



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Benjamin Cardin

Ranking Member - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Mr. Chairman, this year marks the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, an event that had devastating and lingering consequences for Ukraine, where the actual facility was located, and for neighboring Belarus affected by the radioactive fallout. Chernobyl revealed the limits on the ability of a closed system – in that case the Soviet Union – to control information both within its borders and beyond. Twenty years later, the Lukashenka regime is similarly bent on maintaining a monopoly over Belarus' information space in order to retain power. But the winds of change are evident in Belarus even as Europe's last dictatorship struggles in desperation for its very survival. I welcome U.S. and European cooperation in efforts to break the information blockade through stepped up broadcasts to Belarus.

Simply put, Mr. Lukashenka is on the wrong side of history and it is only a matter of time before he falls and Belarus takes its rightful place among the democratic countries of Europe after a decade of self-imposed isolation and misrule. The Government of Belarus has shown utter contempt for its own people, unleashing a campaign of repression aimed at silencing independent voices from university students and free trade union activists to journalists and advocates of peaceful democratic change. Others have also felt the ire of the regime, including ethnic community leaders, particularly Poles in western Belarus as well as members of some religious minorities, including Catholics. The assault on a presidential candidate just last week underscores the continuing climate of fear in Belarus. In this regard, I would also mention the longstanding cases of disappeared opposition figures.

Mr. Chairman, as one who has played an active role in the OSCE since the early 1990's, I am particularly concerned over Belarus' blatant disregard for the fundamental principles of democracy and human rights contained in the Helsinki Final Act. In this regard, I would also note the fact that one of our fellow Commissioners, Alcee Hastings, will be leading up the OSCE's Election Observation Mission in Belarus, in his capacity as President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

Even before the election is held on March 19, I have grave concerns about the pre-election process which is overseen by Lukashenka's faithful at the Central Election Commission to determine that these elections will be neither free nor fair. Stepped up harassment, arrests, and the jailing of opposition supporters and the inability of candidates standing up against Lukashenka to conduct anything like normal campaigns speak volumes about the run up to the elections. The only question is when the people of Belarus will say enough: enough to intimidation, enough to manipulation, enough to falsification of election results.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing today, and I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses today.