

U.S. POLICY ON BELARUS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

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U.S. POLICY ON BELARUS

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 9, 2021

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:04 a.m. in room SD-106, Dirksen Senate Office Building, and via Webex, Hon. Robert Menendez, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Menendez [presiding], Cardin, Shaheen, Coons, Murphy, Kaine, Markey, Van Hollen, Risch, Johnson, Romney, Portman, Paul, and Young.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY

The CHAIRMAN. Last week a Belarusian opposition activist attempted suicide in a courtroom by stabbing himself in the neck with a pen. Covered in blood, his jailers fumbled for the keys to his courtroom cage. The absolute horror of this one incident exemplifies the desperation of an opposition movement constantly under lethal threat from a regime dead set on staying in power.

This is the dictatorial regime of Alexander Lukashenka. This is the harsh brutality faced by the Belarusian people every day. Since attempting to steal the presidential election in August of 2020, the Lukashenka regime's oppression has grown exponentially. Hundreds of courageous political prisoners populate Belarusian jails. Several have been killed. Despite this pressure, the people of Belarus continue to turn out, standing up for their rights.

The repressive reach of this regime came into sharp relief 3 weeks ago when Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega were arrested, victims of a hijacking ordered by the state. The Biden administration has rightfully made support for human rights the centerpiece of its foreign policy. How we respond to Belarus will send a message not only to the regime in Minsk, but to autocrats around the world.

This is a critical test, one the United States must pass. The United States will pass this test by leading the international community in human rights and democracy, by leading an international sanctions effort, leading by clearly, publicly, and frequently expressing solidarity with the democratic opposition and the people of Belarus.

Ultimately, a democratic Belarus is up to its people to determine and to achieve. That is their sovereign responsibility. But the United States has also a responsibility to maintain pressure on the

regime, a responsibility to live up to the vision set by the Biden administration, and that starts by taking a few key steps.

First, sanctions. The U.S. re-imposition of sanctions on nine Belarusian entities is a welcome development, but it did little to change Lukashenka's calculus. Working with Europe, the Administration should impose sanctions on the Belarusian state bank, Belarusian sovereign debt, and the energy and potash industries. It is time to increase the pressure.

Second, we need to stand with the opposition in Belarus. I appreciate that members of our committee—Senators Shaheen, Portman, and Murphy—met with the opposition in Vilnius last week. Lukashenka needs to see over and over that the international community does not see him as legitimate, full stop. To that end, Belarusian opposition leadership should be invited to the G7 summit in the United Kingdom next week. We should never pass up an opportunity to express solidarity with these courageous activists.

Finally, we need to see a robust investigation and a focused set of penalties in response to the hijacking of the May 23 Ryanair flight. A lackluster response will send a crystal-clear signal to autocrats in every corner of the world: It is open season on democratic activists abroad; go ahead, target at will. The Kremlin has already seized the initiative and last week began forcing activists off planes for arrest. Since May 23, we have heard a lot of rhetoric, but little action.

I welcome the measures to block Belarusian flights into Europe, and the EU should consider blocking Belarusian ships from its ports. A weak response will only welcome continued aggression.

Alexander Lukashenka is often called the last dictator in Europe, but unfortunately he is not. Vladimir Putin is sitting right next door, constantly exerting pernicious influence across the region. As the Belarusian activist tried to commit suicide in Minsk last week, Putin took Lukashenka out for a yacht cruise on the Black Sea. The Russian leader sees opportunity.

So I look forward to hearing from Ambassador Fisher on how the Department assesses this relationship and how we can work to ensure that Putin does not gain further advantage in the region. The people of Belarus deserve a chance to live in a democratic society. They have sacrificed greatly. Some have paid the ultimate sacrifice, and hundreds sit in jail as political prisoners.

I hope that this hearing does two things. I hope that it sends a clear message of solidarity to the Belarusian people. Second and most importantly, I want this hearing to advance real policy options for the United States and our allies in Europe.

With that, let me recognize the ranking member, Senator Risch, for his remarks.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH,
U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO**

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Last year on August 9, a Belarusian election was stolen from its people. Alexander Lukashenka, who has ruled Belarus with an iron fist since 1994, has reacted violently to challengers. Despite brutal repression, the citizens of Belarus have spent the past year peace-

fully protesting the authoritarian regime in an effort to restore the proper results of the election.

The United States has followed the events in Belarus closely and has worked to support those who stand for freedom and democracy. We have imposed sanctions on Belarusian officials who are responsible for violence, repression, and election fraud. And we continue to work with our European partners to increase pressure on Lukashenka's regime.

I am very glad to see Ambassador Julie Fisher with us today, although she has not yet been able to visit her post in Minsk due to the Belarusian Government's refusal to grant her a visa. Ambassador Fisher has been working diligently to fulfill her duties both by coordinating the embassy from afar and by working with our allies in the region and the exiled opposition groups that strive to bring democracy and the rule of law to Belarus.

Madam Ambassador, I hope to hear from you about the current bilateral relationship, as well as the ways in which Putin is helping to prop up Mr. Lukashenka.

From Ms. Tsikhanouskaya, the likely winner of the 2020 Belarusian presidential election, I look forward to hearing about her plans to take Belarus forward. As leader of the opposition movement, she has persevered despite intense persecution by Lukashenka's regime.

I am also very glad that we have this chance to talk with Jamie Fly, President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, about the media situation in Belarus. Jamie is an expert in European affairs, human rights, global media, and disinformation campaigns by global adversaries. In addition, he is no stranger to our committee, having served as national security advisor to Senator Rubio for more than 4 years.

There have long been restrictions on the press in Belarus, but Lukashenka has recently tightened his grip and grown bolder in his crackdown on press organizations and independent journalists who seek to hold him accountable. Lukashenka's Government has passed Draconian laws aimed at silencing the populace. Journalists have had their offices and homes raided and have been arrested, tortured, and even killed. Several RFE/RL journalists are in Lukashenka's prisons.

Just a few weeks ago, the world watched the shameless kidnapping of a journalist when Belarusian authorities forcibly diverted his commercial flight to land in Minsk so they could carry out his arrest. Persecution of the free press is only a part of the oppression that Belarusians face under Lukashenka's illegitimate rule. This time last year, Lukashenka let it be known that he was not going to play fair in the election. Belarusian authorities began with arresting opposition activists and candidates, notably Ms. Tsikhanouskaya's husband, and protests rose up around the country. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians participated in peaceful demonstrations in the run-up to the August elections and were met with brutal violence from the authorities. More recently, he legalized use of lethal force against protesters and banned most Belarusians from leaving the country.

For more than 25 years Lukashenka has run Belarus as his personal dictatorship. In contrast to the democratic progress made by

Belarus' neighbors, Lukashenka has been able to operate outside of the international standards due to the support he receives from the only other European autocrat worse than he is, Vladimir Putin.

With Putin's support and by his example, Lukashenka believes he can rule with impunity. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on how we can bring that to an end.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Risch.

We will now turn to Ambassador Julie Fisher. Ambassador Fisher was confirmed by the Senate in December of last year and has provided an essential link to the Belarusian democratic opposition.

We welcome you back to the committee and look forward to hearing the Administration's views on our policy moving forward. Your full statement will be included in the record. I would ask you to summarize your remarks in about 5 minutes or so, so that we can have an opportunity to have a conversation with you.

Ambassador.

STATEMENT OF HON. JULIE FISHER, UNITED STATES AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE TO THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ambassador FISHER. Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting me today to discuss our policy in Belarus.

Guided by the Belarus Democracy Act, the United States has consistently supported a free, independent, and democratic Belarus. I would like to start by thanking Chairman Menendez and Ranking Member Risch for this committee's sustained commitment to Belarus' future. In particular, Senator Shaheen's recent visit to Vilnius, together with Senators Portman and Murphy, and this hearing itself are evidence of the high priority placed by the Congress on Belarus.

Ten months ago, I appeared before this committee. That was August 5, 4 days before the fraudulent August 9 election and the subsequent brutal crackdown on democratic activists that ensued; 4 days before the world would be captivated by images of 100,000 Belarusians peacefully protesting on the streets of Minsk; 4 days before everything changed not just inside Belarus, but beyond its borders in the heart of Europe, with significant repercussions for European security.

Despite the oppression, the violence, and the turmoil that followed, the events of the past year provide glimmers of hope. A new generation of brave Belarusians, with courageous women at the forefront, have emerged. They represent a Belarus determined to chart its own path. They represent a Belarus in which wearing a red and white dress, hanging a flag, or playing a particular song will not result in torture, forced confessions, or even death.

Take, for example, Mrs. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, from whom you will hear later today. Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya stood defiantly, together with Maria Kalesnikava and Veronika Tsepkala, to compete in an election and inspire the world. Forced to flee to neighboring Lithuania, which has generously offered her and thousands of others safe haven, Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya quickly emerged as the leader of the democratic opposition and the face of a new Belarus.

Consider as well journalist Raman Pratasevich. During my recent trip to Vilnius, Raman's dedication and his selflessness in the face of very real threats from a ruthless dictator were on display. Raman's arrest after the forced diversion of Ryanair flight 4978 is further evidence—as if the world needed it—of the regime's utter disregard for international norms and reflects the new lows to which Lukashenka and his foreign backers are willing to sink.

Belarus under Lukashenka will never realize its full potential. Lukashenka and his cronies hold more than 470 political prisoners, among them journalists, bloggers, artists, teachers, everyday citizens, not masters of intrigue, many of whom report squalid conditions and physical abuse. They put the nations bravest and brightest on public display in cages, like Belsat reporters Katsyaryna Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova.

Thinking only of himself and his cronies, Lukashenka has been steadily ceding Belarus' sovereignty to Russia for personal gain since he assumed power more than a quarter century ago. The Belarusian people are rightly concerned about the Kremlin's desire to erode their sovereignty and independence, as are we. For as long as Lukashenka remains in power, Belarus faces absorption into Russia under the Union State agreement, with dire consequences for the people of Belarus, for their voice, their agency, their culture, and their identity.

Mr. Chairman, as you said, the people of Belarus deserve better. They deserve a future in which Daria and Katsyaryna and others like Ihar Losik can participate in the governance of their country without putting themselves and their families at risk.

The United States will and must do its utmost to support those who seek to make that future a reality. And as I assured the committee last summer, we will not do so in any way that supports or enriches the regime nor endangers our shared security.

In partnership with Poland and Lithuania and the European Union, the United States has sought to galvanize a broad coalition of like-minded governments, civil society representatives, and Belarusians in exile to effect positive change. At the OSCE and the U.N., we launched fact-finding missions into human rights abuses, and with partners like the European Union, the United Kingdom and Canada, we coordinated and continue to coordinate on new rounds of sanctions to promote accountability for those abuses.

As announced by the White House on May 28, additional sanctions are coming, and they are coming soon.

By imposing visa restrictions, the State Department has made it clear that individuals responsible for stifling Belarusian democracy are not welcome in the United States. And at the same time we are strengthening our assistance to the people of Belarus.

Since August we have identified over \$20 million in additional assistance which aims to provide emergency support to civil society leaders forced to flee Belarus, to sustain grassroots voices within Belarus, to promote independent media, to document human rights violations, and to help those inside and outside Belarus to remain unified.

Senators, Belarus is a country at a crossroads. What happens next will impact the lives of future generations, not just within its borders but across the European continent.

I thank you for this opportunity today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ambassador Fisher follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ambassador Julie Fisher

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me today to discuss U.S. policy in Belarus.

For the past three decades, the United States has consistently supported a free, independent, and democratic Belarus. The 2006 enactment and subsequent 2020 update to the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act has guided U.S. policies for more than a decade. I would like to start by thanking you, Chairman Menendez, and Ranking Member Risch, for this Committee's sustained interest in Belarus' future. Senator Shaheen's recent visit to Vilnius, together with Senator Portman and Senator Murphy, and this hearing itself are evidence of the high priority placed by the Congress on this nation, Belarus, that yearns for freedom.

Ten months ago, I appeared before this Committee seeking confirmation as the first U.S. Ambassador to Belarus in over 12 years. That was August 5, 4 days before the fraudulent August 9 election and the subsequent violent crackdown on democratic activists that continues to this day. Four days before the world would be captivated by images of 100,000 Belarusians peacefully protesting on the streets of Minsk. Four days before everything changed not just for the people of Belarus, but for the center of Europe and our shared security.

Despite the oppression, the violence, and the turmoil, that followed, the events of the past year give us hope. A new generation of brave Belarusians, with courageous women at the front, have emerged. They represent a Belarus determined to chart its own path. They represent a Belarus in which wearing a red and white dress, hanging a flag, or playing a particular song, will not result in torture, forced confessions, or even death. They represent a Belarus eager to seize the many opportunities that accompany democracies, regardless unprecedented internal repression from a vengeful regime and external political pressure from Russia.

Take for example, Mrs. Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, from whom you will hear later today. When her husband Syarhei was arrested after emerging as a leading opposition candidate, Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya—an English teacher by training—stood defiantly together with Maria Kalesnikava and Veronika Tsepkala to galvanize their people and inspire the world. Forced to flee to neighboring Lithuania, which generously offered her and thousands of others safe haven, Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya quickly emerged as the leader of the democratic opposition, and the face of a new Belarus to the world.

Consider as well, journalist Raman Pratasevich. During my most recent trip to Vilnius in April, I had the privilege of speaking with Raman. I was impressed by his dedication, his passion, and like so many others, his selflessness in the face of very real threats from a ruthless dictator. Raman's arrest after the forced diversion of Ryanair flight 4978 is further evidence—as if the world needed it—of the regime's utter disregard for international norms and human rights and reflects the new lows to which Lukashenka is willing to sink in order to eliminate any trace of dissent.

And then there's Maria Kalesnikava, who was recognized by the State Department as one of the 2021 International Women of Courage this past March yet was not able to attend the ceremony because she languishes in a prison cell, charged with “establishing and leading an extremist organization” amongst other bogus charges.

Belarus under Alyaksandr Lukashenka will never realize its full potential. His is a regime that continues to commit human rights violations and abuses. It holds at least 470 political prisoners—journalists, bloggers, artists, teachers, everyday citizens—many of whom report squalid conditions and physical abuse, and the number continues to climb. It puts its best and brightest on public display in cages—like Belsat reporters Katsyaryna Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova—rather than let them report objectively.

Thinking only of himself and his cronies, Lukashenka has been steadily ceding Belarus' sovereignty to Russia for personal gain since he assumed power more than two decades ago. The Belarusian people are rightly concerned about the Kremlin's clear desire to erode Belarusian sovereignty and independence; as are we, our Allies, and our partners in the region. For as long as Lukashenka remains in power, Belarus is under threat of absorption into Russia under the Union State agreement, with dire consequences for the people of Belarus, their voice, their agency, their culture, and their identity.

The people of Belarus deserve better. They deserve a future where people like Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kalesnikava, Ihar Losik, Darya Chultsova, Katsyaryna Andreyeva and Raman Pratasevich participate in the governance of their country without facing personal risks to do so.

In partnership with countries like Poland and Lithuania, the United States has sought to galvanize a broad coalition of likeminded governments, civil society representatives, and Belarusians in exile to effect positive change. At the OSCE and the U.N., we launched fact-finding missions into human rights abuses, which raised the reputational costs of continuing repression for the Lukashenka regime and its Kremlin backers. Working with Latvia and other Allies we ensured a prestigious hockey championship was moved from Minsk. With partners like the EU, UK, and Canada, we have coordinated on new rounds of sanctions to promote accountability for human rights abuses. These efforts have in turn reinforced cooperation with key European Allies and reinvigorated old partnerships.

We are not done by a long shot.

As announced by the White House on May 28, additional sanctions are coming soon.

The State Department has made it clear that specific individuals responsible for undermining Belarusian democracy—whether by violently suppressing peaceful protests or impinging upon media freedom—are not welcome in the United States by taking action to impose visa restrictions on over 120 such Belarusian and Russian individuals. And we keep adding to it as new information comes to light.

At the same time, the U.S. Government is strengthening its assistance to the Belarusian people. Since August 2020, over \$20 million in additional regional and global State and USAID assistance has been identified to provide emergency support to civil society leaders forced to flee Belarus, to sustain grassroots voices within Belarus, promote independent media, document human rights violations, and help those inside and outside Belarus to speak with a unified voice.

And pending congressional approval, the State Department will contribute \$500,000 to the International Accountability Platform for Belarus. Tasked with working under the auspices of a United Nations Human Rights Council-mandated investigation, the Platform will collect and gather evidence on violations of international human rights law in Belarus to be used in future criminal investigations and prosecutions to hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes.

Belarus is a country at a crossroads. What happens next will impact the lives of future generations, not just within its borders, but across the European continent.

In closing, allow me to repeat something I told you last August, something that remains true today: we and our closest Allies and partners have an opportunity to make a lasting impact on Belarus. By working together in support of the Belarusian people's democratic aspirations, we are also making a lasting contribution to regional security and stability. It is quite simply the best way to advance our own security as well.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ambassador, for those insights.

We will start a series of 5-minute questions.

I am glad to hear you say that more sanctions are coming. I do not believe in sanctions just for the sake of sanctions, but in this case there is a clear need for them.

In order to impose sanctions on Belarus, the Administration is relying on Executive Order 13405 that was issued under the Bush administration in 2006. A lot has changed since then, including passage of the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act last year. Why has the Administration not issued a new executive order on Belarus sanctions, and when can we expect one?

Could you put your microphone on, please?

Ambassador FISHER. Sorry about that.

The CHAIRMAN. It is okay.

Ambassador FISHER. Thank you, Senator. Let me assure you that, as the White House statement indicated on May 28, we are working hard on a new executive order at this time. You are exactly right, 2006 was a long time ago. It was a very different world,

and there is room for us to do an awful lot with a new executive order. That is an effort that is underway.

Our goal remains that we are focused on promoting accountability for those individuals and entities who are responsible for or are complicit in the regime's violent repression of civil society and for those human rights abuses. So we will continue to bring new authorities and new tools of pressure to bear.

We will raise the cost of the violence and the repression that the regime is inflicting—

The CHAIRMAN. I am glad we are going to raise the cost. The question is how soon, because the more we wait, the more impunity takes place.

Let me ask you, the Belarusian organization Nexta published an account of Lukashenka's corruption, "Lukashenka: A Gold Mine."

Ambassador FISHER. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. What is your assessment of that report?

Ambassador FISHER. Sir, I would say that the reports that we have seen, the information that has been gathered by Nexta has been incredibly valuable to us. We are focused on a new executive order on the earliest possible timeline. I can assure you that the interagency inside the Administration is working on this question every single day right now.

The CHAIRMAN. Let me ask you this. If you think the report was of significant value, are there Magnitsky sanction measures that can be taken against enablers of the corruption with this regime?

Ambassador FISHER. Sir, we have been very closely looking at exactly which authorities we can apply to a variety of individuals. I think there is an opportunity to apply Magnitsky sanctions.

The CHAIRMAN. Can you share some specific figures within the regime that enable this corruption?

Ambassador FISHER. Sir, I would be happy to follow up with you afterwards in terms of who I see as the targets in terms of who we envision in the next round. As we are working to finalize those questions, I think it would be a little premature to discuss individual targets.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. Well, I would love to have that in an appropriate setting.

In her written testimony, Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya recommends that 24 Belarusian entities in the banking, oil, fertilizer, meteorology, and wood sectors be subjected to U.S. sanctions. This is her view, her testimony, which we will all hear in a little bit.

Can I get your commitment that the Administration will review this list and seriously vet these entities for sanctions?

Ambassador FISHER. Yes, sir, you can.

The CHAIRMAN. I am very concerned about the burgeoning threats to freedom, democracy, and the rule of law from autocrats around the world, including the direct targeting of activists and journalists. You referred to the Belarusian regime's hijacking last month of the Ryanair flight in order to arrest journalist Raman Pratasevich as the starkest example. What is the status of this investigation, and what steps will the Administration take, both unilaterally and with our allies, since the hijacking to impose consequences on Lukashenka to deter other dictators from committing similar abuses? Otherwise, the open skies will not be open. They

will be open for pursuing political activists, journalists, and those who are seen as a threat to some regime.

Ambassador FISHER. Senator, I very much share your concerns about the need for a strong response to this. These are exactly the messages we cannot allow the dictators of the world to take from this incident.

Specifically with regards to your question about the status of the investigation, I think we have seen the International Civil Aviation Organization take swift action. They have an investigation underway. We anticipate at least a preliminary report out of that process by the end of this month, and we will be tracking that very closely. We are working with our allies and partners who are most directly impacted by this flight, and that would be, of course, Greece as the origination point for this flight, Lithuania as the destination point, Ireland as the headquarters of Ryanair, and Poland as the country to which this subsidiary is registered, on all elements of a variety of investigations surrounding this incident.

The CHAIRMAN. This is part of the interagency review in terms of what potential sanctions may take place?

Ambassador FISHER. Yes, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay.

Senator Risch.

Senator RISCH. Thank you.

Ms. Fisher, I have read lots of reports about the relationship between Putin and Lukashenka. I would be really interested to hear your description of that.

Ambassador FISHER. Thank you, Senator. Really, it is a very important question. Let me maybe start by talking about Lukashenka's relationship with Russia, if I might, and that is to say that over the quarter century since he has taken power, in my view Lukashenka has been ceding Belarus' sovereignty over that entire period. This is not something new. This has very much been a feature of his term as he has ruled Belarus.

And what I have observed is that the people of Belarus are gravely concerned about Russia's support for Lukashenka's whims and deprivations; and as he imposes those on Belarus, Russia continues to provide support to a leader whose only motivation at this point is his own grip on power.

I am deeply troubled by Russia's willingness to facilitate the regime's repressions and its attempts through the last months to normalize Lukashenka's extensive human rights abuses and violations through false equivalencies and their whataboutism.

We find Russia's continued rhetorical, diplomatic, military, and financial support for the Lukashenka regime part of a consistent pattern on the Kremlin's part to ensure Belarus' dependency.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, I appreciate those thoughts. Based on your knowledge, what do you see as being the conditions or the events or scenarios where things change in Belarus?

Ambassador FISHER. Senator Risch, I think the real question is what is it we all can do in the West that will help get the political prisoners out from behind bars so that there can be a dialogue at least to a new free and fair election. That is what Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, from whom you will hear later, that is what she is calling for as the next steps.

We have been working to apply pressure to Lukashenka to try to drive the regime into a dialogue. The costs of remaining outside of a dialogue have become quite high for him. We have not yet changed the calculus. We have not yet changed his decision-making calculations, but we will continue to add those costs. There can be no normalization. It is as if the regime believes a page will be turned and they can go back to building relations with the West when they have so clearly walked backwards from where they were 2 years ago in terms of the human rights situation.

Senator RISCH. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. I understand we have Senator Cardin virtually. Senator Cardin?

[No response.]

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. While we wait for him, we will go to Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you very much, Ambassador Fisher, for all of your great work on what is happening in Belarus. As you pointed out in your opening statement, Senators Murphy, Portman and I had a chance to stop in Lithuania on our trip to Ukraine and Georgia last week and meet with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and I can tell you how impressed I think we all were with her courage, with the motivation of the opposition and their willingness to travel around Europe to build support for the opposition movement. It was particularly interesting to see the juxtaposition of that meeting and the picture that appeared in international newspapers of Lukashenka and Putin on Putin's yacht while they were incarcerating journalists and members of the opposition. The two of them were out having a good time on his yacht, obviously not at all concerned about what is happening with human rights in Belarus.

I wonder, one of the things that we heard that was of concern to other countries in the region was this proposed union between Russia and Belarus. Can you talk about what you think the implications of that are?

Ambassador FISHER. Thank you, Senator. The proposed Union State is a process, this idea of Russia and Belarus combining at a variety of different levels for a sort of supra-national association, and this is a process that has been underway between the two countries for two decades. It is not one that has moved quickly, nor is it one that has moved particularly transparently, and what is in it for each of the two countries is also not entirely clear.

What I have observed is that Moscow has in every way taken advantage of Belarus' vulnerabilities as they have endured this dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenka, and they will continue to do so. They will continue to use Belarus for their own purposes, which leaves the people of Belarus with very little voice, very little agency in their own future. The question of what the people of Belarus want for their future is, of course, one of the most significant motivators for what took place last summer. It is the desire of the people of Belarus to have a voice in their future, and that is one of the pieces of the Union State that concerns me greatly, is what happens to them in that process.

Senator SHAHEEN. Absolutely. And again, it is a concern that we have heard not just from the opposition leader but from others in the region.

One of the things that I was also impressed with was the support from Lithuania, and they also mentioned Poland, in supporting the opposition leaders, many of whom are living in Lithuania now. Can you talk about what more we might do in the United States to support the efforts of those two countries as they work to support opposition leaders?

Ambassador FISHER. Thank you. I think there is room for us to do an awful lot more with regards to both support of the democratic opposition outside of Belarus' borders, and there is also room for us to do more in coordination with our allies, our frontline allies, our partners in the region.

Lithuania and Poland, as you note, are carrying an incredibly heavy burden as they host opposition elements, as they help to protect them. I would note that in Poland they have been hosting generations of opposition who have been forced to flee over the decades of Lukashenka's regime. And Lithuania, of course, is doing a tremendous amount, not only to welcome those who are fleeing persecution and repression but to keep them safe. This is an area where I think the United States can work very closely with our partners.

I would also note, Senator, I know Ukraine was also a stop on your trip. There has been an awful lot of economic flight to Ukraine. A lot of technology folks have fled to Ukraine. We have seen a prominent journalist, an analytical observer, whose name was mentioned in the forced confession from Raman Pratasevich who felt that he had to leave Belarus.

So I think it is important to recognize that we have three allies and an important partner, all of whom are significantly impacted by these events.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, and thank you for your good work in this regard, and your trip.

I understand that Senator Portman is about to make a grand entrance.

Senator Portman is recognized.

Senator PORTMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, Ambassador. I appreciate your opening statement and the opportunity to hear some of the back and forth. I was privileged to go, as you know, to Lithuania last week with Senator Shaheen, Senator Murphy, and have a chance to debrief with the Lithuanians about what is going on in Belarus. You are not there because you cannot be there. We were not able to go there. But on the other hand, we were able to get some good input, including, as you know, from Ms. Tsikhanouskaya, who we are going to hear from in just a moment.

I guess my biggest takeaway was the degree to which Russia is using Belarus as a staging ground, in essence, for their military, and the impact that has on the region, in particular the northern border of Ukraine. Ukraine already has an eastern border they have to defend, and Russia has recently sent over 100,000 troops to that region, including equipment, which would indicate that they

have designs to come back, since they left the equipment there. Now they have to worry about their northern border, as well.

You talk a little about the Russian intentions in Belarus. I understand they have a couple of bases already, and they have asked for a third base. Talk a little bit about their military posture and what you see as the likely scenario with regard to Russian involvement in Belarus.

Ambassador FISHER. Thank you, Senator. And thank you again for taking part in the trip last week. It was so important to both the democratic opposition, to our allies, and to our efforts.

In terms of Russia's role, particularly, as you mentioned, militarily, I would start by saying that, again, it is Lukashenka's willingness to increase dependency on Russia in every possible sphere that has brought him to the point of being in no position—really to barely having a say in what Russia would decide to do militarily in Belarus.

There has been an integration of military and security forces over, again, the decades of his tenure. It is important to acknowledge that Russian troops in Belarus, that is not new. Russian troops have been in Belarus for a long time. The question is how many more.

I would also acknowledge that this year is the year of the major Russian military exercise, ZAPAD, which we are watching very closely to see how this exercise will unfold, what kinds of troops and equipment move into Belarus, and how much of that leaves. The ZAPAD exercise is one that NATO in particular pays very close attention to, and we will continue to do that this year.

Senator PORTMAN. Can you confirm that Russia has requested another base in the country?

Ambassador FISHER. Sorry?

Senator PORTMAN. Can you confirm that Russia has asked for another base in Belarus?

Ambassador FISHER. I cannot confirm that, no.

Senator PORTMAN. That is what we heard in Lithuania, and I thought we heard it from both our U.S. ambassador and from the foreign minister.

With regard to sanctions, we talked about the need for shifting to a more effective means of persuading Belarus to stop some of their malign activities, including obviously in response to the Ryanair jet incident. My question for you is do sectoral sanctions make more sense? And if so, which sectors would be most appropriate to be focused on, and what difference would it make?

Ambassador FISHER. Thank you, sir. I think in a state-run economy, which 70 percent of Belarus' economy is controlled by the state; it is a very Soviet-style economy—I think it is important to acknowledge just how important sectoral sanctions can be to depriving the regime of finance and funding that is used to inflict violence on the people, and I believe that it is the clearest signal that we can send of our rejection of these tactics.

So I believe a new executive order and the work that the White House has directed that is underway now, we are working through targets. It is very important as we work through this process that we take a very careful and thoughtful approach with regards to understanding the impact that we will have on the desired targets,

that we understand the impact to the people of Belarus, who could feel the effects, and that we understand the impacts to American interests as well, and that of our allies and partners.

So I would like to assure you that we are going through a very thoughtful process and that we are working through that with due speed and a sense of urgency.

Senator PORTMAN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Cardin, I understand, is now with us virtually.

Senator CARDIN. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

Let me thank the Ambassador.

In addition to serving on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I also chair the U.S. Helsinki Commission, and we are going to have a meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly early next month. We expect a large U.S. participation in that.

I will also be chairing a hearing with the Chair in Office, the Foreign Minister of Sweden.

So my question to you, Madam Ambassador, is you talked about the OSCE. You talked about a multinational approach. What should we be asking from the OSCE to advance our interests in Belarus? Do you have specific suggestions as to what the OSCE can do more effectively in helping the people of Belarus?

Ambassador FISHER. Thank you, Senator Cardin. For your awareness, we have really looked at the permanent council at the OSCE as the venue for delivering clear messages about how Belarus' authorities have failed to meet their international obligations. As you note, the Swedes, as Chairman in Office and Foreign Minister Linde, have played an incredibly active role in trying to create the conditions for dialogue and trying to bring the parties to the table.

We have seen thus far insufficient results at the OSCE, largely because Lukashenka refuses to engage and has rebuffed the OSCE's efforts to facilitate the dialogue. Nonetheless, this is an effort that I continue to believe we should keep at and work in partnership with the Swedes and other participating states in the OSCE context.

Senator CARDIN. I thank you for that. If you have specific recommendations, the meeting will take place later. The hearing I think will be next week, but later this week we will have a chance to meet with parliamentarians.

I just have a question. The protesters in Belarus are extremely brave people. They are out in great numbers protesting against their government. We have talked about sanctions against those that would violate the rights of the people of Belarus. I am concerned about their safety. Is there more aggressiveness that the international community can be in order to protect the safety of the protesters in Belarus?

Ambassador FISHER. Sir, I absolutely share your concern about the safety of protesters. Who is a protester in Belarus these days is, again, somebody who dares to wear the colors red and white, or someone who hangs their laundry in a way that is unacceptable. A protester these days in Belarus is labeled with a terrorist or an extremist target. I do think there is room, sir, for us to do much more in terms of rejecting the use of these labels and not allowing

Lukashenka and his regime to use these labels to then put international law enforcement tools to work against his opposition.

I think this is an area we can explore more, and I would really be delighted to work with you and your team, sir, to explore what more we could accomplish both at the meeting next week and in the weeks and months ahead.

Senator CARDIN. And we have had bipartisan support here to minimize the use of red notices in regards to oppressive countries trying to get international cooperation in retaining and arresting people that are legitimately protesting and seek asylum.

So, yes, we will very much look to you for advice as to how we can protect the people of Belarus. Our complaint is with the Government, not with the people, and we need to be selective in how we use our power and sanctions, but make it clear we are going to be tough against anyone who would violate international norms of human rights.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Cardin.

I understand that at the moment we do not have a Republican colleague seeking recognition, so we will go to Senator Murphy.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing.

Ambassador, thank you for your work. Thanks for your assistance to Senators Shaheen, Portman and I in getting ready for our trip.

I was incredibly impressed by Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya and her team. The duress under which they are operating is just unfathomable, and I am glad to be exploring new ways that we can support them.

You may have covered this in your prepared testimony but it maybe bears repeating. Lukashenka's claim is that the entire opposition movement is some U.S. front, or using Belarus to get at Putin as part of the Great Power competition. It is important to recognize what the Belarusian opposition is asking for and how it is different, for instance, than what is happening in Ukraine, where in Ukraine the protesters very clearly wanted an orientation with Europe and with the West. That is very different than what is happening in Belarus today. This is not about an alignment with countries to the west of Belarus. This is just about human rights, dignity, and the ability to determine for themselves what the future of that country is. Is that not right?

Ambassador FISHER. Sir, I think that is exactly right, and I think what we are seeing in Belarus, if I put it in a bit of context from what I have experienced in the former Soviet Union over my years of service, this is a delayed transition, right? Lukashenka has held this grip on power. He has run Belarus in a very Soviet style for his quarter of a century. What we see from the opposition is a clear desire—it is different from what happened in Ukraine. It is different from what we have seen happen in countries in the Caucasus, because this is the people saying we want to have a voice.

Largely, the demonstrations last summer to a large extent had an awful lot to do with COVID. It had to do with how the authorities have failed to respond to a health crisis. There were economic

impacts. But immediately what we saw, as people pointed out shortcomings from the regime, was the Government immediately reverted back to its Soviet style tools.

So what the opposition is looking for now, what that democratic opposition—which again, we can acknowledge that Lukashenka has put his opposition either behind bars or he has driven them to the borders of the country and kicked them out. So as we engage with those outside of the borders, the ones with whom we can engage, what they tell us explicitly they are after is the release of political prisoners and the conduct of a new election so that the people’s voices can be heard.

This is not about the European Union. This certainly is not about NATO. This is about a country that would like the opportunity to find some prosperity and stability for its own citizens in a state that serves the citizens, not the other way around.

Senator MURPHY. Well said. Let me ask you one additional question, and that is on how we uncover and publicize the endemic corruption of the Lukashenka Government. Navalny is really dangerous to Putin in part because he has done a very effective job at exposing the financial holdings of Putin and Medvedev and others.

We have capacities to do that as well, along with our European partners. OFAC is a perpetually underfunded agency at Treasury that, with the right resources, can do a good job of exposing the way in which these dictators abroad hide their money. The media can do that as well. We are going to hear testimony on the next panel from Jamie Fly, who is going to talk about how Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty need additional funding and additional resources to be able to do that work themselves and expose for the Belarusian people the extent to which Lukashenka and his friends have stolen from the people of that country.

What do you think about the tools that we have at our disposal to just tell the story of how corrupt this regime is?

Ambassador FISHER. I think that what the committee is going to hear from the next panel I think is going to be incredibly important. RFE/RL and their work is absolutely essential to telling that public story that you referenced.

I think what is so compelling about the information that has been put out by Navalny is it reflects just how little investigative journalism exists in this part of the world and the importance of it. It is not a coincidence that the independent media has been Lukashenka’s primary target in these months since last summer and the conduct of the election, and in all of these years.

It is important to remember that in the lead-up to the Ryanair diversion, there were several significant events in the week before that, including the closure of the largest in-country independent media, Tut.by. So this target is very clear.

I think there is more for us to do in support of that independent media. I think the Global Engagement Center’s work, if I could tout that for a second, is absolutely essential in terms of how we counter some of the massive amounts of disinformation that are at work in the Belarus account. Again, I know that Jamie Fly will talk much more about what it is that RFE/RL can do, and I am quite supportive of that.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Kaine.

Senator Kaine. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Madam Ambassador.

I just want to follow up on this point about press freedom in particular. Reporters Without Borders calls Belarus, “Europe’s most dangerous country for journalists.” In 2020, journalists and other media workers were detained 480 times. In 2021, more than 30 media workers were convicted, detained, or faced criminal charges by the end of May. In May recently, as you just indicated, Belarusian authorities launched a crackdown against Tut.by and its employees. It had its license revoked last year. In June of 2020, video blogger and RFE/RL new media consultant Ihar Losik—and I suspect we will hear more about her on the next panel—was arrested on charges preparing to participate in a riot and disrupt public order. She has undergone repeated hunger strikes, been placed in solitary confinement, and reportedly attempted suicide.

We have had a lot of hearings in this committee over the years where we have heard about persecution of journalists. It might be in Egypt. It might be the dismemberment of Virginia resident Jamal Khashoggi, a Washington Post reporter. It might be in Honduras. It might be in Russia. All over the world, when dictators want to perpetrate atrocities and escape accountability, they go after media representatives.

Mr. Chair, Senator Graham and I have introduced a bill that we call the International Press Freedom Act. We recently introduced it to create a new subcategory of non-immigrant visas for threatened journalists and their families, which would be sort of a strong statement of principle that we value journalism, we value a robust First Amendment culture, and we will provide a haven for those who are practicing this profession who are threatened around the world.

I do not have other questions for the Ambassador. I think especially the questions from those who have recently visited the region have really helped to identify the challenges, and the next panel will do the same. I hope we might think about ways where we can deal with what seems to me kind of an expanding set of attacks on journalists around the world, and that we might find a way to provide refuge in the United States for journalists and their families when they are under assault, as they are in Belarus.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, thank you, Senator Kaine. I certainly look forward to working with you on that. We will have to get some of our colleagues to think about an immigration element that should be unifying, at least. But it is certainly worthy of it. I also think we should be looking at some of our existing laws to see whether the persecution of journalists is specifically a category—for example, Magnitsky and other things—to be considered as sanctionable.

As I understand it, we have no one virtually or present, so I do have one or two final questions before we let you go, Ambassador.

What specific measures should the U.S. look to advance at the OSCE, the Council of Europe, perhaps the European Court of Human Rights, to advance the human rights and democracy efforts in Belarus?

Ambassador FISHER. Sir, I think there is room for us to continue to shine a spotlight on what is happening, and I think that is sort of the minimum for what we can accomplish in those fora. I think there is room for us to do much more in terms of pushing back on Lukashenka's use of international law enforcement tools that he is trying to apply to those who simply do not agree with him, right? Whether it is the red notices, whether as he looks to take his levels of oppression beyond his own borders, I think there is a significant amount for us to do in coordination with the Europeans, with our allies, with those who share our values in rejecting this.

You noted, sir, that this is a test for us. You noted that the message must be clear, not just to this dictator but to all dictators; that we will not sit idly by, and these are the various fora. The U.N., of course, is an important one as well for pushing back on exactly this kind of activity, and we will continue to do that.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, I hope we meet the moment.

Let me ask you this. NATO's Secretary General Stoltenberg called this incident a state hijacking. I was disturbed to see reports that NATO's efforts to penalize and cut ties with Belarus were stymied by Turkey, clearly working, in my view, at the behest of Russia.

Can you help me understand the logic of Belarus' inclusion in the Partnership for Peace program given recent events?

Ambassador FISHER. Let me maybe start by saying I think NATO's statement about the events was quite a strong one, and I would also acknowledge that we have an opportunity to hear from NATO again next week as leaders convene in Brussels.

Having spent quite a bit of time at NATO, getting to consensus at 30 is always a challenge on any set of issues. So the strong statement that emerged I think is quite important. I would note that Secretary General Stoltenberg announced the Belarusians would not be welcomed in NATO headquarters. I think that speaks to the partnership. There are other elements—let me maybe describe the partnership between NATO and Belarus as one that has been quite limited for a very long time. This is not a rich and extensive partnership.

So the questions of the next steps are ones that have to be dealt with by the North Atlantic Council. There are questions that have to be dealt with by 30 allies together, and I believe that they will give a thorough review to the question of the status of our partnership in Belarus, NATO's partnership with Belarus.

The CHAIRMAN. All right. Finally, I understand that the Belarusian Government has not provided you with a visa, effectively blocking you from traveling to Minsk and presenting your credentials. Is it your intention to move to Lithuania, take up residence there so that you can engage with the democratic opposition on a full-time basis? Are you going to continue to operate as you are operating? I am trying to get a sense of how we best put your good experience to the best use.

Ambassador FISHER. I appreciate that, Senator Menendez. The question of how I can be most effective, where I can be most effective, is one that I have been working very closely with the State Department's leadership on. I want to be clear about it. Our goal remains that I will undertake my duties in Minsk. In the absence

of a visa, of course, I will work to be effective in advancing our policies and advancing our goals. I will work in any location where I can be effective.

So at this point, you I think understand that I am regularly in the region. The question of being there on a more regular basis is one we are thinking about very seriously.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, we look forward to hearing what that conclusion is.

Ambassador FISHER. Yes, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. We certainly want you to be able to use the fullness of your experience and your knowledge and your advocacy with all of those who are engaged in democracy struggle as vibrantly as possible.

I think we have no further colleagues at this moment to ask questions of you. With the thanks of the committee, you are excused, and we thank you for your service.

Ambassador FISHER. Thank you, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Now let me, as the Ambassador departs, let me welcome our guests for our second panel.

First, we are honored to be joined by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of the Belarusian democratic opposition. She is a school teacher by profession, but answered the call of her country to run for President last year, and she won.

Let me say that again: She won.

Since then, she has led an opposition movement from outside the country in Lithuania, and I just want to say the Lithuanians are tremendous people, a tremendous Government. They are probably some of the most stalwart advocates for democracy and human rights throughout Europe and the world, and I just want to salute them. This is only one of many examples.

I understand she is currently in Prague, where she is engaging with its parliament today. So thank you for joining us on this busy day for you. We look forward very much to hear what you have to say, and we will have you on virtually in a moment.

We also have with us Jamie Fly, the President of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. He is also joining us from Prague, where he is headquartered. RFE has come under increasing pressure lately in Russia, and I hope we can hear some ideas of how to better protect your journalists across the region. I am glad that you have rejoined RFE after the disgraceful treatment that you and the organization received from the last Administration. We are fortunate to have you leading the organization.

I ask you both to summarize your remarks in 5 minutes to allow time for questions. Your full statements will be entered into the record.

And with that, we will turn first to Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya.

[Pause.]

The CHAIRMAN. I understand that we are having video troubles, but we have audio opportunities. So we would be happy to hear from Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya now.

[Pause.]

The CHAIRMAN. Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, do we have you on?

[Pause.]

The CHAIRMAN. All right. While we wait to solve the technical problems, is Mr. Fly available?

Mr. FLY. Yes. Can you hear me?

The CHAIRMAN. Yes, Mr. Fly. Thank you very much for joining us. The floor is yours.

**STATEMENT OF JAMIE FLY, PRESIDENT AND CEO, RADIO
FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY, PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC**

Mr. FLY. Thank you. Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and other members of the committee, I want to thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify.

As has been noted, I am President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which we refer to as RFE/RL. We are a multimedia news organization operating in 23 countries across Eurasia and in 27 languages. We do our work on a daily basis in places where freedom of the press does not exist or is under attack.

We are funded by the U.S. Congress through an annual appropriation to the U.S. Agency for Global Media, and we believe that we are a living embodiment of America's commitment to freedom of the press and the vital role that the media plays in democracy.

For more than 70 years, our journalists have revealed truths that governments and state-controlled media want to keep hidden. In some cases, including here in the Czech Republic, our work has helped to change the course of history and helped bring freedom to millions of people. Now we give our brave journalists the microphone or TV studio, increasingly the Facebook, Telegram, or Instagram account, and allow them to provide reporting directly to their communities.

I am humbled to be joining Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on this panel. She and her family have suffered immensely over the last year because of her willingness to speak on behalf of the Belarusian people.

RFE/RL's Belarus Service, known locally as Radio Svaboda, or Radio Liberty, is one of the leading providers of news and analysis to audiences in Belarus. We are one of the few independent media outlets working in the Belarusian language, and Svaboda has played a significant role in reporting in and on Belarus since the fraudulent election last August.

As we covered the wave of civic participation ahead of the election, we saw a spike in audience numbers, with a record 24.8 million recorded views on YouTube in that key month, in August 2020. And I would just note these are remarkable levels of engagement in a country of less than 10 million people.

Svaboda has accomplished all of this despite extreme threats to our operation and our people in Belarus. It was already noted that our 29-year-old social media consultant, Ihar Losik, was detained last June. He will soon mark 1 year in pre-trial detention in Belarus. Ihar has been accused by authorities of preparing to disrupt public order ahead of last August's election. As has been noted, he attempted at one point to take his life and has started to hunger strike. He has been separated from his wife, Daria, and his 2-year-old daughter for that entire time, and I spoke to Daria yesterday in advance of this hearing, and she asked me to share this message with the committee.

She told me that Ihar finds himself in a dire situation. His fate and his freedom directly depend on international pressure on Lukashenka's regime.

Numerous other of our journalists in Belarus on assignment to report in recent months have been harassed, detained, jailed, and stripped of their accreditations. In 2020 and 2021, journalists other than Ihar have spent a total of 118 days in jail in Belarus. Our website has been blocked since last August. We have been relying on social media platforms like Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube. We have also gotten support from the Open Technology Fund to provide circumvention technology to ensure that the people of Belarus are able to access our reporting.

It is not just RFE/RL journalists who are under attack. As has been noted, there are multiple other news organizations being targeted. Reportedly, 34 media workers are currently behind bars, awaiting trial, or serving sentences. Tut.by, as has been noted, Belsat, and others have had offices raided in recent weeks, and there is the high-profile case of Katsiaryna Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova, who are now serving prison terms for literally the crime of streaming protests from an apartment window.

The Lukashenka regime is trying to expand its targeting of the media in recent weeks, adding new amendments to its media law which essentially criminalize journalism and make it much more difficult for journalists to do their jobs.

I briefly wanted to note Russia's support for Lukashenka's efforts to control the information space. In the early months of the protests, at Lukashenka's request, the Kremlin sent Russian propagandists from Russian state TV to assist the Belarus state TV channels because many of those journalists at Belarus state TV started to resign from their jobs. At the same moment the Kremlin was doing this, RFE/RL sought to provide an alternative to Russian disinformation in Belarus, and we sent some of our own Russian-based journalists to cover the events in Belarus for a very interested Russian public until those journalists from Russia, like other foreign journalists, were kicked out by the Belarusian Government.

As you noted, Mr. Chairman, RFE/RL is under significant pressure in Russia, which ramped up in the immediate aftermath of the events in Belarus last fall. This crackdown is essentially trying to close our bureau in Moscow, which has existed for 30 years, since 1991, when it was established at the invitation of President Yeltsin. We face millions of dollars in fines for failing to label our content as the products of so-called "foreign agents," essentially spies in the Russian context, and we have now had our bank accounts frozen inside Russia, and court bailiffs visit our offices on several occasions to begin enforcement proceedings.

Briefly, I want to just conclude with some ideas about how Congress can be helpful to support independent journalism not just in Belarus and in Russia but elsewhere in the region.

Fundamentally, independent media, including RFE/RL, need additional resources to support our work as we face governments that are increasingly targeting journalists, ramping up repression, making it more difficult to reach audiences with Internet blockages, targeting websites, and providing access restrictions.

In Belarus, as well as many of the other countries where we operate, we need additional statements of support. I want to support many members of the committee for speaking out on the case of Ihar Losik. We also have a contributor in Ukraine, Vladyslav Yesypenko, who has been detained in Russian-occupied Crimea since March and was reportedly tortured. In the last year we have lost a journalist, Mohammad Ilyas Dayee, in a targeted assassination attack in Afghanistan. We now have many other Afghan journalists who work for our Afghan service who are facing credible threats to their lives as the U.S. military withdraws.

All of this requires sustained investment and funding at a time when our competitors, including competitors backed by the Russian Federation and China, expand their information operations across Eurasia and are committing significant resources to those efforts, and in some markets we are increasingly falling behind and finding it difficult to compete.

One final note, and you referenced, Mr. Chairman, the developments over the last year at the U.S. Agency for Global Media. We need additional congressional support to ensure our independence from the U.S. Government. Our journalists are mostly people working in the countries they were born in and raised in and grew up in, and they provide a local service to their communities. They operate in countries where governments try to paint them all the time as intelligence agents or agents of a foreign power. While there have been some early positive signs during the Biden administration by the acting leadership of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, the turmoil at that agency, which is supposed to safeguard our independence, has increasingly raised questions amongst our journalists and some of our audiences about the safeguards that have long existed in U.S. statute that are supposed to preserve our independence from any government interference.

I will just end by noting that we are based, as you noted, here in Prague. We are here because Václav Havel invited us after he was a listener to our Czechoslovak service and saw the powerful role that we could play in helping shape what became the Velvet Revolution. He wrote frequently about living in truth, which is a mantra for RFE/RL. Our bond with our audience has always been based on respect for the truth. It has drawn audiences to us for decades, through efforts to jam and block our signal. It has drawn audiences to us in Belarus for using circumvention technology to get around website blockages, and to this day submitting their own content to us to use in our reporting, and we need your continued and additional support to help ensure that we can help the Belarusian people in their effort to live in truth, as well as all of our audiences across Eurasia who desire the same and are looking to us for independent reporting to help them do that.

Thank you for your attention.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Fly follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mr. Jamie Fly

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and other members of the committee, I want to thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify.

I serve as President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). We are a multimedia news organization reaching 41.1 million people each week in 23 countries across Eurasia in 27 languages. We operate in places where freedom of

the press does not exist or is under attack. Funded by the U.S. Congress through an annual appropriation to the U.S. Agency for Global Media, we are a living embodiment of America's commitment to freedom of the press and the vital role that the media plays in democracy.

I'm humbled to be joining Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on this panel. She and her family have suffered immensely over the last year because of her willingness to speak on behalf of the Belarusian people. The values that she champions on behalf of them are the same values our audiences across our coverage area aspire to. Freedom to choose your own leaders. Freedom of expression. Freedom to assemble. These are universal rights that the Belarusian people have been deprived of for far too long.

For more than 70 years, RFE/RL's journalists have revealed truths that governments and state-controlled media want to keep hidden. In some cases, our work has helped to change the course of history and helped bring freedom to millions. Our brave independent journalists are people born and raised in the countries where they work, and who care deeply about their homeland and their fellow citizens. We give them the microphone or TV studio, or now, more often, the Facebook, Telegram, or Instagram account, so they can provide reporting directly to their communities.

In all our markets we strive to attract and retain a loyal audience, but our value is especially obvious during a political crisis. And the recent crisis in Belarus is a case in point. RFE/RL's Belarus Service, known locally as Radio Svaboda, or "Radio Liberty," is one of the leading providers of news and analysis to Belarusian audiences. Established in 1954, Svaboda, despite working in what Reporters Without Borders calls "the most dangerous country in Europe for media personnel," continues decades later to provide independent news and analysis of the fast-moving events to Belarusian audiences in their own language.

RFE/RL'S WORK IN BELARUS

As one of the few independent media outlets working in the Belarusian language, RFE/RL's Belarus Service has played a significant role in reporting in and on Belarus since the fraudulent election in August 2020. As it covered the wave of civic participation ahead of the election, Svaboda saw a spike in audience numbers—with a record 24.8 million recorded views on YouTube in August 2020. In fact, Svaboda broke all of its previous digital records in August and September of 2020 driven by interest in the coverage of the protests, remarkable levels of engagement in a country of less than 10 million people.

Our reporters provided a window of truth to the events in the country over the past year with exclusive live footage from street demonstrations, live reporting on police repression of ordinary citizens, and the vicious crackdown on civil society. Svaboda reported that in May alone courts in Belarus issued sentences for 252 years of prison time and 100 years of forced labor in political trials. It means that more than 10 years of freedom were being destroyed in Belarus every day of the past month.

Svaboda also revealed the truth behind what happened after riot police detained protesters, publishing numerous first-person accounts of individuals who were beaten, abused, and threatened. While conducting that coverage, our journalists also looked at the human side of the crackdown and how Belarusians were adapting to the increasing police state. In one short feature video, RFE/RL reported about the popularity of neighborhood Telegram chats and related street gatherings—showing how every day in dozens of Minsk neighborhoods, locals have started to use these "courtyard chats" to get acquainted, organize protest actions, and support each other.

Our work was seen as so integral to truthful live coverage of the country's protests that our cameras captured ordinary citizens chanting "Radio Svaboda!, Radio Svaboda!" on August 15 outside of the State TV building, after they spotted our video crew, showing the emotional attachment Svaboda has with ordinary Belarusians.

More recently, RFE/RL journalists have found ways to cover closed-door trials that other outlets have been barred from. Just last week, media around the world cited RFE/RL's courtroom video of the tragic attempted suicide of activist Stepan Latypov. This coverage has ensured not only that Belarusians are able to learn what is happening in their own country—but this unique reporting has also ensured that the world remains aware of the dire human rights situation inside the country.

LUKASHENKA'S CRIMINALIZATION OF JOURNALISM

Svaboda has accomplished all of this—and more—despite extreme threats to its operations and people.

Detained on June 25, 2020, 29-year-old RFE/RL social media consultant Ihar Losik will soon mark a year in pre-trial detention in Belarus. Losik has been accused by authorities of using his popular blog on Telegram to “prepare to disrupt public order” ahead of the August presidential election. Since then, authorities have added unknown additional charges against Losik—who has started two hunger strikes to protest his detention.

Ihar Losik has been cruelly separated from his wife, Darja, his 2-year-old daughter, and his colleagues for far too long. Ihar must be freed from detention and allowed to rejoin his family. I spoke to Darja yesterday and she gave me this message to share with the Committee:

“Ihar finds himself in a dire situation. His fate and his freedom directly depend on international pressure on Lukashenka’s regime.”

Numerous other RFE/RL journalists on assignment to report on the election and its aftermath have been harassed, detained, jailed, and stripped of their accreditations. In 2020 and 2021, RFE/RL journalists other than Ihar Losik have spent a total of 118 days in jail. In one case, one of our photojournalists served 11 days in jail after being detained by unidentified men after covering a September 13 protest rally in Minsk. While in detention, he was beaten and the flash cards holding his photos were confiscated. In another case, one of our journalists was detained and beaten by riot police who left him handcuffed and kneeling on the floor of a police van, bleeding with a broken nose, as he was taken to a precinct station. These attacks against our journalists are not the exception, but rather the norm in today’s Belarus.

Access to Svaboda’s website was blocked inside Belarus on August 21, 2020. Since that time, RFE/RL has been relying on social media platforms such as Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as using circumvention technology provided by the Open Technology Fund, to ensure that the people of Belarus are able to access essential reporting and information that the Belarusian regime seeks to repress.

Unfortunately, the events starting last summer were just the start of the Lukashenka regime’s attempt to criminalize journalism.

In early May, police launched a probe of popular Belarusian news portal Tut.by, searching the homes of several of its editors and blocking its website. A journalist who was covering the raid was later sentenced to 15 days in jail for “petty hooliganism.” A Minsk studio used by the Poland-based Belsat TV station was raided by Belarusian security forces on May 21 and six people were detained. Belsat has produced investigations critical of Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his associates.

Not only coverage of politics or protests is risky. Two sports journalists who work on a popular YouTube channel covering soccer were arrested on June 3. The Belarusian Association of Journalists reports that 34 media workers are behind bars, either awaiting trial or serving sentences, including Katsiaryna Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova whose “crime” was livestreaming a protest from an apartment for Belsat.

Pressure on independent media is intensifying. On May 24, Lukashenka signed into law draconian new amendments to its Media Law that outlaw live coverage of “unauthorized” mass gatherings—which are defined elsewhere as any rally not formally sanctioned by the Belarusian government. The updated law also allows the Government to shut down media outlets without a court order and bans publication of the results of opinion polls the Government has not authorized. These changes will make the country even more dangerous for journalists who seek to report on events happening in Belarus.

The Lukashenka regime’s repressive campaign against the free flow of information to the Belarusian people and its targeting of independent journalists, including RFE/RL reporters and staff, must cease so they can continue their vital work.

RUSSIAN SUPPORT TO LUKASHENKA REGIME AND TARGETING OF RFE/RL IN RUSSIA

Russian attempts to influence Belarus are well known. There are disturbing similarities between the Russian and Belarusian crackdowns on civil society and a free media. On May 23, Belarus dispatched a fighter jet to intercept a Ryanair commercial flight flying from Athens to Vilnius, forcing it to land in Minsk where journalist Raman Pratasevich, a former RFE/RL Václav Havel Fellow, and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, a Russian national, were taken off the aircraft and detained. And last week, the world saw a hostage style interview in which Pratasevich, who displayed obvious marks of torture, commended Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Following the forced landing and arrest of Pratasevich, Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of several Russian state-controlled media outlets, was criticized by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) for making public comments that amounted to “open support” for an ongoing crackdown on independent media in Belarus. Russian

President Vladimir Putin himself, in meeting with Lukashenka, dismissed the Western reaction to the flight's diversion as "an outburst of emotions."

Lukashenka has clearly long admired the Russian Government's approach to propaganda. After employees resigned in protest from Belarus state-controlled TV stations in the early months of the post-election protests, at Lukashenka's request, Russian state-controlled media outlets sent staff to assist Belarus State TV channels, which then started sounding eerily similar to their Russian counterparts. While Russian state media sent propagandists to lie to Belarusians about what was happening in their country, RFE/RL sought to provide an alternative to Russian disinformation. We sent some of our Russia-based journalists to cover the events in Belarus for a very interested Russian public until they, along with other foreign journalists, were kicked out by the Belarusian Government.

Since last fall, the Kremlin has been engaged in its own unprecedented crackdown against independent media in Russia. This crackdown has targeted RFE/RL's operations in the country, which we formally launched 30 years ago at the invitation of then President Boris Yeltsin.

Pressure against RFE/RL in Russia has steadily increased over Vladimir Putin's 20 years in power but spiked in the past several years—most notably with the Russian Justice Ministry designating RFE/RL reporting projects in 2017 as "foreign media carrying out the functions of a foreign agent" in an effort to discredit our work. Despite access restrictions inside Russia on TV and radio, the RFE/RL audience in the country has almost doubled over the last 5 years. This success has not gone unnoticed by the Russian authorities.

The Russian media regulator is on track to impose fines amounting to more than \$3.4 million against our Moscow bureau for failing to label our content as the work of a "foreign agent"—a term that in Russia implies that RFE/RL journalists are spies. On May 14, Russian court bailiffs arrived at RFE/RL's Moscow bureau to notify us about enforcement proceedings for the outstanding fines. That same day, Russian authorities froze RFE/RL's Russian bank accounts.

If these fines are not paid, the Russian authorities have the power to place RFE/RL's Russian entity into insolvency and to block access to our websites. RFE/RL has filed a case with the European Court of Human Rights, challenging Russia's use of "foreign agent" laws, making the case that Russia's actions violate the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the press protected by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and that our Russian staff will suffer irreversible harms if the Court does not act quickly.

No matter what the Putin regime tries to do to our operations in Russia, we have made clear that we will not abandon our Russian audience. We are redoubling our efforts to provide innovative programming and news and information to our Russian audiences at a time when their Government is trying to control what types of journalism they have access to.

The Lukashenka regime is discussing similar legislation targeting foreign funded media in Belarus. The goals of both Lukashenka and Putin are clear—complete control of the information space with the goal of absolute political control. This is the opposite of everything we at RFE/RL stand for.

HOW CONGRESS CAN RESPOND TO THREATS AGAINST INDEPENDENT MEDIA

RFE/RL needs urgent support and assistance to preserve our ability to conduct independent journalism—not only in Belarus but across a region where authoritarians are resurgent and democrats are on the defensive. We were heartened by the strong language of support in the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020, which called for support and reallocation of resources for RFE/RL's work in Belarus, as well as for surge capacity for our programs and activities in the country. *We have a need for additional resources to be able to support our work and the independent media ecosystem in Belarus as well as Russia.* This is an area ripe for greater international collaboration, especially between the United States and its European partners.

In Belarus, as well as Russia, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and other countries where our journalists conduct on-the-ground reporting, *we need additional support for journalists under pressure.* In Belarus, the regime's attacks on the media have put our correspondents at risk of arbitrary detention for merely performing their essential journalistic work. In Russia, our journalists are facing the difficult choice of continuing to report for us in-country and potentially face grave consequences, or to relocate for their own safety. In Ukraine, cars of several of our journalists have been firebombed and one of our contributors, Vladyslav Yesypenko, has been detained in Russian-occupied Crimea since March and reportedly tortured. In Afghanistan RFE/RL correspondent Mohammad Ilyas Dayee was killed in a targeted attack in No-

ember 2020, and many other reporters face credible threats to their lives as the U.S. military withdraws.

Governments that imprison, torture, and attack journalists should face repercussions. In the case of Belarus, there should be international investigations into the targeting of journalists and documentation of their cases and those involved in their brutal treatment.

Even as independent media outlets, including RFE/RL, are being threatened as never before across this vital region, Russia and China are expanding their information operations across our broadcast area and investing significant resources. Our work in many languages provides an alternative to their state-controlled narratives in countries and pushes back on misinformation using facts and live footage that show first-hand the truth about what is happening on the ground in Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Central Asia, and the Balkans. *Meeting this challenge will require sustained investment at a time when our competitors are committing significant resources.*

RFE/RL needs ongoing support from Congress to ensure that our editorial independence and that of our fellow congressionally funded broadcast networks is respected and protected. That independence is codified in the International Broadcasting Act but turmoil over the last year at the U.S. Agency for Global Media has raised concerns amongst some of our audiences and our journalists about the limitations of these protections.

Most of our journalists are in-country locals, working to provide journalism as an essential service for their communities. They are patriotic citizens of their countries, working side by side with our audiences and facing hostile governments that try to paint them as intelligence operatives or agents of a foreign power. While the early months of the Biden administration have led to reassuring moves by the Acting leadership of the Agency to reaffirm our editorial independence, *it is important for Congress to continue to make clear that you fund our journalism not because of a desire to spread U.S. propaganda to the world but because you understand the important role that a free press plays in the functioning of democracy.*

CONCLUSION

Since 1995, RFE/RL has been based in Prague in the Czech Republic. We were invited there by Václav Havel, who as an activist and dissident listened to our Czechoslovak Service. Havel wrote eloquently about the notion of “living in truth” and how powerful and revolutionary it is when citizens suffering under an authoritarian regime decide to “live in truth.”

RFE/RL’s bond with our audience has always been grounded in our adherence to and respect for the truth. It is what drew families to gather around the radio to search through the static for the one radio frequency the authorities did not jam during decades of darkness. It is what draws audiences to us to this day, using VPNs and circumvention tools or submitting digital content to us surreptitiously to be shared with their fellow citizens.

The Belarusian people have been “living in truth” since last August. Hopefully they will continue to inspire those elsewhere, including in Russia, but also those of us living comfortably in democracies who already benefit from the bravery of those who came before us.

Thank you for your attention.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. I let you go on for about 10 minutes because I think what you have to say is so important, and we embrace your calls for help. I certainly intend to follow up on some of the suggestions you made, and we may be reaching out to you independently from this hearing to follow up on that, so thank you very much.

My understanding now is that we have Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, and the audio we are doing via telephone.

Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, if you are with us, please go ahead.

STATEMENT OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA, LEADER OF THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION IN BELARUS, VILNIUS, LITHUANIA

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity

to speak to you on behalf of millions of Belarusians seeking democracy and freedom. I am here to share my story and to illustrate how Lukashenka's regime has outgrown its borders and became a threat to international peace and security.

My personal story started a year ago when my husband, Siarhei, announced that he was running for President, challenging the incompetent rule of the dictator. The security forces have kept Siarhei arrested ever since.

To stand up for my husband's rights, I entered the race instead of him. Other strong candidates—Viktar Babryka and Valery Tsepkalo—were either arrested or forced to flee. Ultimately, the three campaigns united forces, and I became the main opposition candidate, campaigning together with Veranika Tsepkalo and Maria Kalesnikava.

On August 9, 2020, the dictator blatantly falsified the vote and tried to steal the victory from the people.

Through intimidation, the regime forced my children and then me to leave Belarus. My 5-year-old daughter still thinks that prison is some kind of an interesting place, something similar to a work trip. Her 11-year-old brother avoids explaining what it actually means. So do I.

Not a single day passes without her asking when her daddy is coming home. Not a single day passes without me asking the same question. This is what life has been like for at least 470 families of political prisoners.

This number continues to grow as Belarusians are protesting every day, unwilling to give in, insisting that the dictator must go and that new elections must take place. The nation reacted massively to Lukashenka's attempt to steal elections. The regime's only response has been violence. Thirty-five thousand detentions, 3,000 politically motivated criminal cases, thousands of cases of beatings and torture. There have been at least 10 protest-related deaths.

The last deaths were just 3 weeks ago: Vitold Ashurak, a political prisoner, aged 50, died in a prison camp from supposed heart failure. His wife said Vitold never had heart problems; 18-year-old Dzmitry Stakhouski, an orphan, committed suicide, unable to endure relentless harassment from the investigation committee.

The regime is also trying to conceal the truth by repressing the media. Just last month, the security forces closed down Tut.by, the most popular media outlet in the country, and arrested 15 of its employees on trumped up charges of tax evasion. The next local elections are to be postponed until the end of 2023.

The response from the international community to the crackdown against pro-democracy protests has been principled but gradual, sporadic, often symbolic, and diminishing. This helped the regime to adjust and to develop a growing sense of impunity.

As a result, on May 23, the dictator reached a turning point: he ordered a military jet to force the landing of a commercial Ryanair flight over Belarus to arrest journalist Raman Pratasevich, who was on board. Those reckless actions put the lives of 126 passengers at risk to satisfy the dictator's uncontained impulse to capture an opponent.

New reports reveal that six other commercial planes flying over Belarus on that day were forced to change their routes, putting the lives of many more people at unnecessary risk.

This entire incident and the disregard of Lukashenka for people's lives are shocking to international audiences. Belarusians have been subjected to this kind of lawless treatment every day for the last 10 months, and on a broader scale for 26 years already.

With this decision, Lukashenka has crossed the line and became a threat to international peace and security. Hence, the international reaction has finally been swift and effective: imposing practical measures and starting an ICAO investigation. However, the international reaction must not be limited to the Ryanair flight incident. The entire situation in Belarus deserves a comprehensive and unwavering response. Otherwise, we all will face such situations in the future, as Lukashenka is turning my country into a North Korea of Europe—non-transparent, unpredictable, and dangerous.

The United States, acting together with its partners in Europe and with other like-minded nations, has the power to put a stop to this trajectory.

I urge the United States to: expand the sanctions against Lukashenka's cronies who finance the regime, including enterprises like Belaruskali and Mazyr Oil Refinery; identify sources of foreign funding for the regime and target them; discuss the crisis in Belarus during high-profile international events like the G7 summit, NATO summit, U.S.-EU summit and U.S.-Russia meeting, and invite Belarusian democratic forces to participate; support EU in launching a high-profile international conference on the resolution of the crisis in Belarus involving main stakeholders; develop a U.S. aid package building on the EU Comprehensive Plan for democratic Belarus to assure Belarusians that they will have help when the change comes and to prepare steps to stabilize and reform the economy.

The U.S. can also participate in the associated Donors Forum and Investors Meeting contemplated by the EU.

There are other suggestions, and I would like to ask to add to the record an expanded list of suggested steps on the situation in Belarus by the U.S. and other nations.

These actions would help build up the momentum to launch a transition to elections, exactly what Belarusians demand. Otherwise, Lukashenka and other dictators around the world will feel impunity to freely break international norms to crush their opponents.

Thank you for your attention.

[The prepared statement of Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya follows:]

Prepared Statement of Mrs. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya

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- Develop a U.S. aid package building up on the EU Comprehensive Plan for democratic Belarus to assure Belarusians that they will have help when the change comes and to prepare steps to stabilize and reform the economy. The

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Thank you for your attention.

I am looking forward to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya. We salute your courage and your bravery and those who follow you, and the Belarusian people in their aspirations for freedom. We thank you very much.

We will include, when you transmit it to us, your suggested actions into the record and share it with our colleagues.

We would like to take a few minutes to engage in a conversation with you, if you still have time.

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Yes, sure. I am still with you.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay, very good.

We have several members here, and I am sure they are going to want to ask questions or make some statements, so let me start off with myself.

I heard your list of desired actions. In advance of President Biden's visit to Europe this week, what is the main message that you would like to hear him say?

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. My message is that what is happening in Belarus is not about geopolitics. It is our fight against dictator. It is not about other countries against regime in our country.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. And with reference to your call for an international conference to resolve the political crisis, which would include government officials from Belarus and Russia, can you share with the committee what goals you would have for such a gathering and whether such an idea has gained any traction?

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. We need this conference to unite our efforts to try to solve how to get out of political crisis in Belarus, how to deal with the regime, and how to bring Belarus to new free and fair elections under observation of international organizations.

The CHAIRMAN. Finally, have there been defections from the police and security forces?

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. I think especially in August and September events, there were a lot of people from the regime who came to our side, and now we change the strategy a little bit and we ask people in the regime to stay in their places but to give us inside information about the mood among people in the regime, to give us documents and video recordings so they are useful there where they work now.

The CHAIRMAN. Very good. Well, thank you again for joining us and for your testimony.

Let me turn to Senator Portman, who I understand visited with you in the recent trip.

Senator Portman.

Senator PORTMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for having this hearing and giving Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya an oppor-

tunity to address the United States Congress and to have in the official record her thoughtful presentation regarding what is happening in Belarus today and what she and her fellow patriots have gone through.

It was a pleasure to meet with you in Lithuania last week. I am pleased to see that Ambassador Fisher not only testified before us today but that she is still here and listened carefully, I thought, to your presentation.

One of the things that I think is very important is that in the next couple of weeks while we have these opportunities with the European Union, and certainly with the NATO summit, the G7 summit, the meeting with Russian President Putin, that there be a very strong and forceful communication about the importance of us standing by Belarus, all of us who believe in freedom and democracy and understanding the role that Russia is playing in Belarus. So I thank you for testifying today because I hope that this will help us.

Can you explain just briefly why you think it is so important that the United States provide this message in these fora over the next week or so, and why it is so important that the European Union and the United States continue to stand by those people in Belarus like yourself, like journalist Raman Pratasevich, who are standing for freedom?

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you, Senator Portman, for your question. The Europeans is one of the oldest democracies and one of the most powerful countries in the world. So I think that it is evident that the message from European entities will be the most powerful. Basically, the U.S.A. has to act jointly with the European Union and the UK and Ukraine and other countries that have the same values, values of democracy, just to help the people to continue their fight. This help should be urgent because people on the ground are suffering, so time is very important. We have to avoid impunity of the regime. We have to assist people because it is very difficult. To bring strong friends together with us, it is much easier to survive.

Senator PORTMAN. Thank you. In your testimony today you talked about the need to expand the sanctions. I noted that you talked specifically about the cronies who finance the regime, including specific enterprises and identifying sources of foreign funding for the regime to target them. Do you believe that sanctions that are focused on sectors, important sectors like the oil refinery business you mentioned, could be effective in changing the behavior of the Lukashenka regime?

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. You know, the companies I listed, the state oil companies, are the main focus of Lukashenka. Of course, he and his regime are afraid of the sanctions and only threatening sanctions can help release political prisoners and stop violence. If he does not have income from these enterprises, he will not have money to pay his cronies and policemen. We have experience from the past that sanctions helped political prisoners to be released. The people in Belarus assure that sanctions will help in our case.

Senator PORTMAN. Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, thank you for coming today. Thank you for your courage. You have, on a bipartisan basis, friends and supporters in this room and throughout the United

States Congress and this Administration, and we wish you the best.

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you, Senator Portman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Now we turn to Senator Shaheen, who chairs the Europe Subcommittee of the Foreign Relations Committee and I know led a delegation recently to the region.

Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, it is wonderful to hear from you again. We especially appreciated your willingness to meet with Senator Portman, Senator Murphy and me in Vilnius last week. I think the people of Belarus are very lucky to have such an impressive, courageous advocate on their side.

I am very concerned about Russia's intentions with Lukashenka and what that may mean for the opposition and the effort to get free and fair elections. When we were in the region last week we heard from folks in Ukraine and in Georgia about the effort to form a union with Belarus and with the provinces in Georgia.

Can you talk about whether you think that makes it harder or will have any impact on what you are doing with the opposition in Belarus?

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you. Putin and Lukashenka have a complicated relationship. They got used to each other, and in order to retain support of [inaudible], it is very important to demonstrate support of the Kremlin. Otherwise all his political power will collapse. But I do not believe that the Kremlin will support Lukashenka for long, and we do our best to make this support as expensive as possible. Thank you.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, thank you very much. As Senator Portman and Senator Menendez said, you have strong bipartisan support here in the Congress, and we want to do everything we can to support you and the opposition in Belarus.

I would like to ask Mr. Fly a question as well, because while we were in Ukraine we had the opportunity to meet with some journalists who have fled to Kiev from Moscow. I want to first thank you, Mr. Fly, and all of your reporters who provide real facts to oppressed people across Eurasia. And they do it, as you pointed out, at real danger to themselves and their families often.

As you are thinking about the challenges that you face if Putin froze all of the RFE/RL reporters out of Moscow, and as autocratic governments across Europe and Asia look at ways to crack down on the work that you are doing, how can we in Congress be more supportive of your efforts?

Mr. FLY. Thank you for that question, Senator Shaheen. I just want to thank you in particular, and Senator Murphy and Senator Portman, because the visit that you held with our journalists in Kiev was not just a strong symbol of support to them and those who have recently had to leave Moscow. When you speak out in that way on their behalf, it is noticed by all of our journalists, and I think journalists who do not even work for RFE/RL, and gives them more courage to do their job. So thank you for taking your time during your visit to Kiev.

My concern is that we see this trend in Russia, we see it in Belarus at differing rates, of criminalization of journalism, authoritarians trying to control the information space, limit the options for their citizens to state propaganda outlets or outlets that the regime is comfortable allowing because they are non-controversial. We are seeing that in different forms, at different speeds, but we are seeing them learn from each other and adapt their approaches.

In the Russian case they are using what is called a foreign agent law to target us. Lukashenka has now talked about imposing a foreign agent law in Belarus, which could threaten our presence in Minsk.

So statements of support from the Congress are incredibly helpful. Governments—and I have talked extensively with the U.S. Government, with European governments—pushing back against these efforts, making clear that there are repercussions for targeting journalists. Senator Kaine mentioned earlier perhaps use of the Magnitsky Act, which I would fully support, when journalists are pressured. Then finally, funding, because we can adapt, and we will, even if we lose our bureau in Moscow. Even if our journalists are not able to operate inside Belarus, we will adapt our programming and redouble our efforts to reach those audiences, but that often requires technology and new tactics which are expensive. So additional funding from the Congress would also go a long way towards ensuring that we can continue to be there for those audiences that need us more than ever in these increasingly difficult environments in both Russia and Belarus.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you very much. We will take that back and try and act on that. I especially appreciate your appearing with the committee this morning, and also Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya for being with us, and we will continue to do everything we can to support your work in Belarus and the RFE/RL across Europe and Asia. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Coons.

Senator COONS. Thank you, Chairman Menendez.

My thanks to Ambassador Fisher and Mr. Fly for championing American values under these very difficult circumstances.

Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, thank you for your courage. Thank you for standing up for democracy and for fighting for the rights of the people of Belarus. They have certainly had a very difficult time under the dictatorship of Lukashenka and hopefully are ready to chart a new path and to make a break with what Lukashenka and his actions have shown, namely that in order to retain power, there are no lines he will not cross. This hearing is a reminder of how important bipartisan congressional delegations can be in bringing connections and information back to this committee and to this country and in advocating for the priorities that we shape here.

President Biden is heading to his first overseas trip this coming week. He is meeting with officials from NATO, the EU, the G7, the UK, and I look forward to seeing his leadership in organizing the democracies of Europe to fight corruption and support independent media and defend democracy.

I would be interested, if I might, Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, in hearing from you about how you assess the extent of Russian influence in Belarus, how exactly it is exerted, and how Russian support of

the Lukashenka regime is changing Belarusian civil society at this time.

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. At the moment, the Kremlin supports Lukashenka politically and financially somehow. We want friendly relations with all the countries, including Russia, and propaganda is trying to show us that we are against Russia, but this is not true. We are against dictatorship, and it depends on the Belarusians when they will choose in free and fair elections.

Senator COONS. Thank you, and thank you for your brave stand and for your service.

Mr. Fly, could I just ask you what more we could do to support independent journalism in Belarus, and do you think we need to provide greater support for anti-censorship tools?

Mr. FLY. Yes, I think additional support would be helpful for anti-censorship tools, for circumvention tools. I note in my testimony that it is only because of those tools at this point that we are able to provide access to our website in Belarus since last August. The authoritarian governments are always trying to find new ways to block even the circumvention tools, so additional support as well for the Open Technology Fund, which also receives its congressional appropriation through the U.S. Agency for Global Media, is in the interest of all of the broadcasters and independent journalists generally because, obviously, we can produce the best content, but if we cannot get it in front of our audiences, it is not going to have the desired impact.

Senator COONS. Thank you. Thank you for what you are doing and for your persistence in the face of repression.

Last, if I might, Madam Ambassador, I am just curious about how you are overcoming the challenges of leading Embassy Minsk without being in the country, and how the embassy is able to support and maintain its relationships with civil society in such a repressive context, if you are comfortable sharing some of that.

The CHAIRMAN. We had excused the Ambassador already. If she is willing, I am happy to have her answer.

Senator COONS. I apologize.

The CHAIRMAN. It is okay.

Ambassador FISHER. I am quite happy to answer, and I appreciate, Senator, very much the question.

If I could, I would start by telling you that last week the regime announced that they were drawing down our mission in Minsk—that they were going to put a cap on the number of American diplomats who can serve there.

I would like to acknowledge particularly for this committee just how difficult it is to serve in Minsk today. We have an incredible team there working very hard in support of the American citizens who are there, doing everything they can to work with civil society, the independent media, meet with the families and the representatives of those who are repressed. So this is incredibly important work.

I think for my work, the challenge that I face is how are we collectively in the Government able to consolidate what we know and what we understand from all of the forces at work outside of Belarus and combine that with what we know from the inside. Lukashenka has done everything he can to keep these worlds sepa-

rate, and our job is to work with our partners and our allies to develop an understanding of how we can be effective and how it is that we can help build to that new election, to that dialogue, and to the release of political prisoners and a new future for Belarus.

Senator COONS. Thank you. Thank you very much.

And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Markey.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, very much.

Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, tell us about your husband. We know that you were able to leave the country with your children. Tell us about the conditions that your husband is being held under in Belarus.

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. In Belarus, people cannot communicate to political prisoners. They cannot call him or visit to them even if relatives are in Belarus. We communicate only through the wire. We send short messages to each other that are usually about children and parents and other stuff. Of course, how can people feel spending years in jail for nothing, for just having the strength to say words against Lukashenka? Morally, they are awful. Physically, more or less. But they are all detainees, they are all hostages, and they rely only on us, on the Belarusian people, on international community. They did everything they could, and now they cannot do anything at all.

This is our task, to do everything possible to rescue those people. This is our task to prove that all of them can return home to their children, to their wives, to their parents, who will hug them. Thank you.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you. What is your message to all of those brave young journalists in Belarus who are still trying to tell the truth about what is going on? What would be your message to those journalists?

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. I want to say that journalists' work is very important, even in such dangerous situations such as Belarus, so please do not stop. While you are writing, while you are telling the truth, we are visible, and this visibility is very important. Take care of yourself. Use security, but write and show the truth to the world.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you.

And what is your message to those journalists right now, Mr. Fly?

Mr. FLY. A number of those journalists are our journalists, so I am very worried about them on a daily basis, and we are doing everything we can to try to make them as safe as possible, giving them the tools to communicate securely and to continue to do their jobs.

As has been noted in this hearing, it is almost impossible to do on-the-street journalism because of the laws that the regime has put in place. We have had journalists who literally stepped outside of their apartment to go run an errand and got arrested just for being near a protest. In some cases they were not even covering that particular protest. Any act that is seen as being related to doing journalism with a camera, even using a cellphone in a particular way, the authorities are actually using advanced technology

to track people who are live-streaming protests. It is incredibly dangerous work, so that community has found ways to adapt.

So I am always impressed by the bravery and courage of all of our journalists, but especially our team in Minsk right now, who continue to operate under these challenges.

Senator MARKEY. Thank you.

Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, you should just know that your courage and your husband's courage, your family's courage, has really shown a spotlight on the corruption in Belarus, and we are not going to go away. We are going to continue to pay attention. We are going to continue to shine a spotlight on the injustice which is now being perpetrated by the Government of Belarus. So just know that you have friends, more friends than you have ever had before. We are not going to go away.

So thank you so much for your courage, and thank you for your husband and his courage as well. Thank you.

Mrs. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you, Senator.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Markey.

Let me just turn to Mr. Fly, and then we will wrap up this hearing.

Can you give us an update on the latest on RFE/RL freelancer Vladyslav Yesypenko, who has been jailed and tortured in Russian-occupied Crimea? I know that you and Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine and the U.S. Mission to the OSCE have spoken out on his behalf. Is there a trial date that has been set? What else can we do to help secure his freedom?

Mr. FLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for asking about Vladyslav. I was in Kiev 2 weeks ago in part to talk to the Ukrainian Government about his case to try to raise awareness about his situation. He did testify when he first appeared at a public hearing that he had been tortured, that they had tried to force him to claim that he was working for Ukrainian intelligence instead of doing what we know he was doing, which was gathering information for our Crimea Realities Project of our Ukrainian service.

We believe that he has been targeted by the Crimean authorities backed by the Russian FSB, and that obviously is incredibly concerning. So we hope that as the Biden administration engages President Putin and in other settings where hopefully Ukrainian officials will be able to talk to their Russian counterparts, that we can negotiate Vladyslav's release.

He also has a wife and children who are waiting for him at home, and I also spoke recently to his wife, who is only able to communicate with him right now through the lawyer, just as many of the prisoners in Belarus. So we are very concerned with the uncertainty about his trial and how he will then be treated even once the trial is held.

The CHAIRMAN. All right. We will follow up with the Administration.

Lastly, Russian authorities often try to equate U.S. policy and regulations toward state-run broadcasters, like RT and Sputnik, with Russia's application of "foreign agent" laws to U.S. Government-financed media organizations like RFE/RL. What is wrong with this analogy?

Mr. FLY. Thanks for that question. I have had these conversations with Russian officials in the past when I visited Moscow a bit over a year ago, and my response to them was that I wish we were treated the same way, because RT and Sputnik, as far as I know, have no limitations on their ability to access the American audience. Any American can watch RT on satellite or cable. Sputnik has concluded radio agreements with radio stations in the United States. RFE/RL, Voice of America, other U.S.-funded outlets lost all access to those platforms years ago, earlier in the Putin tenure, which is why we have turned to online to reach audiences, and we have been incredibly successful, nearly doubling our audience in Russia over the last 5 years.

It is now that online audience that the authorities are trying to target with the foreign agent labeling requirements they tried to impose on us, which we have refused to comply with. So although the Kremlin propaganda says that they are just doing to RFE/RL what the Department of Justice does to RT and Sputnik, that is fundamentally untrue and not the case.

The CHAIRMAN. I asked you the question knowing the answer, but I think it is important that we establish it for the record that there is a fundamental difference. In an open society as we are, we permit even those adverse entities, like RT and Sputnik, to engage freely in our society, and we take the associated risk, but we do not get the commensurate response in totalitarian/authoritarian governments, so this is the challenge.

I want to thank all of our witnesses today, the Ambassador who is still here listening to both of your testimonies; Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya for your courage, bravery, and for your advocacy. You are an example not just for Belarusians, but for others in the world. Mr. Fly, to you and the men and women of your journalism, who with their pen send a beacon of hope and information to people across the globe and in places where they do not have that opportunity to independently understand what is happening in their own country and in their region. These are extraordinary people, and I want you to know you have the thanks of the committee for your respective endeavors.

We will follow up on some of these initiatives to see if we can hasten the day when Belarusians can determine their own future, that we will hasten the time in which journalists will be able to exercise their profession, and if we can get Ambassador Fisher to her post in Belarus.

So, thank you all.

This hearing's record will remain open until the close of business tomorrow.

And with the thanks of all of the members of the committee, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:51 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]