

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus (6 May 2021)

Dear Co-Chairs McGovern and Smith, distinguished members of the Commission,

I am deeply grateful for the great honor to address you on behalf of the Belarusian people. I am here to give voice to the thousands of my compatriots who have faced injustice, intimidation, and inhuman treatment. It is my duty to testify about the gross human rights violations and relentless political repression.

On August 9, 2020 Lukashenka's regime openly rigged elections, cynically depriving Belarusians of their right to choose their leaders. Forged elections happened in Belarus before but this time Belarusians clearly saw alternative candidates - Sergei Tsikhanouski, Viktor Babaryka, Valery Tsepkala - who were imprisoned or forced to leave Belarus. People could not allow the regime to take away their right to decide on the future of the country.

The nation erupted in the massive peaceful protest movement, and the regime responded with unmatched violence and brutality. While Belarusians have protested peacefully, the regime has instituted a severe crackdown which has brought the country in the state of lawlessness. By now, there have been more than 35 thousand arrests, more than 3 thousand criminal cases, 369 political prisoners, at least 8 people murdered, thousands of cases of brutal beatings and torture - and not a single case against perpetrators of regime's violence.

Tortures in prisons have acquired new traits - the administration rotates COVID infected inmates among overcrowded cells to infect others, essentially using this potentially mortal disease as a biological weapon to punish those disagreeing with the regime.

The ill-treatment of prisoners has been on the rise lately as the regime desperately tries to eliminate the protest that stubbornly continues. One of the repeating tricks has been to pour liquid bleach on the floor of the cells where ventilation is poor and inmates are exposed to the effects of this harmful chemical.

In the face of such violence, I am proud that our protest remains peaceful. The unity of the entire society in its drive for change is evident. Our protest movement is inclusive and diverse. The strength of Belarusian women defies the regime's violent rhetoric and methods. Workers, athletes, teachers, doctors, scientists, students – they have all come together.

Meanwhile, the illegitimate government is desperately clinging to power, using a variety of tricks. Calling someone an extremist, a terrorist is a new regime's tool to persecute and silence people and media. They have added to the list bloggers, civil society and political activists. You can also find my name on that list.

Under heavy domestic and international pressure, Lukashenka is fear mongering when he threatens to advance integration with Russia and uses sham conspiracies made up by the KGB while accusing the US Government of being the mastermind. He announced a plan to make a militarized Security Council his successor in complete contradiction with the Constitution. Our independence and sovereignty, constitution and rule of law are at stake.

That is why we are going forward with the proposal to hold negotiations on the peaceful transition of power. 800 thousand Belarusians - an equivalent of 26 million Americans - supported my call and in a matter of days voted in favor of negotiations. We have been working with our international partners and in particular with the OSCE on the format and framework of such negotiations.

We see it as a three-fold process:

1. First, national dialogue and reconciliation based on the release of all political prisoners and restoration of their rights;
2. Second and central to the process, new free and fair elections;
3. Third, reform of the political system, restoration of the rule of law and respect for human rights.

I am bound by the will of Belarusians to make this happen. My country is in crisis, and that is why I urge you - the elected representatives of the American people – to continue acting decisively. We call on the US to engage in international mediation jointly with European partners.

The US has been a staunch supporter of our country's sovereignty, democracy and human rights and one of the first countries to impose sanctions and visa bans against Belarusian senior government officials. Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 paved the way to broader measures addressing the situation in Belarus. The resumption of the Treasury sanctions under Executive Order 13405 against nine state-owned enterprises are among the most effective measures. Even before the sanctions are resumed, the regime is reeling from this strong unequivocal signal. This list should be expanded further.

We call on the US to use its diplomacy to further isolate Lukashenka, to underscore that his point of political no-return has been passed. Nine months into the crisis in Belarus, there has been no in-depth conversation of major international powers about the path to resolve it. We call on the US to take an active part in organizing such an international conference involving a broad range of stakeholders. This would allow us to review the situation in Belarus and work out steps to resolve the crisis through elections.

As an important step in this direction, we call on the US to discuss the crisis in Belarus during the upcoming Group of Seven summit in the United Kingdom. Based on the principles of freedom and human rights, democracy and the rule of law, peace and security, G-7 is the right place to discuss the situation in Belarus. Amid the rise of authoritarianism around the world, Belarusians are in a clear pursuit of democracy. They deserve all the attention and support of the international community.

We also call on the US Congress to consider increasing the support for Belarusian civil society, human rights defenders, independent media, and businesses. As the European Union has drafted a Comprehensive Plan to support Belarus, we call on the US Congress to find the appropriate ways to join this effort together with other key stakeholders.

We believe that the United States as the leader of the free world has an exceptional standing to coordinate the international community's measures on Belarus. The international solidarity with Belarusians has been overwhelming and it is instrumental to resolving the crisis.

Thank you!