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## House of Representatives

### 50 years of RFE/RL Broadcasting to Belarus

**HON. TOM LANTOS**

OF CALIFORNIA  
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. Speaker, May 20, 2004 will mark the 50 year anniversary of Congressional action which authorized broadcasting to Belarus. This is an anniversary, which I note with some regret. It is unfortunate that we still need to broadcast to Belarus, and it is unfortunate that democracy and freedom of speech have not made greater progress there.

The transition to democracy and genuine freedom of speech in the former communist countries has never been easy. Belarus, a former Soviet republic that regained its independence when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, is an exception when compared to its neighbors, such as Ukraine and Russia. Since elected President in 1994, Alexander Lukashenka has relentlessly curbed independent media outlets in Belarus. As his regime became increasingly authoritarian, leaders of the democratic opposition have disappeared; civil society activists have been routinely detained, beaten by Special Forces, imprisoned and fined by government courts; and numerous NGOs have been closed. Belarus is the only country in Europe where Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) continues to

broadcast as it did during the darkest days of the Cold war – exclusively from abroad and relying primarily on short wave radio.

Mr. Speaker, RFE/RL listeners in Belarus greatly appreciate this service provided by U.S. taxpayers. The atmosphere of fear does not stop people from expressing their feelings of gratitude and support. A priest from a regional town writes to RFE/RL: “When I listen to your programs I think that it is God who is speaking through your waves to Belarusians.” A listener from Minsk, the country’s capital, writes: “Radio Liberty is doing more for democracy in Belarus than all the opposition taken together.” A former member of parliament, Uladzimer Kudinsky, imprisoned by the Lukashenka regime, was listening to the RFE/RL Belarus service over a radio smuggled into prison and found out that due to international pressure he was to be released in a week. The ground breaking reporting of the RFE/RL Belarus service helped discover and document illegal arms deals between the Lukashenka regime and Saddam Hussein.

It is a tradition of the Belarus service to step in and give an outlet to those who the government tries

to muffle – opposition leaders, journalists from banned newspapers and magazines, children from the only Belarusian language high school which was shut down by the authorities, and civil society activists who are harassed and arrested. For fifty years the RFE/RL Belarus service was the major and most popular independent voice from abroad broadcasting domestic and international news into a state-controlled media environment and it has been carrying out this mission with professionalism, courage and dedication.

Mr. Speaker, I invite my colleagues to join me in commending the Belorussian service of RFE/RL for its persistence and professionalism on this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The Belorussian listeners of the RFE/RL who tune in to its broadcasts, truly hear a “voice of freedom” – objective coverage of events within and outside of Belarus and, perhaps even more precious, a sense of solidarity with the world communities of democracies and hope for freedom for themselves.