



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

Hearing on “Not-So-Good Neighbors: Russian Influence in Belarus”

Wednesday, November 20, 2019

10:00 a.m.

Room 2200, Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Statement of Helsinki Commission Ranking Member Sen. Ben Cardin

As much as the toxic relationship between Belarus and Russia presents a challenge to liberal democracy in Eastern Europe, it also provides opportunities for exploiting existing fractures in the Russia-Belarus relationship. We have lately seen that all is not well between Presidents Putin and Lukashenka. Disputes over oil and how deep the level of integration between the two countries should be have made cracks in what was once a strong partnership. The strong relationship between Belarus and Russia still exists, but Russia’s adventurism abroad over the past few years may have planted doubts in Lukashenka’s mind that the peace can last. His need for control in his own country and his reliance on Moscow for legitimacy place him in a precarious position.

It is in this position that the opportunity arises for Western engagement with Belarus. In the past few years, Lukashenka has expressed an unprecedented openness to the West that may be a protective response to Putin’s designs on Belarusian sovereignty. After over a decade of a constricted U.S. diplomatic presence in Belarus, and no ambassador, Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei and U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale met and announced that ambassadors would be exchanged once again. The executive



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branch, in this administration and the previous, has sent high-level representation to Belarus that has not been seen for quite some time. Belarus has also sought to reach out to the rest of the world by instituting visa-free regimes for more countries than ever. It is clear that Russia's adventurism in the past few years has softened Belarusian policy toward the US and the EU.

It is important to remember, however, that Belarus is an authoritarian state, and we must not lose sight of the human elements when attempting to build a better working relationship. Civil society and fundamental freedoms are regularly repressed in the country, and its last truly free and fair election was held 25 years ago. When it comes to human rights, Belarus is in a post-Soviet rut that has not abated, as it has in many of its neighbors. Lukashenka will have to consider serious reforms, at the expense of his own personal power, if he truly wishes for better cooperation with the West. It is not clear he is willing to do that.

So, are friendly gestures on the part of Lukashenka sincere or a false front? Can he navigate a foreign policy somewhere between Russia and the West, or will Belarus find itself pulled to one side? Our witnesses will no doubt share their expert opinions on Lukashenka's thought processes and the prospects for Belarus' relationship with Russia and with the West. Thank you.