

Statement of Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin

Co-Chairman

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Belarus -- The Ongoing Crackdown and Forces for Change

November 15, 2011

Thank you, Chairman Smith, for convening this important hearing. The difficult situation in Belarus merits our ongoing attention as the post-December 19, 2010 election crackdown continues to this day. The very modest hopes engendered prior to that election were crushed as the world witnessed singularly brutal repressive acts from the Lukashenka regime – a regime with the unfortunate distinction of being the worst human rights violator in Europe.

Clearly, throughout his 17-year rule, the Lukashenka regime has repeatedly violated its OSCE human rights and democracy commitments, but this nearly year-long crackdown has been especially egregious. The international community has properly reacted, including the OSCE. Earlier this year, the United States together with 13 other countries invoked the Moscow Mechanism concerning Belarus, an extraordinary, rare measure last used with Turkmenistan in 2003, reflecting the gravity of the post-election crackdown. Despite Belarusian attempts to undermine the Mechanism's implementation, a comprehensive report was issued in June documenting Belarus' non-compliance in many areas of the human dimension and containing numerous recommendations, which the Belarusian authorities have chosen not to act upon.

In June 2009, I led a seven-member Congressional delegation to Minsk where we met with Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka and made it clear to him that the only way to improve the relationship between our two countries is for him to increase political freedom and respect for human rights. Unfortunately, this is something that he has been either incapable or unwilling to do, thereby isolating Belarus. Along with our EU partners, we have taken various targeted measures against those involved in human rights violations and the suppression of democracy, sending the message that the contempt Lukashenka exhibits for international standards and, indeed, for the people of Belarus, will not be countenanced.

The economic situation in Belarus is dire, and the Belarusian people – already denied their rights – are now suffering as a result of Lukashenka's long-time mismanagement of the economy. This has spurred growing disaffection among the populace, and Lukashenka's popularity is at an all-time low. Lukashenka needs to make a choice – either to begin to live up to OSCE commitments and move in the direction of democracy and a functioning, market economy, or face a very uncertain future. The Belarusian people deserve to share in the democracy, freedom and prosperity enjoyed by most of Europe, to which, after all, they belong.