

THE FUTURE OF FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS

HEARING

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE
OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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CONTENTS

	Page
WITNESESS	
Tsikhanouskaya, Sviatlana, National Leader of Belarus and Head of the United Transitional Cabinet	7
APPENDIX	
Hearing Notice	31
Hearing Minutes	32
Hearing Attendance	33
ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD	
Additional materials submitted for the record from Belaurus Freedom Forum	34

THE FUTURE OF FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:08 a.m., in room 210, House Visitor Center, Hon. Thomas Kean, Jr. (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. KEAN. The Subcommittee on Europe of the House Foreign Affairs Committee will come to order. The chair would like to remind our guests today that demonstrations from the audience, including the use of signs and placards, as well as verbal outbursts, are a violation of the rules of the House.

The purpose of this hearing is to discuss the Alexander Lukashenko authoritarian repression in Belarus and the brave efforts of Belarus's democratic forces in standing up to this dictatorship. We will also discuss Lukashenko's complicity in Russia's war in Ukraine.

I'd also like to welcome for the first time Representative Gabe Amo to the Subcommittee on Europe. This is Mr. Amo's first hearing with the subcommittee, and we look forward to his participation at future subcommittee events and meetings.

I would also like to welcome the gentleman from New Jersey, Mr. Smith, who is joining us today. He will participate, following all other members in today's hearing.

I now will recognize myself for an opening statement. Alexander Lukashenko is an illegitimate dictator. The fraudulent 2020 Belarusian Presidential election made a mockery of democracy. His regime has beaten and imprisoned peaceful protestors, as well as journalists, including Ihar Losik and Andrey Kuznechyk from the Radio Free Europe. As we speak, Lukashenko holds nearly 1500 political prisoners behind bars.

Lukashenko also undermines Belarusian sovereignty. By furthering the so-called union State with Russia, he is making Belarus a permanent junior partner to the Kremlin.

Belarusian culture is also under attack by the regime and its enablers. Use of the Belarusian language is gradually being replaced by Russian, and national symbols, such as the red and white flag of independent Belarus are banned.

Vladimir Putin already considers Belarus and its people to be part of Russia. In a speech last month, Putin referred to Belarus, as well as Ukraine, as part of the historical Russian nation. This revisionism is legitimized by allowing Russia to use Belarusian territory to wage its unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine.

The U.S. must continue to support the democratic development of Belarus. I applaud the bravery of leaders, like Ms. Tsikhanouskaya, for the efforts to fight tyranny, even from exile. Belarus has served as a launch pad for Russia's full-scale invasion, provided Russia with ammunition, and hosted Russian nuclear weapons.

In addition to these measures, the Lukashenko regime's weaponization of refugees by illegally funneling them en masse to the borders of Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, as well as a support for the Wagner Group. Increasing integration with Kremlin also presents a threat to NATO.

Most egregiously, Lukashenko has made Belarus an active participant in crimes against abducted Ukrainian children, holding thousands of them in facilities in Belarus for so-called re-education. The international community must hold all levels of Lukashenko's regime accountable for these crimes alongside his sponsor, Vladimir Putin.

I applaud U.S. engagement with democratic forces of Belarus, as well as the sanctions imposed on Lukashenko, his regime, and enablers in response to the domestic crackdowns and support of Russia's war in Ukraine. However, more can be done.

Since June 2022, we have not had a special envoy to Belarus. The Biden Administration needs to fix this immediately. The U.S. and our allies must also strengthen our sanctions to make the cost of continued subjugation of the Belarusian people to Lukashenko's repression and Vladimir Putin's imperial ambitions too high.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today how U.S. assistance can better be directed and what we can do to increase the pressure on Lukashenko and his master, Vladimir Putin.

The chair now recognizes the Ranking Member, the gentleman from Massachusetts, Mr. Keating, for any statements that he may have.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Chairman Kean, for holding this important hearing today on the future, freedom, and democracy of Belarus. The Presidential elections in August 2020 in Belarus marked a new chapter in the country's history. Prior to the elections, a group of strong, determined, mostly women, leaders led hundreds of thousands of protestors in the streets of Minsk and other cities in Belarus demanding a better future. Those in the streets were not only protesting the brutal and authoritarian crackdown of Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus through multiple fraudulent elections, but they were advocating for the protection of their civil and human rights, freedom of speech and assembly, and the maintenance of the rule of law, tenets of any democracy.

In response to the unprecedented scale and scope of these protests against the rule, Lukashenko forcefully arrested, beat, detained hundreds, if not thousands, of peaceful protestors. He arrested not just the political opposition but journalists and other people simply chanting for freedom or wearing red and white, the color of the opposition.

Over the last 3 years since the protests took place, Lukashenko's crackdown has only intensified, and he and his security services have stifled all dissent inside Belarus. Today, over 1,400 political

prisoners remain in Belarus, including the leaders like the husband of our witness, Sergei Tikhanovsky, Maria Kalesnikava, and others like journalists Ihar Losik, all people we remember, along with the others who are being held today as we conduct this hearing.

Lukashenko has also extended his repression to Belarusians living outside the country. In 2022, Lukashenko amended the criminal code to allow for trial in absentia against citizens abroad. And in January 2023, a law was passed to enable authorities to revoke citizenship for Belarusians living abroad. At the same time, Lukashenko has been woefully complicit in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, assisting authorities in the trafficking of Ukrainian children, and allowing Russian forces to use Belarusian territory as a staging ground for its illegal invasion.

In response to Lukashenko's crackdown at home in support for Russia's war, the United States, in concert with our European allies, has active forcefully to impose costs on the regime. As of December 1st of this year, the U.S. has imposed sanctions on 111 individuals and 81 entities engaged in human rights abuses, electoral fraud, corruption including major financial petrochemical potash manufacturing State-owned companies who benefit from the regime's repression, an extensive amount of sanctions. An additional 500 Belarusian officials have been banned from entering the United States or had their U.S. visas suspended or revoked.

Congress has also acted, passing a resolution in the 117th Congress H.R. 124, supporting the people of Belarus and the democratic aspirations of that country. This Congress and I and other co-chairs in the House Belarusian Caucus, have introduced H. Res. 441, which, in addition, calls for the release of all political prisoners in Belarus.

Congress has also appropriated \$30 million in supporting civil society and democratic opposition in Belarus. Money, I believe strongly, must be included in any upcoming appropriations package.

We welcome to this committee the leader of the Belarusian opposition, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, to shine a spotlight on the progress the Belarusian opposition has made toward our democratic future. For example, the democratic opposition has established a united transitional cabinet and a Coordination Council, two bodies dedicated to understanding the needs of Belarusians inside and outside the country and advocating for effective policy to meet these needs. Such legislative and executive bodies are vital to the future of democracy in Belarus. Ultimately, united and committed opposition with a deep knowledge of the foundation of a democratic system will only serve to benefit the people of Belarus.

The same time of today's hearing comes just as the inaugural U.S.-Belarus strategic dialog where the democratic opposition occurs. This dialog, which will focus on support for the opposition and furthering accountability measures for the regime, is a significant step in demonstrating the United States' long-term support for the democratic opposition. I'm hopeful that additional accountability measures from Lukashenko's regime will be announced in the coming days.

Three years into this movement, I remain optimistic that, despite the repression in Belarus, hope remains amongst those in exile, the diaspora, and those inside the country with a brighter, more demo-

cratic future. That hope is why we're here for this committee hearing today, and we hope that across the world support for Belarus continues to amplify those strong voices, those opposition voices, led by our witness here today. Today's hearing is another step toward these goals.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you. I now recognize Mr. Smith for 5 minutes of opening remarks.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Chairman Kean. And Bill Keating, thank you, as the Ranking Member. Tom, I want to thank you for calling this very important and timely hearing, for your leadership, and that as well as the Ranking Member. It is deeply appreciated, I know, by the Belarusians but by every one of us who follow this closely. Thank you so much.

This hearing, of course, is on the future of freedom and democracy in Belarus, and it is an honor and a high honor and a distinct pleasure to hear from Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of the free Belarusians everywhere. She has earned this position by showing enormous courage and principle, and many of us and I believe it, beyond any reasonable doubt, she won the election. It was stolen by Lukashenko, so we are talking to the person who should be the government leader of Belarus. So thank you for not only being on the ballot but being such a tenacious campaigner. And, of course, we remember and we pray for not only you but your husband and the other political prisoners, but your husband, Sergei, for the terrible harshness that he has faced in this long, terrible prison sentenced meted out by Lukashenko. Your patriotic sacrifice that you are making for your county, you will be remembered forever by the Belarusians and by all who believe in human rights and democracy.

You represent millions of Belarusians who suffer under an ever-worsening terror campaign by Lukashenko. We know what he has done in partnership with Putin to invade Ukraine and all of the terrible enabling that he has done, you know, when they lied in a bold-faced way that they were just doing maneuvers and having war games, all the while preparing for a terrible, unprovoked invasion. Lukashenko, I believe, is guilty of war crimes, and he needs to be held to account by the ICC and any other court that will take this up. He ought to be, along with Putin, named for any kind of indictment for what he has done.

I met with Lukashenko in 2017. As I think you know, in 2004, I was the author of the Belarus Democracy Act and did the updates and expansions in 1906, 2012, and then working with my good friend and colleague, Bill Keating, we expanded it in 2020. And Lukashenko, at a meeting, I was barred from going there until the OSCE had a parliamentary assembly in Lithuania and 11 of us traveled over to meet with him and to argue with him, and he called me public enemy No. 1. You know, big deal, I leave the country. You and all of your fellow Belarusians go to jail, not you but your husband, for being such stalwart believers in freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental human rights.

I am circulating to the other members the Belarus Democracy Act and Human Rights and Sovereignty Act of 2023, which we hope to move as quickly as we can. He will not like that either.

Tough. We need to pass it, we need to pass it quickly. And it will provide a number of things, including temporary protective status for Belarusians who are here; again, the special envoy to coordinate efforts in support of freedom-loving Belarusians; and updates U.S. sanctions and reporting to Congress on Lukashenko's support for the war in Ukraine, as well as his despicable behavior. So we'll be working on that.

But, again, I cannot thank you enough. All of us feel this way. I chair the human rights committee of this Foreign Affairs Committee, and we watch everything that is going on in Belarus, and it is awful. And you are such a noble and patriotic leader, for which we all have such deep respect. Thank you.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Congressman Smith. And thank you for your extraordinary leadership on this issue over such a long period of time. Thank you for joining us here today, as well. Other members of the subcommittee are reminded that opening statements may be submitted for the record.

We're pleased to have a distinguished witness before us today on this important topic. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is a national leader of Belarus and head of the United Transitional Cabinet. Thank you for being here today. Your full statement will be made part of the record, and I'll ask that you keep your verbal remarks to 5 minutes in order to allow time for member questions.

I now recognize Ms. Tsikhanouskaya for her opening statement.

STATEMENT OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA, NATIONAL LEADER OF BELARUS AND HEAD OF THE UNITED TRANSITIONAL CABINET

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Dear Chairman Kean, Ranking Member Keating, honorable members of subcommittee. Let me express gratitude to the U.S. Congress and the American people for many years of support of the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people. I am confident that Belarus will become a truly independent, a reliable partner, and a member of the European Union and Trans-Atlantic Community. But to achieve this goal, we must dismantle the illegitimate regime of dictator Lukashenka, who, with Russia's help and under its control, has reserved power.

In 2020, Belarusians made a clear choice in favor of democracy, freedom, and human rights. However, the dictator refused to step down and drowned the Nation in terror. Sixty thousand were detained. Hundreds of thousands had to flee. Thousands of political prisoners were taken hostages, including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, my colleague Maria Kalesnikava, Presidential hopeful Viktor Babaryka, activist Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk, journalist Ihar Losik, and my husband Sergei Tikhanovsky sentenced to 19 years. My children did not see their daddy for three and a half years, and, since March, they see I have not heard anything from him and I do not know if he is alive. People in prisons are tortured and kept incommunicado. More than a hundred people are in critical condition and might not survive. The release of political prisoners is a matter of urgency.

Lukashenko's regime became a threat to the entire Europe. It hijacked the Ryanair flight to kidnap the dissident journalist. It continues sending illegal migrants to the border with Lithuania, Po-

land, and Latvia. It dragged our country into Russian's aggression against Ukraine and continues to support the war with weapons, infrastructure, training, airspace, and land. Dictator participated in the abduction of Ukrainian children from the occupied territories.

For Putin's support, Lukashenko pays with our sovereignty. Russia is taking control of the Belarus economy, national security, foreign affairs, and media. There is an ongoing Russian attack on Belarusian culture, language, and national identity. Russia expands its neutral presence in Belarus. Recently it deployed nuclear weapons on our land.

We support Ukraine's just war for its survival because the fates of our countries are intertwined. We fight against the same evil and for the same values. Without a free Belarus, there will be no free Ukraine and vice versa.

We understand the changes in Belarus is our responsibility, but we cannot do it alone. We need U.S. support. We applaud the U.S. State Department and Presidential decision to launch strategic dialog with Belarus and democratic forces. We call on the U.S. to support our efforts to preserve independence and restore democracy in our Nation. The appointment of the U.S. special envoy should help build a coalition for independent, democratic Belarus.

We ask to recognize agreements signed by the dictator with Russia as void and impose new sanctions against Russia for its illegal attempt to subjugate Belarus. Belarus shouldn't become a consolation prize to Russia. Free Belarus will be the strongest sanction against Putin and will help Ukraine win this war. Therefore, supporting free Belarus is not charity. It is your investment into the global peace and security.

We call on you to provide material assistance to Belarus citizens fighting for freedom and democracy, to independent media, and families of the repressed. Support those who live in exile and cannot return home. I call on the U.S. Congress to support the temporary protected status for Belarusian nationals in the U.S. Dozens abroad are denied renewing their passports. In response, we prepared to issue a new Belarusian national passport, and we ask the Congress to endorse this project.

We should increase pressure on the regime. Sanctions are not a silver bullet, but it is a way to weaken the regime, release people from prisons, and stop its involvement in the war.

And we must end impunity. Let's bring Lukashenko and his cronies to account through international courts. The regime has a long record of crimes, including crimes against humanity, torture, killings, and abduction of Ukrainian children.

All dictatorships fall, and Lukashenko's dictatorship will fall, too. When you discuss economic recovery plan for Ukraine and Moldova, please include Belarus, as well. And, finally, I call on the U.S. Congress to support the U.S. edition of the Belarus Democracy, Sovereignty, and Human Rights Act. It will show U.S. leadership and commitment to the Belarus we all stand for.

So dear friends, the path to freedom and democracy may be long and difficult. But know this path is the only right one, so let's work this path together. Thank you for your attention.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Tsikhanouskaya follows:]

**Testimony of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, President-Elect and Head of the United
Transitional Cabinet of Belarus, in the US House of Representatives Foreign
Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe,**

“The Future of Freedom and Democracy in Belarus”

December 5, 2023

Dear Chairman Kean,
Esteemed members of the Subcommittee,

Let me start with the words of gratitude to the US Congress and the American people for supporting the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people for many years. I do believe that one day Belarus will become a truly independent, democratic country, reliable partner, member of the European Union and Trans-Atlantic Community. To achieve this goal, we have to dismantle the illegitimate regime of dictator Alexander Lukashenka, who has been ruling the country for 29 years.

In 2020, Belarusians made a clear choice in favor of democracy, freedom, and human rights. According to observers and alternative vote count, Belarusians resolutely voted down corruption, lawlessness, and incompetence. Instead, they voted for values of democracy, freedom and human dignity. I won that election. However, the dictator refused to step down, and instigated the terror against Belarusians. Security services detained protestors en masse. We have credible reports of torture, abuse and inhumane treatment in detention centers. The police also cracked down on journalists, civil society activists, and opposition figures.

More than 60 thousand people got imprisoned. At least 20 people were killed, thousands were tortured. Hundreds of thousands were forced to flee the country, including myself. The repressions against the general population can be classified as crimes against humanity, according to the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights. At least 1500 political prisoners remain behind bars as I speak, including my husband Siarhei Tsikhanouski who was sentenced to 19,5 years in prison. Including Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Ales Bialiatski, my colleague Maria Kalesnikava, presidential hopeful Viktor Babaryka, activist Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk, journalist Ihar Losik and others.

Feeling impunity, the regime of the dictator Lukashenka became a threat to the entire region. It hijacked the Ryanair flight to kidnap the dissident journalist, it orchestrated the migration crisis on the border with Lithuania, Poland and Latvia. Finally, it dragged our country into the Russian criminal war against Ukraine, providing it with weapons, infrastructure, training, and territory. All of that happened against the will of the Belarusian people.

Lukashenka's regime allowed Russia to deploy Russian troops and nuclear weapons on our territory. We have evidence that the dictator also participated in the abduction of Ukrainian children from the occupied territories. There is an ongoing attack on Belarusian culture, language and national identity. Belarus becomes more and more dependent on Russia.

However, Belarusian people don't want their country to be a Russian proxy and an accomplice in the war. Belarusians support Ukraine, and they want to have a good relationship with all neighbors. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Belarusians organized a pro-Ukraine movement that has taken many forms. Railway partisans stopped trains with Russian military equipment. Many

people went to Ukraine as military volunteers to join Ukrainian Armed Forces, and formed the largest foreigners' unit within UAF, the "Kalinouski Regiment".

Belarusians see their country as free and independent. Only 4.5% of Belarusians support the unification with Russia. Despite brainwashing propaganda, Belarusians remain dedicated to the idea of independent and democratic Belarus, free of oppression and tyranny, with strong national identity and a thriving private sector.

As the President-elect, I continue to perform my duties from exile. Together with civil society and political groups, we have formed alternative institutions of power, such as the United Transitional Cabinet, which is the executive body, and the Coordination Council. I represent Belarusians on the international arena meeting the world leaders and participating in the international fora on behalf of our nation. I am urging the international partners to distinguish between the regime and the people of Belarus, between Belarus and Russia, to support the democratic movement of Belarus.

I understand that democratic transition in Belarus is a task for Belarusians, but we can't do it alone. We need support from the United States.

I call on the United States to elaborate, in concert with other nations, an action plan to support the efforts of Belarusians to preserve independence and restore democracy in Belarus. Appointment of a US Special Envoy on Belarus would be a step in this direction. We call for setting up a coalition for independent democratic Belarus in which the US could take a lead.

This coalition should demand full removal of the Russian military from Belarus and a complete seizure of any involvement of Belarus in the war against Ukraine,

to counter the Kremlin's encroachment on Belarusian sovereignty and national identity. This should include imposing sanctions and non-recognizing agreements signed by the regime with Russia after the 2020 elections. There is an urgent need to introduce sanctions against Russia for its illegal attempts to subjugate Belarus and to instrumentalize it in the confrontation with our European neighbors.

We should not allow Belarus to become a consolation prize to Putin. Belarus should not become a bargaining chip in any negotiations with Russia. "Nothing about Belarus without Belarusians" must be an absolute principle. Our presence will ensure that the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Belarus are upheld consistently and principally. I applaud the US decision to launch the Strategic Dialogue with Belarusian democratic forces.

The US and its partners should support human rights efforts by monitoring the situation, providing aid to the victims and vulnerable groups facing repressions, financing initiatives and foundations that help political prisoners and their families, and supporting human rights education programs. International mechanisms within OHCHR must be maintained and strengthened. Given the gravity of the situation with political prisoners, it is imperative to create a bilateral US-Belarus working group to develop a strategy for the release of political prisoners and extension of support to work with them. Among other decisions, this group should lead to the creation of an international fund to help political prisoners.

I call on the United States to increase the isolation of the regime and the pressure exerted on it. Economic sanctions are not a silver bullet, but a tool to weaken the regime and its ability to conduct repressions and assist Russians in the war. It is crucial to strengthen sanctions on the military industrial complex

supporting the Russian war, on the banking and financial sector. The sanctions must be coordinated with the EU, UK, Canada, and Belarusian democratic forces.

The current sanctions don't work in full due to loopholes, so it's crucial not just to impose them but also monitor and enforce them. I ask to consider the secondary sanctions on those who help to bypass sanctions, based on Executive Order 14038, and to harmonize trade sanctions against Russia and Lukashenka.

The US can take a more active role in bringing the dictator and his cronies to account. The US could submit country referrals in ICC and ICJ on a number of cases, including the unlawful displacement of children, deportation or forcible transfer of civilian population, cases against the regime's officials under the universal jurisdiction, crime of persecution, etc.

While isolating the regime in Minsk, it is crucial to support democratic forces – to strengthen agency and ability to deliver practical results to the benefit of Belarusians inside and outside Belarus. The US can increase its assistance to Belarusian democratic institutions, civil society, independent media, and cultural initiatives. The US aid to Belarus amounts to 30 million USD a year approximately, while Russian aid to sustain Lukashenka's regime is in billions. The international aid to the democratic Belarus is enough to subsist, but we need resources to win.

All dictatorships fell, and Lukashenka's dictatorship will fall too. Therefore, it is crucial to prepare Belarus to democratic transition, by developing a plan for the country's economic recovery. We will need to rebuild Belarus after decades of poor management and tyranny, after repressions and Russian dominance. We will need to reconcile the nation and integrate it in the international economy.

Belarusians must know that, as a part of democratic transition, Belarus will be given all the necessary assistance to conduct economic and political reforms. Please help us to advance the agenda of democratic, independent, pro-European Belarus.

The path to freedom and democracy may be long and difficult. But this path is the only right one. I ask the United States to stand with free and independent Belarus.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Ms. Tsikhanouskaya. I now recognize myself for 5 minutes. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the U.S. has not had a special envoy for Belarus since January 2022. This is unacceptable. Can you please describe how the appointment of a new special envoy would improve U.S. policy in dealing with Lukashenko and supporting the democratic forces?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. I remember how the first special envoy was designated. It should open so much doors for our democratic movement in the USA, Congress and State Department and the White House. And special envoy is a bridge between our democratic forces and the USA, all the branches.

So it will help us to explain the situation in Belarus. It will help us to pursue the government of the USA to study opportunity and to work out on their strategy on new Belarus because now we see there is no strategy toward Belarus about its future, and, of course, we appreciate all the help and assistance and pressure on the regime and the assistance to Belarusian people, but we need to clearly understand what will be the future steps of the U.S. And that's why we need this person to be the best friend here in the U.S. and be best friends to Belarusian path, to be this, as I said, bridge.

So of course it is very important for us, and I hope that a new special envoy hopefully will be designated very soon. We will unite all the special envoys that have been designated by European countries. There is already lots of countries who have designated special envoys who do not work with the regime of Belarus but with democratic forces.

Mr. KEAN. And you're in Washington this week for a so-called comprehensive strategic dialog with the State Department. What results do you hope to achieve to the democratic forces meeting this week with the strategic dialog?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Of course, we would like to have final joint communicate statement with the main political messages in support of democratic, sovereign, and independent Belarus; acknowledgment of the United Transitional Cabinet and Coordination Council work and welcome elections through Coordination Council; also post-war security architecture and Belarus essential role in it; and recognizing the need for the concerted pushback to Russia's illegal actions against Belarus; more recognition of Lukashenko's agreement with Russia after 2020; work with the goal of Belarus to join in European Union and Trans-Atlantic community; commitment to support democratic movement; continued pressure on the regime, including sanctions and supporting accountability efforts.

Mr. KEAN. You've gone on record and stated that loopholes are weakening the sanctions imposed on Lukashenko and his regime. I would like to see more effective sanctions in place, so we can hold this dictatorship accountable for its crimes. Can you please describe the loopholes that currently exist, and how can the U.S., the U.K., and the EU improve our sanctions for maximum impact?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Well, the sanctions that exist now, sanctions against Lukashenko's regime, cannot be effective because of the loopholes that can be easily circumvented by Lukashenko's regime. Lukashenko uses Russia and Russia uses Lukashenko's regime to circumvent the sanctions. Regime of Belarus opens door to

enterprises in Russia and continue to trade with the European Union, and the trade with European Union increased several times since the beginning of the war, you know, and they buy goods from Europe to Russia and sell bills and goods as goods from other countries. For example, they put a label of Kazakhstan, for example, on the bills and goods and sell it as Kazakhstan, but, you know, it is evident that, you know, it is circumventing of sanctions.

So we need, first of all, to have joint position on closing the loopholes, and there should be efforts of the U.S., together with the European Union, Canada, and U.K. And also please consider individual sanctions. You already mentioned that judges, prosecutors, all those people who committed crimes against Belarusian people have to be put on sanction list.

Mr. KEAN. OK. Thank you. I now recognize Ranking Member Keating for any questions he may have.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, again, thank you for being here and for everything you're doing. I just like to make sure there is a strong bipartisan support here for the appointment of a special envoy. We saw the work for former Ambassador Julie Fisher, who is terrific. We all really admired her work while she was Ambassador. We admire the work of Peter Kaufman, that it continues going forward. But I think having this role filled would give more strength internationally to that position, so it is something we strongly endorse.

I've known you now for a few years, and I just admire your courage beyond words, the sacrifices to your family, everything you've done. You said in your opening statement that you do not know whether your husband is even alive and you have not had contact for that period of time. At a time when democracy is being threatened not just in Belarus but around the world, including in the United States, it is a critical time that we look to leaders like yourself, largely the huge support you had from so many women in the country can be echoed around the world. But can you share with us, given all that sacrifice, why democracy to you is so important, not just in Belarus but all over the world?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. You know, Representative Keating, I think you start to value democracy when you are deprived of it. And people who live in democracy, enjoy it every day, forget, you know, how democracy is valuable and that we are fighting for actually the rights and values that you have in your everyday life.

For me, democracy is about responsibility, responsibility of every person to participate in the life of your country, not just to live with your personal cozy life but to feel responsibility for bigger issues. And now, of course, you know, for me, responsibility of democracy is about the right of people to express their opinions. So as we are lack of it, hundreds of people are in prisons at the moment.

You know, a couple of days ago, in Belarus, about 200 searches happened, you know, that we have Coordination Council as part of parliament. We are building democratic institutions in exile at the moment, but we want to show and to study how democracy works. And people who are members of Coordination Council, they are sacrificing freedom of their relatives. You know, their relatives in Belarus have been detained. Their flats, apartments, were ruined

just because of these people are a part of the democratic institution we are trying to build, and people are ready to do this because we know how it is important to study democracy and to build democracy in Belarus. Many people are sacrificing in Belarus and in exile.

So it is a big price, you know, we are paying at the moment. So, again, we cannot do it alone. You know, I really cherish democracy of the USA and that you feel this moral obligation to help those who want to gain the same rights that you have.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you. You know, coming from you in particular, given what you've gone through and continue to go through, democracy is just not a privilege to be taken for granted but a responsibility and a shared one.

And very briefly along those lines, there is some debate here in the U.S. now about funding Ukraine. How important is that to Belarus but also to democracy in general?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. You know, I urge all the countries and, of course, powerful and significant USA to help Ukraine with all the possible means because Ukrainians now are fighting not only for their lands but they are fighting against dictatorship. We must remember that dictatorship is like cancer. Until it is cast to the last cell, it will spread further and further. So democratic countries have to help those who are on the front line of this fight. I am absolutely sure that Ukraine will win this war, but, if they lose, it will be disaster not only for our region, not only for Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, so on and so forth, but also for all democratic countries.

Democracy has to show its teeth because dictators are learning very fast from each other. You know, they use the same tools, and we have to show that democracy also has tools to counter dictatorship because dictators are crossing red line after red line. And if they see that democracy cannot answer, you know, they go further and further. They become bolder.

I understand that Ukraine influenced a lot the situation in Belarus, too, because we are, both countries, are facing the same enemy: imperialistic ambitions of Russia. And without a free Ukraine, there will be no free Belarus, but also vice versa. We have to remember that without free independent Belarus, there will be constant threat to security of the whole region.

So help Ukraine to win this war. I really believe that assistance, any possible assistance to Ukraine will not stop.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you for your cautionary words about the spread of this when it is not extinguished in the first place, particularly as we look to China, Iran, North Korea, and other areas.

So I yield back. And thank you.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Mr. Keating. I now recognize Congressman Huizenga from Michigan for 5 minutes.

Mr. HUIZENGA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And before I get into my questions and statements, I do think it is important that the record reflect and clarify what Chairman Smith was saying about him being declared as public enemy No. 1. That is not unique. There is many despots and dictators around the world who have declared you public enemy No. 1. Why? Because of your work on

making sure these types of voices are heard. And I want to say thank you to the chairman for this and for this hearing and for bringing light to this.

Interestingly enough, I have a son who is studying in Spain right now, and he's on a break, and they're in Prague right now. I happened to be in Prague in January 1989. I was caught up in pro-democracy, what turned into a riot, and was chased by riot police and nearly clubbed and had dogs and water cannons chase me and my college friends as we were there. And my son now, who is there, was visiting the Museum of Communism earlier today, and we've been texting. I wish I could share some of the texts in our conversation, but it struck me, as my trip, we went to Moscow and Leningrad, St. Petersburg, Warsaw, Prague, East Berlin at the time, Prague and Budapest. And my son and this generation does not know what had happened in the cold war. And they also do not know necessarily the connectivity between what we are seeing now today with these people who are desperate to hold on to power and will do anything, anything to stamp out the voices of freedom and liberty.

So I want to say thank you for what you are doing and for those folks that are remaining behind fighting back against this. I was able to leave Prague. I was able to come back home to the United States. Many cannot. They cannot flee that. And those are lessons that we cannot forget.

So, again, I just want to commend you for what you are doing in leading that and being a voice for freedom and liberty for the people of Belarus.

One of those things that we have seen as sort of a marker of despotism and dictators is crackdowns on various groups, oftentimes on religious groups. And we are seeing this in Belarus right now; is that not true? We are seeing the churches being cracked down on. I would love for you to comment a little bit on that. There is reports that Belarus is detained, fined, imprisoned, and pushed out of their positions or forced into exile, at least 60 religious leaders of the Belarusian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, and various Protestant churches since the 2020 crackdown. Would you describe what's happening as also part of a crackdown on religious freedom in Belarus?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. You know, in 2020, people of different layers of population or different professions were on the streets opposing further elections in Belarus. And among those, of course, there were a lot of people of religion, of different confessions. And, of course, regime started to put revenge on religion, religious institutions in our country.

The problem is that all the Orthodox churches in Belarus belonged to the State, and they can easily close churches, and it is the way to blackmail religious people. Many priests are in jails, in Belarusian jails, at the moment and are recognized as political prisoners. Many of them had to flee Belarus because of repressions, and now they serve in Lithuanian and Polish churches. They continue to do this.

But, of course, Belarusian churches are also under repressions. They are made to keep silence. They are forbidden to pray for those who are in prisons, for families of political prisoners. They are for-

bidden to pray for future free Belarus without wars. So they're also under pressure. But I am absolutely sure, when the means of opportunity comes to Belarus again, all those people will be in this pro-democratic movement.

Mr. HUIZENGA. And if you come, let's say when you come into power and Lukashenko is no longer there, would you support religious freedom and the ability for these people to gather and worship as they see fit?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Absolutely. I fully welcome religious freedom in Belarus and all the confessions should be presented in our country without any pressure. You know, among Belarusian society, there was absolute tolerance to people of all religions, and there will be full consensus among Belarusian people that people for religions have to be presented in our country.

Mr. HUIZENGA. My time is expiring. I wish I had gone shorter on my story of my experiences that pale to anything that you have been going through. I wanted to explore a little more of how sort of hybrid or irregular uses of things like downing or grounding of an international airline or to get to an opposition journalist or how migrants and refugees are being used really as weapons against surrounding countries, and I'll leave it up to the chairman if he is able to give you some time to comment on that.

But I just want to say, Ms. Tsikhanouskaya—sorry. With a name like Huizenga, it is also difficult. I just want to again say thank you for your efforts, your bravery, your courage, and your voice that is here.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I'll leave it to you.

Mr. KEAN. That inquiry, please.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Yes, thank you, thank you. Now we are talking about crimes of Lukashenko's regime. You know, he committed crimes against Belarusian people. First of all, we have to consider this. People have been tortured, people have been humiliated constantly in the prisons. People in Belarus are kept in this atmosphere of tyranny on a daily basis.

But also regime started to put revenge on our neighboring countries, and this migration crisis that was orchestrated by the regime, it is revenge on Poland and Latvia for constant support of Belarus and democratic forces. And it will not stop, you know, until we stop dictator. All these efforts to blackmail, to put pressure on our neighbors, will continue. So we have to not to treat symptoms of this disease that is dictatorship but to treat the main problem.

Let's return to hijacking of the airplane. You know, this was act of terrorism from the side of the regime, and this case was investigated but still no punishment came for this crime. And I think we should use all the possible international justice mechanism, like ICC, ICJ, universal jurisdiction, to bring Lukashenko and all those responsible to account. This will help us to endorse this special investigation, appeal to Karim Kahn for him to pay attention to the issue of Belarusian regime crimes.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you. And thank you, Mr. Huizenga, for bringing those important issues up. The chair now recognizes Mr. Amo from Rhode Island for 5 minutes.

Mr. AMO. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I really appreciate your welcome and warm welcome to this committee, and to the

Ranking Member, as well. And I am pleased to join my first hearing hosted by the Subcommittee on Europe, and I really just want to thank our witness for your remarkable strength, your perseverance under what I cannot imagine to be the most intense of pressure, both in your own family unit but also the family of Belarus collectively that requires real change. And I am so honored to be before you, as you lead.

It is important that I am here today in this first hearing because it is a topic that means so much to me: democracy, democracy and the preservation of it. And so it is clear that there is bipartisan support domestically for our commitment to democracy, and I appreciate those in Belarus who are demonstrating their strong desire and commitment to a democratic future.

I especially want to recognize that women have played a leading role in Belarusian, the democratic movement that has grown. And I am so glad to be adding my voice in my early weeks here in Congress. And I'm proud that the last Congress passed several measures to affirm the support for the aspirations of the people of Belarus, for democracy, for human rights, for the rule of law. The fulfillment of these aspirations is critical to ensuring the continued strength of Belarusian sovereignty and territorial integrity. I hope to build on that support in this Congress.

And I'm also encouraged by those across the Biden Administration who are supporting the democratic movement and holding account its anti-democratic leaders. The strategic dialog provides a great opportunity, and that is one of the things that I wanted to ask about today. I wanted to get a sense from you about the role of the Belarusian private sector in the dialog and what role do you think they have in accelerating our pathway to change and making sure that the democratic opposition is able to ultimately lead?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you for your question. I have to say, first of all, that since 2020 many Belarusian small businesses and entrepreneurs are also under repressions and had to flee Belarus. And now many businessmen are trying to open their businesses just to work for democratic forces, you know, to help democratic institutions and families of the repressed and to contribute to cultural projects of Belarus.

And, of course, we want to work with the U.S. to help private businesses in Belarus to grow. And it includes getting advice from the U.S. experts and making plans based on what works well in the U.S. Belarusians want to see the future after Lukashenko. We want Belarusian people, Belarusian business, to blossom, at the moment maybe in exile, because it is difficult to stay loyal to democratic aspirations and work in Lukashenko's Belarus now. But we want to develop private sector in exile at the moment, and we ask you to help those people, to provide them with new connections with the businesses who maybe would like in future after Belarus becomes democratic to invest into our country.

We have wonderful hardworking people, we have wonderful geographic position, but we have poor management in our country. It will give our people opportunity to work freely and to make the businesses freely. They could contribute so much in our economy, but we have to start to work now for future of Belarus. So we ask for your assistance in this direction, as well.

Mr. AMO. Well, I appreciate that. That dignity of participating in the private sector and driving that innovation and growth is something that I hope is a value that we can help blossom. And with that, I yield back my time.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Congressman Amo. I now recognize the Vice Chair of this committee, Congressman Self from Texas.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. You say in your testimony that the Belarusian people do not want to be a Russian surrogate or Russified. I am trying to gauge, because the United States does not have very good record over the last 20 years working in different cultures, understanding different cultures. So I am trying to gauge the support across the nine-plus million people of Belarus, so what are the activities that you see inside your country? Are there underground resistance movements? Are there any active resistance movements? Talk to me about the nine million people, not just the few in the democracy movement. What is the mood of your people?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. I am absolutely sure that most of the Belarusian people are dreaming about democratic and free country, but people who are under repressions, you know, who are under threat of being persecuted, you know, every day cannot be vocal. Just imagine, for speaking against regime, you can get 15—20 years in jail. For supporting Ukraine, you can get 10—15 years in jail. For donating 20 euros to Ukrainian army, you get 6 years in jail. This is our reality.

And, of course, we want to save people because there will be a new opportunity for us, and we want people to be safe and secure for this moment. Of course, people are not just sitting and waiting when this opportunity comes. People are working, and working underground of course. People have to hide, you know, their aspirations—

Mr. SELF. Thank you for that. Believe you me, we understand that the real target of the January 6th is the American people so that you do not go to the street corner and make your views known.

I want to talk about enforcing the sanctions. How do you recommend the U.S. admin enforce the sanctions better? Because we are looking, in Congress, we are looking for ways, because this Administration has allowed Iran, for instance, to sell at least \$60 billion in oil, so how do we change the behavior of this Administration to help you enforce the sanctions on Russia?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. So there are still fields of Belarusian economy that can be under sanctions. It is woods, it is steel, that are not under sanctions at the moment. And as I have said before, you know, we have to close loopholes because trade with our neighbors with the other foreign countries is still continuing despite of sanctions.

We have to understand that sanctions on Russia are mostly imposed on import, on Belarus on export. And Russian regime and Belarusian regime are using each other to circumvent the sanctions. Lukashenko's regime is selling Russian goods as if they are Belarusian because they are not under sanctions and—

Mr. SELF. So what would we do about that? I'm trying to understand how we change behavior because that is our own problem in the U.S. How do we change behavior?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. It is not about behavior. It is about instruments that allow to detain all those businesses, enterprises, that helps regimes to avoid to circumvent sanctions. You have to launch special mechanism of sanction circumvention that will follow fulfillment of the sanctions. I know that in the USA you have secondary sanctions. Can you urge the European Union, for example, to create the same mechanism.

Mr. SELF. We are trying to do that in relationship to Iran, as well. So you are in Washington for the strategic dialog with the State Department, so what do you expect to come out of that strategic dialog?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. So I have already listed, you know, what we are waiting for from this, but we need U.S. strategy for Belarus. We need to understand how the U.S. is perceiving the situation in our country, that you not allow, you help us not allow Belarus to be left as consolation prize—

Mr. SELF. That is a great point. Let me interrupt you, I'm almost out of time, to say we cannot get a strategy for Ukraine out of the Administration. I hope you have success with the Administration. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Vice Chair Self. I now yield 5 minutes to Chairman Smith from New Jersey.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you so much. And, again, thank you for the courtesy of allowing me to sit on your committee.

Ms. Tsikhanouskaya, one of my concerns is that the Putin—Lukashenko horrific war in Ukraine has diminished, however unwittingly, the focus in the U.S. and the West on human rights in Ukraine, in Belarus, being committed against people like your husband. We know there are a lot of political prisoners who are arrested, then let out, so there is this reign of terror. A lot of the long-stayers, like your husband, 19 years, continue, unfortunately, to be incarcerated.

My hope is, with the Belarus Democracy Act of 2023, that we will begin a pivot toward remembering. Because, unfortunately, as you know, war does crowd out other concerns, though it shouldn't—so we can get back to, as you mentioned the strategy, which I think is so extremely important. So the sooner we get that legislation passed and into law the better. And I can assure you we will work overtime to make sure that that happens.

And I thank the chairman for co-sponsoring and, again, for holding this important pivot hearing with you, which is so extremely important. And the Ranking Member, of course.

You know, twice this year, Lukashenko has met with Xi Jinping. He met with Xi Jinping again on Monday. They are talking Belt and Road, which would be an opportunity to get a great deal of funding from the communist dictatorship of Xi Jinping, and I am very concerned and I am interested in hearing what you have to say on this. You know, Xi Jinping has perfected a lot of human modalities, including torture, which obviously Lukashenko knows a great deal about. But he also has excelled in coopting and destroy-

ing the churches and the Uyghurs and, you know, he is committing genocide, as we all know, in Xinjiang.

But he has also developed a surveillance capability that is second to none, often with the aid and support of American corporations, like Fisher and others, which is outrageous. I am wondering if you are concerned or perhaps are looking at and maybe part of the strategy you share or get out of the U.S. Department of State is how Xi Jinping might be looking to convey that surveillance, which is ubiquitous throughout China, through Belarus, making it even harder for dissidents, democracy activists, and church people to speak out because everywhere you look there is surveillance in China, and it has become, like I said, it is everywhere. So if you could speak to that.

Also, the churches. What can we do to raise the issue of the churches and the people of faith, the pastors, the clergymen, that are being incarcerated? Are there religionists speaking out? Has the Pope said enough, for example, on the Catholic side? Has other Orthodox said enough? It seems, again, we get so distracted by what is happening in the Middle East and we got to deal with that, of course. China, Taiwan, of course Ukraine. I just had a hearing on the ongoing brutality in Nicaragua under Ortega where he is holding priests, bishops, and many other people, including a bishop who got very long 26-year prison sentence for what? Preaching the gospel.

So if you could on this idea of China's getting involved, also the pivot which you are helping all of us to make sure that we do our part in a pivot back to Belarus democracy.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you, Representative Smith, for your questions. First of all, I will respond on what can you do on the religious aspect. You know, we have tried a lot to attract attention of the Pope, you know, to the problem of political prisoners, and we want Catholic churches to play part in release of our political prisoners. As I said, we have about 100 people who are in extremely poor physical State. People are dying there, people with cancer, diabetes, and we need humanitarian possibility to release at least these people without any conditions. And church, of course, can play here a huge role.

So if you can appeal to Rome, with them to start this conversation about release of political prisoners without any conditions, we would really, really appreciate it.

And as for Lukashenko's visits to China, of course Lukashenko needs support. His now only ally Putin, and he is trying to attract attention of China, as well. But China, you know, they are very pragmatic. They are looking for responsible partners and, knowing that in Belarus there are times of turbulence, they do not want to invest in our country. And Lukashenko is visiting China, I suppose, requesting for money. But until there will be no more situation in Belarus, China would not invest in Belarus, but Lukashenko needs resources, you know, and that is why we have to push more to isolate Lukashenko more economically to change his behavior and to start release political prisoners and start negotiations with democratic forces.

Mr. SMITH. Just real quick, we will do the letter, and we will do it immediately to the Pope. So thank you.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Chairman Smith. I now yield 5 minutes to Representative Titus from Nevada.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you so much for being here. Welcome back. It is nice to see you again, and I join the others in just commending your courage and your determination, especially against such great odds and not having seen your husband in such a long time. You are truly a heroic leader of this movement in Belarus, so thank you for doing that.

Could you tell us a little bit more about the cabinet in exile and how your government is structured and what you are doing exactly there to keep the movement alive and maybe what we can do, in addition to sanctions, to help you strengthen that movement?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. You know, I am really proud of Belarusian people who, during this 3 years, are still managing to keep energy alive, you know, to continue our fight. We really feel responsibility for all those who are in prisons, and we feel responsibility for the future of our country.

And, of course, we realize how institutions are important, and we, since the beginning, started to build democratic institutions. Yes, they are in exile at the moment because it is impossible to do something visible inside Belarus. So since 2020, we have built a United Transitional Cabinet as proto-government where representatives from different directions are working and also Coordination Council as proto-parliament.

I want to underline that the families of participants of Coordination Council are under repressions inside Belarus, but people continue to be in Coordination Council because they understand how it is important.

Hopefully, next year there will be new elections in Coordination Council because we want our institutions to work in the most democratic way. We are actually starting how to live in a democracy, and I hope that it will be good alternative to so-called Lukashenko's elections, local elections in Belarus.

You know, maybe I want to underline once again how material assistance is important for democratic movement; to launch cultural initiatives to strengthen and keep our cultural identity, our language; to media, media is crucial countering Russian and Belarusian propaganda. Let's keep in mind that Russia puts billions in euros or dollars to Belarus to support propagandistic additions and channels in Belarus. And we, like the media in exile, have to counter this huge propagandistic machine. We have to be creative, we have to be inventive, but maybe we lack enough resources to doing creative things.

Of course, there is urgency to support families of political prisoners and political prisoners who already served their time and they also had to flee Belarus because repressions, even after that you served your time, has continued. And people are released in awful physical and emotional state, and these people need rehabilitation. And we need to support organizing of this rehabilitation program for people to feel that they are not abandoned, you know. They sacrificed their freedom, their health, but they will have opportunity to rehabilitate themselves, you know, after—

Ms. TITUS. How do you get information back into the country to keep the movement alive?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. God bless internet because now it is much more possibilities to communicate with people inside Belarus through different internet tools. So, for example, I, myself, every week have hours of conversation with Belarusians who, from inside, can call me and we can discuss anything. All the media, like, local journalists will provide them information. All the organizations, NGO's, that have been ruined inside the country but managed to recover their activity in exile have people inside the country.

Ms. TITUS. I know that IRI and NDI were pushed out of Belarus and had to kind of move their headquarters somewhere else and just kind of do forays into the country, and this has been several years ago. And this has been several years ago. I suspect that has gotten even harder.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Of course it is harder, but, you know, people in Belarus are also not giving up. You know, people create small communities. People are really afraid to do this, but they are doing because they know it is necessary. People still continue to communicate inside the country.

Why repressions are continuing because regime knows, if they stop repressions, there will be again thousands, millions of people on the streets. So they want to control people through this constant fear. And small acts of sabotage still going on in Belarus, acts of disobedience. Our partisan movement is still there. They stopped Russian equipment going to Ukraine at the beginning of the war. In the middle, there were acts of sabotage. And I am sure that when our country, our land, will be used for attacking Ukraine again. Our partisans will be there immediately.

So society is boiling, you know. But there is no possibility to be vocal, but we have to save our people alive and free just for them to be active when the moment comes.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you. I now am going to recognize the Ranking Member, Mr. Keating, for a second round of questions for up to 5 minutes.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. You mentioned that, you know, journalists, news people, independent news people, people like Ihar Losik, are imprisoned or silenced one way or the other, and there is reasons dictators do that: because they do not want the free flow of information about what is really going on that affects people's lives there to be known to people.

I wonder to the extent that the people of Belarus understand how they have been used, how they are in jeopardy, as a stage of nuclear weapons for the Russians, how dangerous that is to them, for the military training that is going on, how dangerous that could be for them, given the Ukraine war that is there. I wonder if they understand in Belarus just how it is being used. Just a couple of weeks ago, the report from Conflict Observatory showed with their studies that, they detailed the 2,400 children that were being kidnapped from Ukrainian families and that there is 13 facilities in Belarus that are housing them now.

Do the people there understand the torture that is going on in Ukraine by the Russians, how much they understand the sexual assaults and the rapes? Do they know about Bucha and the mass

graves that are there? Do they know about this child kidnapping that has occurred and how this is there? How well is the news getting into there so the populous in Belarus can fully understand just the jeopardy they are being placed into themselves, as well as the way their freedoms are being taken away from them?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. You know, I see the Belarusian people are looking for honest news. They are not just blindly believe in the propaganda TV, you know. They do not want to be brainwashed, so that is why people are watching alternative news from Belarusian free media. Of course, it is also dangerous. I have to remind you that all of the alternative media in Belarus have been recognized as extremist, and, if a person inside country following alternative news or subscribed on alternative media, they can be detained for years for this act.

But we know that interests in honest news is increasing, and, of course, people are watching also Ukrainian news. Of course, people know everything. They cannot be vocal about these atrocities. They cannot say anything against the war in Ukraine because immediately they will be detained. It is like Stalin's time era now in our country.

But why I said about support to media because it is so crucial to tell the truth about the relative, about deployment of nuclear weapon, how Russia wants to subjugate our country, how Russia wants to end presence for years ahead with deployment of nuclear weapon, how Lukashenko is participating in the war and abduction of Ukrainian children. It is our task to deliver all of these messages inside the country.

Of course, now internet is our main way of delivering these messages. YouTube, different social networks like Instagram. Even TikTok, I know that you do not like it, but, nevertheless, we want to appeal to every person inside the country. Somebody even can be for Lukashenko, for Russia, against the war. Nevertheless, we want them to know the truth or to watch alternative news and see what is reality.

And what is disturbing me is that people, ordinary people do not know what is going on in Belarus in the moment. So that is why we urge Radio Free Europe here in the USA to open Belarusian service. Voice of America, yes. Voice of America to open Belarusian service where they will broadcast in Belarusian language but also in English about the use of Belarus. Maybe some people in America know where Belarus is situated, that we have border with Ukraine, that we have dictatorship in our country, that we're like North Korea at the moment, just to learn more about our country.

And, of course, again, support our media. It is urgent to counter propaganda that Russia contributes billions of euros to promote their messages and to brainwash people.

Mr. KEATING. OK. Those are strong words when you say it is like Stalin's time in your country. I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Mr. Keating. I now yield myself for up to 5 minutes for a second round of questions. How can the international community hold Lukashenko and his regime accountable for their crimes in Ukraine? Should the ICC extend the warrant it issued for the U.S. of Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova for similar crimes to Lukashenko?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. You know, since the beginning of our revolution, we are trying to bring Lukashenko's regime to accountability for his crimes. We try to do this because thousands of people went through tortures in prison, so it is crimes against humanity. No success at the moment.

Hijacking of airplane. It is a threat to international security. An investigation was done but we do not know what was the result and no punishment for this. Migration crisis, then participation in the war. Now abduction of Ukrainian children, and this abduction of Ukrainian children is our chance to bring Lukashenko to accountability because for the same crime Putin and Lvova-Belova was put to accountability and was given arrest warrant.

While Lukashenko is not in the same role with them, we have tons of proofs of these crimes, tons of evidences that have been delivered to Karim Khan already. But still no special investigation was initiated. The question why? So if you can somehow help us to open this door and to encourage Karim Khan and ICC to start this investigation, we would be really grateful because people have to feel that dictators shouldn't feel, will not feel impunity for their crimes.

Mr. KEAN. That is why I brought that question up, and thank you for answering it in that way. In 1999, the Belarusian and Russian government signed an agreement creating a so-called union State of Russia and Belarus. Can you please describe how this entity actually subordinates Belarusian sovereignty to Russian control?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. You know, hardly any person in Belarus answer what this unity, you know, unity means in reality because what they are doing, you know, Lukashenko is putting under the cover of this unity nobody knows. It is like a secret what is going on.

But, of course, Russia can use this signed document as, like, prison, you know, to continue to subjugate Belarus. We see the process of subjugation in our country. We see how Russia is trying to control our education, media, economy, maybe under the cover of this union State, you know. And Lukashenko, when he gave our land as launching pad for missiles in the attack in Ukraine, he also said that, look, we are with Russia in this union, we have to help this country.

But there is no profit for Belarus, as well. It is just a way to deprive our country of independence and serenity and, of course, this agreement, this union should be dismantled as soon as Belarus becomes free and independent.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you. I now yield up to 5 minutes for a second round of questions to Representative Titus.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you again, Mr. Chairman. You know, when you first took up this cause after your husband had been imprisoned, Lukashenko said you are just a housewife and you could not possibly be president. Well, obviously, you have shown that is not the case. But I would ask you about the role in women in this opposition movement because we find that women are not only usually the agents of change but they also bear the heaviest burden with their families, with their husbands going to war; they are left with few resources. Could you talk about that a little bit both in your movement and in Belarus?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. You know, our revolution is often called a revolution with women's face, and I now realize that maybe women are more effective at long distance. Now we see that our fight is not a sprint, it is a marathon, and women are really more effective and stable, I would say, in our fight, maybe because we feel more responsibility for the future of our country because it is the future of our children, as well. We are preparing this country for a better life of our children and the Ukraine children.

And, of course, in future Belarus, there will be no even discussion about gender inequality because our women proved that they can be leaders. Women are the leaders of the most initiatives, political, cultural, media initiatives, in our country, so we have proved that we are much stronger than we might seem sometimes. And let's see how many brave women behind the bars at the moment. Let's recall how Maria Kalesnikava her passport to stay in the country, Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk who is opposing this regime even behind the bars and she is paying a high price for this.

So, yes, you know, our women are strong. Our women are powerful, but, of course, you know, the unit of our movement of democratic forces consists of not only women but also of men, and our task is to unite around our common goals, not around personalities about persons but about our goals.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you. Just changing the subject a little bit about the Ryanair flight that was grounded to arrest a person that Lukashenko was opposed to. Can you talk a little bit about his use of transnational repression and if that is being effective or you anticipate it increasing or other authoritarian regimes are kind of copying that pattern of behavior?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. As I said before, dictators easily learn from each other, you know, learning the tools, how to suppress people, how to blackmail neighbors, how to keep democratic countries in stress, how to disperse attention for example. Ukraine was in focus, now Israel is under attack, and it is a task of dictators to, as I said, to disperse intention, not to be concentrated on one issue, and to exhaust democratic countries, not to support everybody systematically. And that is why, as I said also before, we do not have to treat symptoms of the disease which name is tyranny, but to treat the problem itself.

You know, if in Belarus we can support democratic forces years and years, we can impose new sanctions, but there is loopholes. If this support is not enough to win dictator, so it might be endless fight. But we really want to return home, we want to defeat this regime and build normal, reliable democratic country.

And as I said in my speech, your support to us is not charity. It is your investment into future security of the whole world. So help us to help the world be safe.

Ms. TITUS. That is true. We need a friend in that difficult neighborhood. So by your strengthening your democratic movement, that strengthens our position internationally, too.

Well, thank you very much. I yield back.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you. I now recognize the Vice Chair of this committee, Mr. Self, for up to 5 minutes.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to followup on the nuclear weapons. We have seen the statements by Putin and so

forth, and I'm not sure anyone has actually confirmed the presence of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. Have you seen any evidence that confirms their presence?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Actually not. No information from open propagandistic resources. They say that nuclear weapon is already in Belarus, but this uncertainty, you know, creates more questions. These uncertainty regimes keep neighbors and the world in stress. Is there weapon there? You know, we do not know.

But what we know for sure is that with the deployment of nuclear weapon, the aim of this deployment is to keep Belarusian people under control to enter the presence of Russia in our country for many, many years ahead and also to blackmail neighboring countries. So we do not know for sure. My answer is no.

Mr. SELF. I read one article that said that they were actually building a new base for it. Are you familiar with that base, and has that base been completed, even if we do not know the weapons have moved? And I'm not sure where it is. I cannot tell you.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. No. Actually, we do not know. We have heard about this basement. You know, in Belarus, we have so-called people's intelligence. It is ordinary people who give us information if they see something, you know, is going on. But we have not got any information about this basement or deployment of nuclear weapon. You know, I really cannot confirm this.

Mr. SELF. OK. Thank you. I think that is instructive to me that it may be all talk and no action. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Mr. Self. I now yield up to 5 minutes to Mr. Wilson from South Carolina.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. And I call you Madam President. I believe that you were rightfully elected, and we just so appreciate your courage, your courage, your husband's courage. We just hope the best for, ultimately, a free and democratic Belarus. I am very grateful with my democrat colleagues to be working with the Friends of Belarus Caucus. Indeed, we look forward to freedom and democracy in Belarus; and, again, the courage of yourself and your husband just is such an inspiration and I have been happy to actually be with you in Vienna, to be here with you in Washington, and my service. Everywhere I go, people are just so impressed by your personal commitment and courage. You are an inspiration, obviously, for the people of Belarus and then, hey, ultimately, an inspiration for the people of Russia itself that they, too, under the repression of war criminal Putin, 1 day there will be a free and democratic Russia. I've visited many times and have been so impressed but so sad to see a great country held back and oppressed by a dictator.

With that in mind, I also want to congratulate you. The BBC has recognized, that is British Broadcasting Company, you as one of the top 100 women in the world. You are in the top Bloomberg 50. Additionally, the European Parliament, in 2020, you received the Sakharov prize, one of the highest awards, which indicates, indeed, as we saw the Soviet Union liberated and sadly going backward simultaneously, that is such a recognition. In 2022, Charlemagne Prize. And then I was recently grateful to be with you here in Washington to receive the recognition with the National Endow-

ment for Democracy. So your leadership is just so inspiring for the people around the world, for the people of Belarus.

With that in mind, sadly, when the war criminal Putin invaded Ukraine February 24, 2022, a large contention of its forces staged an advance on Belarusian territory to invade from the north. And, hey, I saw the consequence. I was at Bucha, Ukraine where I saw the site of where whole families had their hands tied behind their back and then they were shot in the head and buried in shallow graves. These troops had come from the direction of Belarus.

With that in mind, Lukashenko has also provided basis and logistical support, including ammunition supplies, to the murdering Russian military. What other help has Lukashenko provided, and what can we do to deter this?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. So until now, Lukashenko's regime providing Russia with the missiles, Belarusian missiles, tanks, military equipment. Also, Belarus modernizes military equipment and repairing damaged equipment. Also, they provide intelligence information for Russia. Also, Belarus provides facilities to train Russian soldiers on our land, and, of course, the convention of sanctions we have discussed before, allowing Russia to buy stuff for the war and for military through Belarus. Also, Belarus, sometimes Russian missiles fly over Belarus territory. It is like providing airspace for attacking Ukraine. Also, at the moment, it is up to 200 Wagner staffs stay in our territory and up to 2,000 Belarusian soldiers also.

So last attack from our country was in October 2022, but it does not mean that our country cannot be again used for attack in Ukraine. And Lukashenko will provide our territory for doing this.

Mr. WILSON. Another atrocity is the kidnapping of children. The Nazis kidnapped children in Poland to Germanize. Now we have war criminal Putin kidnapping children. Are there any children that have been kidnapped from Ukraine currently in Belarus?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. We have proof about at least 2,000 children that have been kidnapped from occupied territories and brought to Belarus, and we have documents proving this. And that is why Lukashenko has to be given arrest warrant for this crime, abduction of Ukrainian children, and I ask you to help us in launching a special investigation on this crime of Lukashenko in ICC.

Mr. WILSON. Again, thank you so much. And it has been such an honor to be with you in Vienna, Washington, Copenhagen, and then I am so grateful for the support of the Republic of Lithuania. Gosh, they're there 110 percent of the time, because they have seen oppression in the past and they want to see a liberated Belarus. Thank you. I yield back.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Thank you.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you. I now yield 5 minutes to Chairman Smith from New Jersey.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Ms. Tsikhanouskaya, thank you for your courageous leadership, but it is not just that. It is selfless. In the entirety of this hearing today, not once did you mention that a kangaroo court in March convicted you of trying to influence or overthrow an election. It's called an election. And you were sentenced to 15 years by Lukashenko's dictatorship. You never even mentioned it. You know, I mean, that

speaks so much about you and your courage, and all of us here on this panel on both sides of the aisle are deeply concerned about you and your well-being.

And we know that, increasingly, Lukashenko is going after the diaspora both in Europe, as well as in the United States. As a matter of fact, the European Council on Foreign Relations did a piece in January called "A Prison of the Mind: Lukashenko's Pursuit of Exiled Belarusians." We know that nobody does that better than people like Xi Jinping and others, he especially, trying to harass and do worse to the diaspora here and in Europe and around the world.

I just wondered if you would might want to speak to this. I mean, another reason why TPS, temporary protected status, TPS, is so important, but it is only a part of it. I think our FBI and others in Europe need to be, law enforcement, even more energized to ensure the protection of the Belarusian people who are out of the country and you especially. I mean, you're an icon of freedom. You know, let everyone know that in Lukashenko's dictatorship that we care deeply about you and are watching and hoping and praying that you remain completely safe in your very, very courageous work. So, maybe speak to the diaspora, your own bogus conviction by that court in March.

And, finally, in terms of visiting political prisoners, we always count on the ICRC and others to go. Apparently, that has not been happening. And then you have the outrage where the global Red Cross suspended the Belarusian chapter of the ICRC after its chief boasted of bringing in Ukrainian children. That came out just a couple of days ago. That is outrageous for the ICRC to have facilitated and boasted about that kidnapping of Ukrainian children.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA. Yes. So since the beginning of detaining people in Belarus, we asked Red Cross, International Red Cross, to pay attention to this issue. We are absolutely sure that Red Cross will find opportunity to demand access to political prisoners for them to see how people are being tortured inside our country in Belarusian prisons. But no results of this work, we have never heard about public demand of access to political prisoners. And Belarusian Red Cross is absolutely pro-regime institution, and the leader of Belarusian Red Cross went to occupied territories and he was participating in the abduction of Ukrainian children.

As far as I know, now ICRC stopped any relationship with Belarusian Red Cross and stopped financing of this organization because of they did not agree to fire this leader of Belarusian Red Cross. But still they need to, they have to continue their support to demand access to people. People are really dying in prisons, and it is their mandate to interfere inside issues where people are abused, people are being tortured. And if you can help us, you know, to ask them to do it publicly, not just to send letters under carpet but to show publicly that they are interested in helping our political prisoners. So we would be really grateful for this.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you. And we will followup with that. Again, we still do not mention the fact that this dictatorship has convicted you and sentenced you to 15 years. Again, you are so selfless, so inspiring. Thank you.

Mr. KEAN. With no further questions from the members, I want to thank our witness, Ms. Tsikhanouskaya, for your valuable testimony and the members for their questions.

Members of subcommittee may have some additional written questions for you, and we ask that you respond to these promptly and in writing. Pursuant to committee rules, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions, extraneous material for the record, subject to the length limitations.

Without objection, this subcommittee stands adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:38 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX



**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE**
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on Europe
Thomas H. Kean, Jr (R-NJ), Chairman

November 28, 2023

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held by the Subcommittee on Europe at 10:00 a.m. in Room 210 of the House Visitor Center. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

DATE: Tuesday, December 5, 2023
TIME: 10:00 a.m.
LOCATION: HVC-210
SUBJECT: The Future of Freedom and Democracy in Belarus
WITNESSES: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya
National Leader of Belarus and
Head of the United Transitional Cabinet

*NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

By Direction of the Chair

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202-226-8467 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
 MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Day Tuesday Date 12/05/2023 Room HVC-210

Starting Time 10:08 A.M. Ending Time 11:38 A.M.

Recesses (___ to ___) (___ to ___) (___ to ___) (___ to ___) (___ to ___) (___ to ___) (___ to ___)

Presiding Member(s)
 Chairman Thomas H. Kean, Jr.; Rep. William Keating

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session Electronically Recorded (taped)
 Executive (closed) Session Stenographic Record
 Televised

TITLE OF HEARING:
The Future of Freedom and Democracy in Belarus

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:
See attached

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes No
 (If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)
See attached

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____
 or
 TIME ADJOURNED 11:38 A.M.

Meg Wagner
 Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD



November 8, 2023

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security
2707 Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Mayorkas:

We, members of the Belarusian-American community, urgently request that you grant Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designation for Belarus and Special Student Relief for Belarusians studying in the US. Belarus satisfies the third condition for granting TPS: political repression in Belarus has created the *extraordinary and temporary condition* of a political and humanitarian crisis that prevents Belarusians from returning safely to Belarus. Further, Belarus is participating in Russia's war against Ukraine as a staging ground and launch site for attacks on Ukraine, satisfying the first condition for granting TPS. Both of these qualifying conditions for TPS threaten US national interests and sovereignty.

Belarusians in the US require TPS, because dictator Aliaksandr Lukashenka's September 4 Decree 278 has terminated consular services for all Belarusians, forcing them either to return to Belarus to face prosecution for political crimes (including extremism and terrorism) or to become stateless. Decree 278 bars Belarusian embassies and consulates from issuing and renewing passports, forbids them from certifying powers of attorney and voids powers of attorney issued and certified outside of Belarus. As a consequence, Belarusian citizens must return to Belarus to access normal consular services like renewing a passport and obtaining or certifying the documents confirming their educational credentials, marriage, and birth certificates. As the UN Special Rapporteur stated in her August 25, 2023 report [Situation of human rights in Belarus](#), "[V]irtually all human rights defenders, investigative journalists, civic activists and members of the political opposition [are] either in prison or in exile." Belarus' approximately 1,500 political prisoners attests to the humanitarian crisis inside Belarus. Ending consular services abroad closes a safety valve for those who escaped.

Lukashenka's actions create a human rights catastrophe by trying to extinguish the activism of those who escaped Belarus and continue to fight to establish a liberal democratic society in Belarus from countries like the United States. More importantly, Lukashenka, through Decree 278, threatens US national security: 1- violates American sovereignty by using American law to deny Belarusians the sanctuary the US offers through regular US immigration process; 2- seeks to undercut US support for Ukraine as it repels Russia's invasion; and 3- attempts to undermine President Biden's leadership of liberal democracies in the battle of authoritarian regimes like Lukashenka's and Vladimir Putin's.

Terminating consular services first and foremost violates American sovereignty. With this act, Lukashenka is reaching his despotic hands into the United States' sovereign territory to pull Belarusians from the safety offered by legal presence in the US. Without a valid passport, Belarusians will lose their identification, be unable to travel, and be without the means to obtain medical care, maintain employment, engage in banking, and other everyday tasks. If the US does not designate TPS for Belarus, Lukashenka will have turned the United States from sanctuary to prison for the thousands of Belarusians the US currently shelters within its borders.

Secondly, granting TPS for Belarus will protect the political opposition that Lukashenka fears. The intended effect of Decree 278 is to punish and neutralize that political opposition. It is Lukashenka's fear of being deposed that has limited his use as Vladimir Putin's partner in Russia's war to subjugate Ukraine. In February 2022, Belarus became a principal debarkation point for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russian troops deployed from Belarus committed some of the most horrific war crimes and crimes against humanity since World War II. The US has been the single largest supporter of Ukraine since Russia's invasion. It has invested almost one hundred billion US Dollars in military and non-military aid to Ukraine. Allowing Lukashenka to silence Belarusians abroad, by forcing them to return to Belarus or exist abroad in stateless limbo, strengthens him at home. If Lukashenka is permitted to oppress his citizens who have reached sanctuary abroad, he will feel confident that he can continue to support Russia. A stable, authoritarian Belarus supports Russia. It undermines American support for Ukraine.

Third, granting TPS for Belarus directly defends the liberal democratic world order. After falsifying the results of the August 2020 Belarusian Presidential election, Lukashenka began bloody repression against peaceful protesters seeking only to have the vote count. In May 2021, Lukashenka ordered Belarusian fighter aircraft to divert RyanAir FR 497, threatening the safety of civil aviation, to seize a single opposition journalist, Raman Pratasevich. Since February 2022, Belarus has supported Russia's war against Ukraine. The consequences of Lukashenka's crackdown on political dissent and Russia's war against Ukraine have been a flood of refugees from political chaos and war. The United States granted, and has now extended, TPS for Ukraine. Poland and Lithuania have developed temporary immigration statuses for Belarusians. TPS offers protection for Belarusians as a group in the same way that it is protecting Ukrainians.

Granting TPS for Belarus is a tangible message that the US defends liberal democracy and protects those fighting on its frontlines.

The United States has officially recognized the Lukashenka regime as a general threat. In February of 2022 the US Embassy in Belarus suspended its operations. The State Department has issued a Level 4 Travel Advisory that recommends U.S. citizens in Belarus leave and urges others not to travel to Belarus as a consequence of the legal situation and Belarus's support for Russia's war against Ukraine.

TPS is a lifeline for Belarusian citizens in the United States, providing them with valid proof of identity and the ability to travel. Belarus qualifies for TPS, because the Lukashenka regime's political repression and support for Russia in its war against Ukraine is extraordinary, total and well-documented. TPS for Belarus is justified on grounds similar to those granted for Venezuela, Ethiopia and Syria.

Thank you for considering our request to designate Belarus for TPS status and grant Special Student Relief for Belarusians studying in the United States.

Sincerely,

Belarus Freedom Forum

Association of Belarusians in America

Belarusian American Association