

“Belarus: The Ongoing Crackdown and Forces for Change”
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman
November 15, 2011

Welcome to our witnesses and everyone joining us this morning.

Nearly a year after the brutal post-election crackdown of last December, the Lukashenka dictatorship has not relaxed its grip. Civil society remains under attack, with NGOs facing ever greater constraints, and freedoms of assembly and expression are severely infringed. Just a few days ago, Lukashenka further tightened his grip by signing amendments to two laws – one would tighten penalties for political and civil society groups receiving foreign aid and the other would add even more restrictions on peaceful gatherings, such as the “silent” protests which resulted in the detentions of some 3,000 people this past summer.

Yet at the same time there are reasons to ask whether the dictatorship may not be increasingly vulnerable. Lukashenka’s popular support has plunged because of his repression and because of the ongoing economic turmoil. And Lukashenka is facing a new international environment – we can talk about how changing policies of the U.S., EU and international institutions like the IMF may be affecting the dictatorship.

The sad truth is that, two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union, Belarus remains unreconstructed politically and economically and isolated from its European roots. The Belarusian people, who have endured so much over the course of the last century, certainly deserve better. I am convinced that the time will come when Belarus will be an integral member of the family of democratic nations. We need to stand in solidarity with the people of Belarus to achieve these goals and the values we all espouse.

So we'll have to talk more about what more can be done by the United States and its European partners to promote democratic change in Belarus – both by assisting those struggling for freedom, and by holding accountable those who perpetrate human rights abuses. The Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 201, legislation I authored this spring, passed the House in July, and awaits Senate passage. The BDHRA reinforces earlier legislation I authored, the Belarus Democracy Acts of 2004 and 2006. The Bush and Obama Administrations have put the provisions of the earlier legislation to good use, but this new bill will reinforce our message and provide new tools for promoting democracy and human rights in Belarus – for example, it expands the list of Belarusian senior officials who would be denied U.S. visas and be subject to asset freezes – so that the list would now include those involved in the post-election crackdown.

I'll close with an observation on political prisoners. In the last few months, Lukashenka has released many of the political prisoners convicted in the crackdown – he obviously hopes to regain favor in Europe and the U.S., in view of Belarus' sinking economy. The U.S. and the Europeans, and the international lending institutions, must not be taken in by this. Before we can improve relations with such a vicious dictator, we need to see truly meaningful changes – such as the release of all remaining political prisoners, full restoration of their civil and political rights, and a complete end to the harassment of all those who criticize the dictator.

Now I'll introduce our witnesses.

Our first witness, Ales Mikhalevich was a candidate in the December 2010 Belarusian presidential elections. In the protest that followed, Mr. Mikhalevich was arrested, as were six other presidential candidates and more than 600 others. Held for two months in a KGB jail – in Belarus it is still called

the KGB – after his release Mr. Mikhaelovich publicly denounced the conditions in his prison and described the acts of physical and psychological abuse that he and others endured. In danger of being arrested again, he sought and received political asylum in the Czech Republic. Last week, Mr. Mikhalevich was awarded Canada’s John Humphrey Award for his courage and determination in defending human rights and democratic principles. He holds degrees in Political Science and Law from the Belarusian State University, and has studied at the University of Warsaw and University of Oxford.

Rodger Potocki is Senior Director for Europe at the National Endowment for Democracy, where he has overseen NED’s Belarus portfolio since 1997.

Rodger has written widely on Belarus; his most recent article, “A Tale of Two Elections,” appeared in the July 2011 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*. An adjunct in Georgetown University’s History Department, Rodger also worked in the US Congress and at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Jamestown Foundation. He holds an MA in Russian and East European Studies from Yale

Susan Corke is Director for Eurasia Programs at Freedom House. Before joining Freedom House, she spent seven years at the State Department most recently as the Deputy Director for European Affairs in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). Of great interest to us because of the Helsinki Commission’s mandate to fight for human rights, she has been the managing editor for the State Department Country Reports on Human Rights, where she had responsibility for reports on European countries. She has also had supervisory oversight over DRL’s civil society, media and human rights programs in Europe (including Belarus). She has a Master’s degree in International Affairs from George Washington University.