

House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing  
on  
Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus

May 6, 2021- 10:00 a.m.  
Virtual, via WebEx

**Statement of  
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Distinguished co-chairmen and members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on political and human rights situation in Belarus. My name is Adam Eberhardt. I am the Director of the Center for Eastern Studies (OSW) based in Warsaw, Poland.

I have divided my presentation into three parts. I am going to focus on: (1) The socio-political situation in Belarus; (2) Repressions against the public and (3) The international context affecting Belarus.

### **1. The socio-political situation in Belarus**

- The Belarusian regime, despite the unprecedented scale of protests after the rigged presidential election on 9 August, has retained internal cohesion and continues to control the situation in the country. Last year a small section of the Belarusian *nomenklatura* openly resisted the government's policy and resigned from their positions. These cases were very rare and concerned mainly low- or medium-ranking state officials (with the exception of diplomacy – several active ambassadors have resigned). No such cases have been seen this year. Most members of the state apparatus are loyal, and in many cases this is due to the lack of a real alternative on the labour market. Since Lukashenka has lost the support of the majority of the Belarusian public and the possibility (due to the growing budget deficit) to financially and socially influence citizens, he is making efforts to achieve obedience by force, striving to intimidate his opponents.
- The fear of losing power has made Lukashenka rely even more on the law enforcement sector in recent months than before the election. This sector's loyalty is now the main guarantor of the continuation of his presidency. As a result, high-ranking officers from state security agencies currently predominate within the president's inner circle and have a greater say on the formation of Belarus's politics. This trend has been confirmed by a decree announced by Lukashenka in April 2021 authorizing the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus (where the so-called *siloviki* predominate) to lead the state in the event of the president's sudden death

of the president or his inability to continue to perform his functions. As the role of the law enforcement sector is strengthening, the civilian section of the Belarusian state apparatus is being marginalized. Uladzimir Makei, the minister of foreign affairs, who had been highly influential before the election and who is viewed as a skillful lobbyist for dialogue with the West, is now simply passively implementing Lukashenka's confrontational foreign policy. The role of the ministries in charge of economic affairs has also been downgraded. They are useless in terms of repressions against the society. They are also inconvenient, given the realistic perception of the condition of the state economy prevalent within these circles. Since representatives of the law enforcement sector dominated the president's inner circle, the economic policy has become mainly based on central planning and subsidizing the inefficient public sector. In turn, as regards the political aspect, the regime is stoking the sense of an external threat resulting from alleged attempts to destabilize the country inspired by the West (in April 2021, the FSB and the KGB jointly arrested 'conspirators' who had allegedly been plotting to overthrow Lukashenka). This has been used as an additional argument for repressing opponents.

- Although the anti-regime demonstrations have been decreasingly active or have even been discontinued over the past five months, and the protest is now mainly expressed on social networks (mainly due to repression and fatigue with the duration of the confrontation), the level of public discontent remains high. In recent months, the civic, as well as national, awareness of a part of the Belarusian society has significantly increased. A dream of a new, better Belarus has emerged on the streets of Belarusian cities, which in the long term will have a positive impact on the feeling of attachment to Belarusian statehood.

## **2. Repressions against the public**

- The regime has responded to the mass post-election protests with mass repressions against Lukashenka's opponents. Around 35,000 people were detained for political reasons between 9 August 2020 (election day) and the end of April 2021. Most of them were released after writing down an arrest report or serving a sentence of several days/weeks in prison. Many detainees, especially in the first weeks after the election, were beaten and tortured. Criminal charges have been fabricated against the most active protesters, opposition leaders and independent journalists, who may be sentenced to years in prison as a result. Since the beginning of 2021, Belarusian courts have handed down hundreds of long prison sentences (usually from two to five years), and sanctions have also been used against ordinary demonstrators and even people criticizing the government on social media or using the prohibited white-red-white national symbols. According to data from Belarusian human rights defenders, the number of political prisoners has reached 358. At the same time, the Belarusian parliament is currently working on new amendments, tightening the regulations concerning the activity of the media and public gatherings, and imposing penalties for propagating extremism and attempts to glorify crimes against Belarusians committed at the time of World War II.
- As part of the regime's policy of mass repression, in March 2021, the government attacked the organizations of the Polish minority in Belarus, primarily the public and private Polish education network (mainly Polish language courses), as well as the Union of Poles in Belarus, the Polish minority organization not recognized by Belarusian law. The headteacher of one of the Polish public schools in Brest was arrested (then the court ordered the school she ran to be

closed) and the entire board of the Union of Poles, including its chairperson, Anzhalika Borys. The charges are based on allegations of spurring ethnic and religious hostility. Furthermore, the Belarusian prosecution authorities have been conducting inspections in all Polish schools in Belarus since mid-March, checking the curricula and the accuracy of financial settlements. The regime's goal is to destroy the independent structures of the Polish minority and gradually liquidate Polish education, which is expected to lead to the Russification of ethnic Poles in Belarus. These moves beyond any doubt violate the rights of national minorities guaranteed under the Belarusian constitution.

### **3. The international context**

- The brutal repressions against citizens demanding that Lukashenka should step down after the rigged presidential election led to a breakdown of dialogue with the West. Belarus's political contacts and limited diplomatic relations with the US and the EU have been frozen. This has been manifested by Minsk blocking the arrival of the new US ambassador to Belarus, Julie Fisher. In response to the three sanctions packages (visa and economic) imposed by the EU last year and reimposition of the suspended sanctions against nine Belarusian companies by the U.S. in April this year, the regime has intensified its anti-Western rhetoric and is imposing its own restrictions on selected European companies. These actions, however, have a symbolic impact, given the marginal importance of the Belarusian economy for Western exporters. As a result, Minsk has been conducting a confrontational foreign policy towards the West for many months, and has not yet given any signs of being prepared to resume political dialogue.
- Russia's role, which was already significant, has increased even more as a result of Minsk's international isolation. It is currently Belarus's only ally, supplier of energy resources and creditor. Therefore, the Kremlin expects not only an acceleration of the talks on enhancing Russian-Belarusian integration within the Union State, but also a real constitutional reform, which will offer room for the operation of pro-Russian political groups, and will also increase Russia's influence on the political process in Belarus. However, no such agreement was announced after the meetings of the two countries' presidents in Sochi in February and in Moscow in April 2021. It seems that Lukashenka is aware of the risk of the ultimate loss of sovereignty and is delaying decisions regarding issues of key importance to Russia. Moscow is interested in showing off successful cooperation with its Belarusian ally, including a joint anti-Western narrative, so it is currently avoiding an escalation of tension. This, in turn, is leading to a deadlock in the pursuit of Russia's goals. In the short term, Lukashenka's negotiating position has also been strengthened by the domestic situation in Russia (the autumn election to the State Duma and the risk of anti-government demonstrations) and the Zapad joint military exercises scheduled for September in which the armies of the two countries will participate. However, Minsk has been unable to obtain the additional credit support or more preferential terms of oil and gas supplies which is necessary to stabilise the deteriorating economic situation. It cannot be ruled out that a more serious crisis will resurface in Russian-Belarusian relations at the end of this year, when the Kremlin will attempt to finalize the process of integration with Belarus. In the context of the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the USSR in December, this could be Russia's major political propaganda success in the post-Soviet area.