarus have demonstrated that they deserve it. It is in that spirit, Mr. Chairman, that I request a letter I received from several Belarusian friends at iSANS

who have been engaged in this struggle for a long time be submitted for the record. I informed them of this hearing, and I encouraged them to share their views with you.

Resolving the current crisis in Belarus, which borders Russia, Ukraine and several NATO member states, will have major implications for all of Europe. Just importantly, it will afford the people of Belarus the possibility of enjoying freedom for the first time in many years.

The vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace cannot be realized as long as Belarus remains under dictatorial rule. And yet the protests in Belarus are not about that country's place in the geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West. They are about Belarus and Lukashenka. During these difficult times around the world with democracy under attack, the people of Belarus have stood out for their bravery and determination. Amid grave risks, they have turned out seeking an end to dictatorship and the dawn of a new, more democratic day in Belarus. That should be a cause we can get behind.