



OPEN LETTER TO PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

Catalyzing Democratic Change in Belarus

June 28, 2011

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House

Dear Mr. President:

As the strong-armed rule of Alyaksandr Lukashenka faces its gravest economic crisis to date, we write to express our belief that now is the time for the United States, together with the European Union, to step up its efforts at securing the release of all political prisoners in Belarus and to intensify pressure on “Europe’s last dictatorship.”

During the last six months, Belarus has descended into a crippling financial crisis caused by years of profligate state spending and reckless economic policies by the government. The people of Belarus have borne the brunt of this calamity, watching their savings and real wages plummet, even as the prices of food, fuel and other imported goods have skyrocketed. But rather than addressing the needs of his citizens, President Lukashenka has threatened to close the country’s borders, promised to “whack” activists who organize protests over the Internet and invested his efforts in sustaining a repressive crackdown on members of the opposition, civil society and journalists. Many of these individuals have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms by a judicial system that has long been a political tool abused by Lukashenka. Still others face harassment, arrest and persecution at the hands of state authorities. As U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and European Union (EU) High Representative Catherine Ashton declared in December, “The people of Belarus deserve better.”

As you said in Cairo two years ago, freedom of speech, the rule of law and the ability to choose one’s government “are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.” Likewise in your May 19 address at the State Department, you stated, “There are times in the course of history when the actions of ordinary citizens spark movements for change because they speak to a longing for freedom that has been building up for years.” We believe that moment is now at hand in Belarus.

Your Administration has shown leadership in condemning the abuses of the Lukashenka regime and supporting civil society and the victims of Lukashenka’s brutality. But we urge you to consider additional measures focused on bringing about the immediate release of all political prisoners in Belarus and to reiterate America’s deep concern regarding reports of torture and other forms of cruel and degrading treatment of detainees. In order to assist the people of Belarus in their struggle for freedom, we likewise encourage the Administration to expedite its efforts to provide material and technical assistance to

Belarus' opposition, civil society and journalists, and to expand current U.S. economic sanctions against the regime. We note how just last week, EU leaders instituted an arms embargo on material that might be used for political repression inside Belarus and imposed new sanctions on companies linked to the Lukashenka government. We support the EU's efforts and recommend expanding the list of companies currently sanctioned by the U.S. government, including, inter alia, the state-owned arms manufacturer BelTechExport. By ratcheting up pressure on the Lukashenka government, your Administration can send a strong signal that it is time for members of the regime to think about their future, especially as life becomes more unpleasant for them by the day.

Additionally, we recommend that the Administration state clearly and publicly its opposition to any assistance from international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, following the lead of the European Investment Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, as long as political prisoners remain in jail. These institutions must avoid dispensing assistance which could have the unintended consequence of extending the lifespan of this repressive regime. Now is not the time to throw Belarus' dictatorship a financial life preserver.

Lastly, we encourage your Administration to think strategically about Belarus post-Lukashenka, when the people of Belarus are finally able to establish a democratic, free market society. In anticipation of that day, the United States should prepare now, so as to be in a position to rapidly assist in the establishment of internationally-recognized elections and rules-based, transparent governance in Belarus.

Your consideration of these concerns is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

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