

**Testimony of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya,
President-Elect and Head of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus,
in the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing
“U.S. Support of Democracy and Human Rights”
March 28, 2023**

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the committee: thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the dire situation of democracy and human rights in Belarus and its implications for regional security and global interests.

I will provide brief remarks while I would like to ask Chairman Menendez to accept my full testimony for the public record.

In 2020, Belarusians voted out incumbent Aliaksandr Lukashenka and protested against his refusal to step down. The illegitimate regime responded with lawless crackdown against political forces, civil society, and the media. Systemic repressions affected literally all strata of the society: women and men, children and seniors, workers and teachers, athletes and lawyers, medics and religious communities.

Arrests are accompanied by violence, torture and degrading treatment amounting to crimes against humanity, as it was repeatedly recognized by the international community, including in the reports by the UN and OSCE experts.

Repressions led to 60 thousand administrative arrests and criminal cases, at least 5 thousand political prisoners, and hundreds of thousands of Belarusians fleeing their country. Prison terms are extremely long, for example my husband Siarhei Tsikhanouski received 20 years, my own term is 15 years. We cannot wait till these terms expire, we must do everything to end the regime and to free people.

Names of many political prisoners became symbols of courage and dignity – Ihar Losik, Maria Kalesnikava, Pavel Sevyarynets, Mikalai Statkevich, even Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski – just to name a few. But thousands more remain invisible and receive very little support. Repressions affected more than 1500 Belarusians who support Ukraine and oppose the war.

The regime treats political prisoners as hostages, using them to cast fear inside the country and to bargain for international recognition. The regime maintains a high level of terror while changing the political system, ideology, and legislation into neo-Stalinism. The very concept of solidarity is outlawed in Belarus as the regime tries to break every horizontal connection in the society.

Nevertheless, Belarusians have not given up fighting for a day. But now we must resolve two formidable tasks: **liberate Belarus from tyranny and preserve its independence**. The democratic forces of Belarus are not delegating this work – it is our duty and responsibility. But we need help of the world to win this fight.

There is no doubt that an independent, sovereign, democratic Belarus is in the interest of the entire international community. **We, Belarusians, are the legitimate force** to bring democracy to our own country and this by default cannot be seen as an interference in internal affairs.

We have seen an unprecedented outpouring of support and solidarity since 2020. This energy should become the international strategy to realize the **commitment to independent and sovereign** Belarus.

The most damaging factor to democratic hopes of Belarusians has been **Russia's interference in our internal affairs**. Without the Kremlin's help Lukashenka would have lost power even before 2020. To

return the debt he makes illegal concessions to Russia. This includes agreements expanding Russian military presence and handing over economic and financial controls to Moscow. The Russian military is freely using Belarus territory, making our country a co-aggressor in the war against Ukraine. To please Moscow and make space for the Russian world, Lukashenka destroys Belarusian national identity, the core of the nation's soul and resilience before external threats.

Finally, Putin just announced that Russia is deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus by July 1 this year. This is his way to deter Western support for Ukraine but also portraying Lukashenka as Putin's puppet. Some call it occupation, some creeping annexation, but it is clear that Russia's actions damage Belarusian and global interests. As long as Belarus remains under Russian control it will be an outpost of its aggressive projects, and this is unacceptable for us and for the world.

It is time for a **strong response to Russia's hostile, colonialist actions** against Belarus. I urge the world to support our demand of full removal of the Russian military from Belarus and complete termination of its involvement in the war. We cannot postpone Belarus until after the war. As we see this, a democratic Belarus would drastically shorten the way to Ukraine's victory. Going further, we see sustainable peace as the result of a comprehensive approach to stabilizing the region. This should entail a Marshall Plan for Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus since regional security and stability are only possible when all these nations are free of Moscow's control.

In the same vein, it must be guaranteed that the post-war arrangements have no place for Russia's special interests in Belarus. Such deals would lay the foundation for new instability. Discussions about peace must include the Belarusian democratic forces who have the legitimacy and think about national interests.

Russia denies to both Belarus and Ukraine their fundamental right to have a sovereign state. However, these two nations are not the final destination for Russia's ambitions, **they are a stepping stone on the path to dismantling the Transatlantic partnership**. Therefore, I urge the US and like-minded nations to continue supporting Ukraine, including with the most advanced military equipment, in its brave fight for the right to be themselves and decide on their future.

The war has made it clear to Belarusians that **relations with hostile Russia must change**. The United Transitional Cabinet has adopted an approach to revising ties with Russia. This includes leaving the military alliance and the Union State Treaty. Instead, we started working on the European perspective for Belarus. This will also include joining regional initiatives and broad partnerships with neighboring states. **I ask the US Congress to support this strategic change for Belarus.**

The US Congress has always been active on the Belarus agenda. In 2021, the Belarus caucus was officially launched in the House. Senator Shaheen and Senator Wicker founded the Free Belarus caucus in the Senate. The Congress adopted four iterations of the Belarus Democracy Act and resolutions assessing and highlighting the developments in Belarus. **Now is the right moment to update the BDA** to reflect the role of Lukashenka in the war and suggest policies for the US government.

Lukashenka lost the mandate to represent the Belarusian people. Yet, he and Putin perceive the lack of full derecognition as a green light to realize their illegal ambitions and enjoy impunity along the way. I call the US to complete this effort and to **fully de-recognize Lukashenka and his regime** as being under full control of the foreign power to the detriment of the very statehood of Belarus. This process must be accompanied by a growing recognition extended to democratic forces.

The US sanctions against the Lukashenka's regime have shown their impact. This leverage should be further strengthened by removing loopholes and enhancing coordination with the EU, UK, and Canada.

The regime is implicated in a series of crimes and must be held accountable for the crimes against humanity, the crime of aggression and for complicity in the war crimes in Ukraine. Lukashenka made the war against Ukraine possible. The attack on Kyiv and Bucha came from Belarus. He remains the only ally of Russia, fulfilling all requests of Putin to help him in this aggression while brutally repressing any forms of protest from Belarusians against the war. **Lukashenka deserves to sit next to Putin at the tribunal** for the crime of aggression.

Finally, I want to reiterate the need of not just keeping Belarus in the agenda but to make this attention practical, to focus international efforts on taking away space and resources from the regime. Cooperation with the US in this sphere has proven to be impactful and this momentum can be further increased, especially when it comes to the UN and its Security Council.

In conclusion, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the United States, its people and government, for the decades of your principled and genuine support for democratic, sovereign, and independent Belarus. The US global leadership on these issues has always had a decisive role. We share the same values and aspirations, and we should stay in this fight together.

Thank you. I am looking forward to your questions.