

Dear Members of Congress, Staff, and supporters of democracy in Eastern Europe, thank you for allowing me to speak about the recent events in my country. Let me begin by citing two letters I recently received:

“Belarus is different now,” my friend and one of the leaders of the March 25<sup>th</sup> demonstration wrote yesterday. “History is happening before our eyes. There are so many new faces! Hundreds of people previously uninvolved have joined democratic movement, especially youth who refuse to tolerate dictatorship anymore. This is the time of heroes, those who are ready to stand up for freedom, raise the flag, remain in the Square in the cold and snow, defending their choice and knowing that this free space will be taken from them sooner or later, and that they will pay for it with their health, freedom, studies and jobs. We are now creating a new Belarus and I’m proud to be part of this process.”

“I want to tell you about the heroism of our girls,” wrote a human rights activist in a letter from prison. “Despite being treated as criminals, they proved to be stronger and wiser than these rude males in uniforms. Despite hard conditions and psychological humiliation, cheering, songs and prayers can be heard from each cell. The celebration of our victory has coined a new slogan: “We Will Remain Together.” ... Nobody regrets anything. We brought with us to prison the atmosphere of freedom from our liberated city. My heart aches when I see these educated, smart, charismatic, determined young women, who came to the Square, called by their hearts... and they don’t regret it. Each of them understands that they will most likely be thrown out of school and lose their jobs. We, the adults, look at them as heroes, and we are proud of them.” (Pause)

This election and the events after it are a victory for the Belarusian people. It is a victory of freedom of spirit, of a strong desire for democracy and freedom. The regime has suffered a defeat because the people overcame fear to express and defend their opinions in the face of overwhelming state propaganda, intimidation and repression. The regime is afraid of our people: it destroyed a tent city with 500 kids in the dark of night, sent thousands of armed troops to beat peaceful demonstrators, and put more than 2,000 people in prison. Lukashenka has not appeared in public since, and his inauguration has been postponed. The authorities do not disclose the number or names of those arrested.

This regime will not last much longer. In Belarus, things have changed forever. The very next day after the tent city was destroyed, hundreds of young people took part in a flesh-mob in the center of Miesnk to shame the leading state newspaper, a mouthpiece of pro-Lukashenka propaganda. More than 20,000 people took to the streets on March 25<sup>th</sup> to celebrate Independence Day and reject repression. Hundreds of people stand vigil outside of prisons, and are lighting candles and placing flowers on the Square to honor those who suffered for freedom. The movement for democracy continues, and it is growing.

We Belarusians greatly appreciate support from the international community.

International observers witnessed violations of the electoral process and clearly stated that the elections were a fraud. Reporters protected young people in the Square from the security services with their cameras and microphones. The US and EU did not recognize

the results of the elections as free and fair, condemned the mass human rights violations, and demanded that all political prisoners should immediately be released.

Now that the election is over, it is even more important to keep international attention focused on Belarus. Those who continue to struggle for freedom should not be forgotten. Those who help to keep Lukashenka in power, including police, state officials, judges, and media figures should fully understand the consequences of their actions. These people should not be allowed to travel to Europe and the US. Economic sanctions can be a useful tool to undercut the illusionary stability of Lukashenka's economy, which is propped up by cheap oil and subsidies from Russia. The Kremlin's economic and political support for Luksahenka should be a subject of international pressure. Assistance is needed to help hundreds of Belarusian students, newly expelled from universities, to finish their studies abroad. These young people are Belarus' best and brightest, those who will secure our country's democratic future. The US Congress has been supportive of the Belarusian democratic movement. We ask you to increase your support, re-authorize the Belarus Democracy Act, and stand with democratic activists of Belarus.