



**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 Rep. Joe Wilson**

It is curious that as we monitor Russia’s malign influence on its neighbors as well as far abroad, we pay so little attention to what is going on in Belarus. Perhaps this is because we have much more evident and headline-grabbing news available when discussing the Kremlin’s attempts to meddle in our own elections and society. Just as dramatic and concerning is Russian military adventurism—whether it be in Syria, Ukraine, Georgia, and even places as far-flung as the Central African Republic. Vladimir Putin tramples on international law and attempts to erode liberal, democratic norms where they are just beginning to grow, or even where they are already well-established.

Though not a military conquest, Putin’s designs on Belarus should be just as concerning to us as the above-mentioned examples. As the chains of the old Iron Curtain have been broken, and as democracy and the rule of law have moved steadily eastward, Belarus remains a stubborn outlier. Why is this? We know that part of the reason is lack of significant structural reforms after the fall of the Soviet Union. Still known for its collective farms and state-owned enterprises, Belarus has an economy stuck in the past. Another part of the reason is the dictatorship of President Alexander Lukashenka, who has ruled the country for most of its post-



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Soviet existence, by falsifying elections and marginalizing, even violently punishing, dissenters. And finally, Russia's tight grip on its old Soviet friend is unrelenting, taking advantage of Belarus' weaknesses to create a vassal state subject to its whims.

We know that as longtime authoritarian leaders, Putin and Lukashenka have many things in common and many incentives to work together. But, as I hope we will learn over the course of this hearing, there are questions about how long this cozy relationship can last. Lukashenka is a tyrant but not a fool—he knows that engagement with Europe and the West is not optional in this day and age, and he sees how Putin's greedy fingers have reached into Ukraine. He is being forced to make some difficult decisions about the direction the country should take.

We can only hope that these decisions bring greater freedom to the people of Belarus, who for too long have lived without the opportunity to express themselves without fear of repression. The younger, globally-connected generations in particular can easily see the opportunities and freedoms available in the West. They, along with all Belarusians, deserve the opportunity to determine their own futures. A Belarus tied down by Putin's Russia is a Belarus stuck in the Soviet past and subservient to Moscow. I look forward to hearing our witnesses comment on the prospects for Belarus' future and ways to combat Russia's pernicious influence. Thank you.