



# HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

## Testimony :: Hon. Christopher H. Smith

**Co-Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

Mr. Chairman, exactly six years ago to the day, on March 9, 2000, the Helsinki Commission held hearings on Belarus, focusing on the already bleak human rights and democracy situation under the regime of Alexander Lukashenka. Numerous witnesses, including some of the leading opposition members from Belarus testified, highlighting concerns and outlining steps on how democracy and that country's integration with Europe could best be fostered. Six years later, we find ourselves examining an even more precarious situation in Belarus.

Unfortunately, the Lukashenka regime has only become more dictatorial with the passage of time. The assault on civil society – NGOs, independent media, democratic opposition, and increasing pressure on unregistered and minority religious organizations has only intensified, becoming daily occurrences. Despite innumerable calls for Belarus to live up to its freely undertaken OSCE election commitments, elections in 2000, 2001 and 2004 were neither free nor fair. It follows along a downward trajectory that began a decade ago when Lukashenka, through an illegitimate referendum, took control over the legislature and judiciary and manipulated the constitution to remain in power.

Belarus, which borders on the EU and NATO, has become a stark anomaly in an increasingly democratic Europe. The Belarusian people have become even more isolated from the winds of democracy following neighboring Ukraine's Orange revolution. Lukashenka's fear that the people could follow the Ukrainian example has led to his further clamping down on those who dare to speak out for freedom.

Among the numerous examples that can be cited, just last week, one Belarusian opposition candidate running for next week's elections, was detained by security forces and severely beaten. Yesterday, we received reports that five members of the campaign of united opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevych were held by police and driven away. In recent weeks, Lukashenka has launched an intensive campaign to encourage a climate of fear and stoke hostility among the Belarusian people through a Soviet-style propaganda campaign against the opposition, Europe and the United States.

As sponsor of the Belarus Democracy Act, I welcome the Administration's growing engagement with the people of Belarus. I am pleased that President Bush and other high ranking Administration officials met with Irena Krasovska and Tatyana Zavadzka, two of the wives of opposition figures believed to have been murdered with the complicity of Belarusian senior officials. I've had the privilege of meeting with them and others over the last six years and have admired their determination and courage.

Given the disturbing pre-election environment – where meaningful access to the media by opposition candidates is denied, where independent voices are stifled, and where the regime maintains pervasive control over the election process -- it is very hard to imagine that next week's elections will be free. They are already not fair. In the event that protests are held in response to electoral fraud, we remind the Belarusian authorities that the right to peaceful assembly is a fundamental human rights and a basic tenet of the OSCE. Any violent suppression of peaceful protests will have serious repercussions and only deepen Belarus' self-imposed isolation.

Over the course of the last century, the Belarusian people have endured great suffering at the hands of murderous dictators such as Stalin and Hitler. Twenty years ago, they endured, and continue to endure, Chernobyl's dark cloud. The Belarusian people deserve the freedom and dignity long denied them and Belarus deserves its rightful place in a free, prosperous and democratic Europe.