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before the

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European Affairs**

“Crackdown on Belarus: Responding to the Lukashenka Regime”

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Madame Chairwoman, Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you here today to discuss the latest situation in Belarus, and I commend you for holding today's session. It is vitally important that the United States and Europe stay focused on the deteriorating situation in Belarus, support those in desperate need of assistance, and take decisive steps in response to the latest assault on freedom committed by Europe's last dictator, Aleksandr Lukashenka.

In just four days, European Union (EU) foreign ministers will meet and, I hope, vote to reimpose a visa ban and other sanctions against the Lukashenka regime. Frankly, anything short of that is unacceptable and would constitute a slap in the face to those victims of Lukashenka's repression. It would also send a signal to authoritarian regimes around the world that they can get away with massive human rights abuses cost-free. Five years ago, in response to Belarus' previous fraudulent presidential election, human rights abuses, and corruption, the United States and EU together imposed sanctions against the Lukashenka regime. Over time, those sanctions – i.e., not engagement but pressure -- secured the release of political prisoners held in Lukashenka's prisons.

Engaging Lukashenka Has Failed

Unfortunately, after the EU in particular eased its sanctions against the Lukashenka regime in October 2008 (the U.S. kept most of its sanctions in place) and launched an engagement strategy with Minsk, the pressure on Lukashenka went away, and he masterfully played the West and Russia off of each other. Fearful that continued sanctions and pressure would drive Lukashenka into Russia's arms, European leaders tried to lure him toward the West by including him in their Eastern Partnership initiative in May 2009, offering \$3.5 billion in assistance if last month's election passed the "free and fair" test, and paying lots of visits to him in Minsk in the lead-up to the election. Lukashenka and his five-year-old son even visited Rome, where they met with Prime Minister Berlusconi and Pope Benedict XVI in April 2009. In the days before last month's election, some European leaders essentially endorsed Lukashenka's candidacy, arguing that he was the best bet against Russian pressure. There were even glimmers

of liberalization in Belarus in the lead-up to the December 19 election, supporters of engagement claimed.

Europeans were not alone in softening their approach toward Lukashenka. Despite the fact that Lukashenka expelled the American ambassador and almost 30 American staff from the Embassy in Minsk in March 2008 and has not allowed any of them to return, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with Belarusian Foreign Minister Martynov in Kazakhstan on the margins of last November's Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Summit to sign an agreement on the transfer of highly enriched uranium (HEU). Such a meeting broke longstanding policy dating back to her husband's administration against such high-level encounters. Securing HEU is important but no more so than standing by principle on freedom and human rights; moreover, the timing of such a meeting just weeks before the Belarus election sent an unfortunate signal that the U.S. was siding with Lukashenka, too. Only at the end of Clinton's joint statement with her Belarus counterpart did the two officials briefly mention human rights issues – and even then the statement praised Belarus for inviting international observers to monitor the upcoming election and offered no words of criticism for the grim situation there.

Despite European and American offers of engagement, the situation inside Belarus was in fact deteriorating, not getting better. The government increased pressure against opposition leaders, arrested civil society activists, violently broke up protests, harassed the Polish minority, and denied registration to newspapers. In certain respects, the regime was less blatant about its repression than it was in 2006; it avoided high-profile political-prisoner cases, which are easy for the international community to focus on and cause image problems for the regime. But make no mistake: The general political and human rights environment did not appreciably improve in the lead-up to the election. In Freedom House's Freedom in the World annual rankings, Belarus has not been rated as "Not Free" for years as its government keeps a vice-like grip on all institutions of democratic accountability. Meaningful changes have not been in evidence, and the regime's true essence shined through in this election.

Election Day to the Present

Indeed, the final nail in the coffin came on December 19. Independent exit poll results, contrary to official rigged numbers, showed Lukashenka falling well short of the necessary 50 percent threshold to avoid a runoff second round. Apparently deciding to deal with the opposition the only way he knew how, Lukashenka ordered his KGB goons (and yes, they are still called the KGB) to engage in provocations and crack heads, literally, against peaceful protestors in downtown Minsk. Their crime: they were expressing their frustration with rigged elections and Lukashenka's dictatorial rule. The security services assaulted and arrested more than 600 people, including seven of nine presidential challengers, and savagely beat dozens of people. The KGB has continued to conduct raids and attacks against journalists, opposition figures, civil society representatives, and their families.

The violence authorized by Lukashenka on December 19 and the abuses that continue to this day are much worse than those in 2006. If sanctions were called for in 2006, there should be no debate that they are warranted this time around, too. Far more people have been detained and beaten up in the past month than in 2006, and the raids on journalists and opposition figures continue unabated. Civil society representatives and opposition figures support the reimposition of tough sanctions against the Lukashenka regime. Spurning their calls would be a setback for freedom and democracy in Belarus and elsewhere around the world. Moreover, it's time to stop viewing Belarus through a Russia prism. In 2006, the EU and U.S. imposed sanctions against Lukashenka based on how he abused his own people, not on whether Minsk and Moscow had good or bad relations. We should not change that approach now and worry whether new sanctions will push Lukashenka toward Russia.

Enough Talk – It's Time for Action

Tough talk condemning what has happened in Belarus is simply not good enough. Lukashenka and his henchmen must suffer major consequences for what happened. A wider visa ban should be imposed on those responsible for the human rights abuses and be extended to their immediate families if we want it to have impact. It should also include Foreign Minister

Martynov. While not directly involved in human rights abuses, Martynov acts as the mouthpiece for an abusive, corrupt dictator and should not be allowed to peddle his government's lies anywhere in the West. High-level meetings with him, as EU High Representative Baroness Ashton held a week ago, lend unwarranted legitimacy to him and his boss. Moreover, Belarus should be suspended from participating in the EU's Eastern Partnership; to allow it to remain a beneficiary of this program is to make a mockery of this initiative. Nor should Belarus be entitled to any assistance from any European or international financial institutions as long as political prisoners remain in jail.

The United States, too, should be doing what it can to ratchet up the pressure on the regime in Minsk, including imposing sanctions against state-owned enterprises such as Belneftekhim (the state-run Belarusian oil-refining enterprise in which Lukashenka himself reportedly had a stake and which the U.S. sanctioned in November 2007). Together, the EU and U.S. should be speaking with one voice and state publicly and repeatedly that Lukashenka is a threat to freedom in his country and to the region. He is the reason why Belarus suffers from self-imposed isolation from Europe. He is why the families of officials who engage in human rights abuses should not be allowed the privilege to travel, live, or study in the West. He is why their assets are frozen and their credit cards won't work. If they want to fix these problems, they need to focus their energies on the reason for their hardships – Aleksander Lukashenka.

Showing Solidarity with Belarus Civil Society and Opposition

Secretary Clinton issued a good joint statement with EU High Representative Ashton on December 23 condemning the violence in Belarus. Unfortunately, President Obama remained silent, and the White House statement of December 20 was issued in the name of the press secretary. President Obama saw fit to issue a statement December 30 commending Ukrainian President Yanukovich on the transfer of highly enriched uranium to Russia, but opted to say nothing on the situation in Belarus (or on the verdict in the Khodorkovsky case in Russia or the arrest and sentencing of Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov). It matters in whose name such statements are issued, and the President's silence was noticeable.

Freedom and democracy should be the common cause uniting the EU and U.S. together with those inside Belarus who are fighting for a better, more democratic future. We must keep up the drumbeat – and that is why this hearing is so important. I also want to commend Tom Melia, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, for traveling to Minsk last week. During his trip, he clearly condemned the regime’s abuses while standing with those victimized by Lukashenka’s abuses. Senior-level visits to Minsk these days, to the extent they occur at all, should be focused solely on lending support to those in civil society and the opposition who are under relentless attack. Photo-ops with Belarusian officials, to state the obvious, should be avoided at all costs.

Assuming the EU takes a tough stance next week toward Lukashenka and his regime, it should join with the U.S. in simultaneously extending significantly more assistance to civil society and opposition forces inside Belarus. We should be pressing for the release of the several dozen political prisoners still in jail, for a rerun of the election given the fraud that delegitimized the last one (and EU ambassadors were right to have boycotted Lukashenka’s inauguration last Friday), and for restoration of full political rights and civil liberties. We should be demanding that the Lukashenka regime change its behavior completely – and if it is unwilling, then it should be sanctioned until it does. This is a regime that is not serious about engagement. This is a regime that only understands pressure and strength – that’s the way to get Lukashenka’s attention. It is a regime that a decade ago “disappeared” four prominent opposition figures for crossing the regime; their whereabouts remain unknown. It sells arms to such places as Syria, Venezuela, Sudan and Iran, revenue from which lines not only the state’s coffers but Lukashenka’s pockets. Lukashenka’s regime, in other words, is not only a threat to its own people but beyond its borders. By practically any measure, Belarus under Lukashenka is truly the last dictatorship in Europe, a view reinforced by developments on December 19 and since.

At the same time, it is critical that the West step up its support for the opposition and for civil society. This should include waiving visa fees for citizens to allow more Belarusians to visit the West. We should ramp up opportunities for university students to study in Europe and the U.S., especially given that some have been expelled from their studies for participating in the

protests. We must help the families of those in detention to pay for lawyers, medicine, food, and other needs. We should be expanding efforts to channel media into Belarus to let the people there know we're on their side. We should continue to meet with activists and opposition figures traveling around Europe and to the U.S. to show support for their efforts. In this regard, I commend Secretary Clinton for meeting with a group of Belarusians and Belarusian-Americans several weeks ago. These shows of support are critical. I also welcome next week's donors conference in Warsaw as an important opportunity to demonstrate support.

Congress has an important role to play as well. I urge Congress to take up and pass the latest version of the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2011. I commend Members through joint letters and public statements for urging the EU to take a strong stand. We must remember that tens of thousands of people turned out in downtown Minsk -- unprecedented numbers -- to protest against a fraudulent election and the Lukashenka regime. They knew they were risking serious injury and worse at the hands of Lukashenka's repressive security services. And yet they stood for freedom and human rights. We should be standing with them. When President George W. Bush signed the original bipartisan Belarus Democracy Act in 2004, he declared, "[T]here is no place in a Europe whole and free for a regime of this kind." At the same time, there is very much a place in Europe for a democratic Belarus -- but such a possibility is unlikely as long as Lukashenka remains in power and we in the West provide him succor as we did last year. Our support should be for the tens of thousands of brave people who turned out to protest Lukashenka's rule. They are the future of Belarus, and they need our support and solidarity now.