

PROTECTING DEMOCRACY DURING COVID-19 IN
EUROPE AND EURASIA AND THE DEMOCRATIC
AWAKENING IN BELARUS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE, EURASIA, ENERGY,
AND THE ENVIRONMENT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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PROTECTING DEMOCRACY DURING COVID-19 IN EUROPE AND EURASIA AND THE DEMO- CRATIC AWAKENING IN BELARUS

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2020

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE, EURASIA, ENERGY, AND THE
ENVIRONMENT
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
Washington, DC,

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 11 a.m., via WebEx, Hon. William Keating (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. KEATING. The House Foreign Affairs will come to order. Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any point, and all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous materials, and questions for the record, subject to the length limitations in the rules.

To insert something into the record, please have your staff email the previously mentioned address or contact the full committee staff.

Please keep your video function on at all times even when you are not recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves, and please remember to mute yourself after you have finished speaking.

Consistent with House Resolution 965 and the accompanying regulations, staff will only mute members and witnesses as appropriate when they are not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

I see that we have a quorum present. Thank you all for your participation.

Pursuant to notice, we are holding a hearing today entitled, “Protecting Democracy During the COVID-19 in Europe, Eurasia, and the Democratic Awakening in Belarus.”

We will begin, without objection, by submitting several documents for the record regarding the current situation in Belarus, including reports that document the horrors inflicted by the Belarusian people—upon the Belarusian people including a statement by a Belarusian victim that we just received today of the abuse by the police where she details the violations of her rights and the harm inflicted by security forces on her and others who were detained by security forces.

Additionally, there are statements by multinational institutions condemning the violence and electoral fraud to underscore the broad consensus around the flagrant abuses of power that exist and

that we are all watching with great concern the government's actions and with the support of the Belarusian people.

One of the leaders of the movement, Maria Kolesnikova, was kidnapped earlier this week, and just yesterday, yesterday, two members of the Coordination Council, Maxim Znak and Ilya Salei were kidnapped as well.

Ranking Member Kinzinger and I are introducing a resolution condemning these actions by the government of Belarus and recognizing the incredible bravery and efforts of the Belarusian citizens to move toward democracy and holding their government accountable.

I hope that our members will join us in that resolution as well.

To begin with, I would like to start by showing a couple of images from the protests. Since there are limitations with the video system we are using in terms of being able to show these videos, we are showing a few still pictures in lieu of that, and you can see from these pictures some of the incredible scenes that are occurring in Belarus right now.

They underscore how critical it is for journalists and the press to have access to and record moments like this around the world and, importantly, they show the remarkable commitment and bravery of the Belarusian people in the face of oppression by the State.

These are peaceful demonstrators, women-led protests. Students, children, a Nobel Prize winner. These are not security threats requiring foreign intervention. They are citizens demanding accountability for their government and the freedom to express themselves.

With that, I will now make an opening statement before turning it over to Representative Yoho, who will stand in Representative Kinzinger today as the ranking member.

We begin today with a focus on Belarus and everything transpiring there.

First, because the sacrifice, bravery, and solidarity of the Belarusian is coming together for a shared future in their country it is nothing short of heroic and it deserves to be part of the congressional record to mark this incredible moment in their country's history.

And, second, because Belarus must serve as a reminder to all of us about the incredibly difficult work required to live in a democracy. We see it here, too, and realize that democracy cannot be taken for granted. It takes a commitment by the people to keep their democracy healthy and it takes time and often support from friends and partners along the way.

Democracy is not just a result of replacing a corrupt leader at the top. It is embedded in the mundane processes, institutions, and rules and the daily actions by citizens and government officials alike to ensure the system works so the rights and freedoms of all people are guaranteed. There are no quick fixes to democracy.

In Belarus, so many people have risked everything. Hundreds of thousands risked being detained by the police and suffering horrible abuse. Some, tragically, have sacrificed their lives.

The first part of holding a criminal government accountable to its crimes is in no way over.

Yet, it must still be followed by a crucial second part: to develop the institutions, the bureaucracies, and have new and greater ac-

countability in the government so that these sacrifices do not exist—did not go in vain and so they will never be relived again and again.

The world is watching Belarus now because this movement and this moment in history is an opportunity. It is an opportunity that has been captured and it has captured our attention and our support as well.

However, what happens is no less important and demands no less of our attention if we are truly to honor everything that Belarusians have done to get to this moment today.

What comes next, the hard work of democracy, is really at the heart of this hearing today. We have been having discussions about democratic backsliding for some time now, and we held a hearing in this subcommittee on this subject last fall, where former President of Poland Lech Walesa, who is no stranger to what it takes to lead a movement, to build a democracy, he warned us that we must do the work necessary to keep it, not take it for granted.

Across Europe and Eurasia, we see recent democracies struggle in corruption, partisan bickering that prevent that government from truly serving its citizens, really, the one and only purpose of a government and a democracy.

We see laws that simply grant governing officials more power instead of making their countries more productive for the benefit of all their citizens.

Democracies require fair elections. Undermining elections does not only entail the—of holding secret balloting, and having ballots thrown out of windows of polling locations, just as undermining trust and accountability in democracy does not require the most egregious of crimes.

Today, in the midst of all these challenges to democracy, we also find ourselves in a global pandemic. Communities and government are being tested in unprecedented ways.

The pandemic has been terrifying, deeply saddening, exhausting, and uncertain in so many ways, and it affects democracies in ways that we should be very attentive to, make sure—making sure that elected officials are chosen by the constituents to chart paths forward that strive to keep all of us as safe as possible but that does not necessarily sacrifice their rights in the process.

Unfortunately, yet predictably, what we see is that where democracies are ailing before the pandemic, the pandemic only provided more opportunities for curtailing rights and restricting freedoms, and we also tend to see a less effective response to the pandemic itself with more people dying and the spreading of viruses to others.

This is hard daily work we all need to do to maintain a democracy, all the way from everyday citizens being informed about what their government is doing and demanding, and that they receive accurate information back, to every elected official from your school board all the way to the head of State doing everything in their power to protect people from the threats of COVID-19 alongside protecting their rights. It can be a difficult balance. But there are guideposts we can follow and lessons we have learned to inform how that can be, in fact, done.

So I am pleased to be joined today by our expert panel to discuss these issues and how they have played out across the region, sharing their experience, what can we learn from those experiences.

And thank you for being here and I look forward to the discussion. I now yield to Representative Yoho for his opening statement.

Mr. YOHO. Thank you, Chairman Keating, and it is always great to see you, and I want to thank Ranking Member Kinzinger for allowing me to fill in for him and for you calling this hearing, and thank you for the panel joining us today.

Since the final days of the cold war, the United States and its trans-Atlantic allies and partners have been motivated by the vision of Europe, whole and free.

That vision foresaw a united continent built on a foundation of lasting security, peace, shared values, freedom, prosperity, and the respect for the basic human rights, held together by the rule of law.

While we have made many tremendous progresses in realizing that vision, it is under threat. Today's timely hearing addresses two key challenges that undermine this vision: the violence from the post-election crackdown in Belarus and the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Europe's last remaining dictatorship under the rule of Lukashenko since 1994, Belarus has long seen—has long been seen as a final barrier to a Europe whole and free.

There is no question that the August 9th election in Belarus was flawed and corrupt. The Belarusian people have flooded the streets to demand that their voices be heard.

It has now been over a month since the election and, despite the violence and terror inflicted upon them by the Lukashenko regime, the Belarusians continue to peacefully protest.

They have refused to back down and their calls for free and fair elections as well as respect for the human rights are only getting louder. The Belarusian people bravely—their bravery is truly inspiring.

This was most recently exemplified earlier this year when one of the leading opposition activists, Maria Kolesnikova, ripped up her passport when Belarusian authorities attempted to forcefully deport her from her own country.

That shows somebody that is strong on freedom and liberty, and will sacrifice whatever it takes to have that for her country and I admire that.

We must support the Belarusian people as they assert their right to chart their own destiny. We must also hold the Belarusian authorities who are responsible for the post-election crackdown accountable.

Toward this end, I am glad to hear that the administration is actively working on individual sanctions against additional members of the Lukashenko regime.

Those sanctions must remain on the table until at least two conditions are met: all of those unjustly detained are released, including American citizen Vitaly Shklyarov, and the Lukashenko regime engages in meaningful dialog with the Belarusian people.

As for Russia, the United States must ensure there is no question in Vladimir Putin's mind that a Russian military invasion of Belarus would be met with severe consequence.

As Deputy Secretary Biegun made clear in his recent meetings in Russia, this is not a contest between East and West, but one between the Belarusian people, their ruler, and the rule of law.

I hope to hear more of all the witnesses today on how we in Congress can support the democratic aspirations of the people of Belarus. And as you said about Lech Walesa talking about the struggles of Poland, and he has been through that, it reminds me—and that is a truism that is true throughout history because Benjamin Franklin said that coming out of the Hall in Philadelphia when asked, “What form of government did you give us, sir?” And he said, “A republic, if you can keep it.”

And we know these are messy, but they are worth it because they empower the people and protect those basic human rights. I hope to hear more from all the witnesses today on how we in Congress can support the democratic aspirations of the people of Belarus.

The other threat to Europe whole and free that will be examined today is COVID-19 and the democratic setbacks we have seen in some countries in Europe and Eurasia amid the pandemic.

Democracies around the world have put in place unprecedented safety measures from emergency declarations to restrictions on free assembly to protect their people from the deadly virus.

However, we must ensure these restrictions on civil and political rights are not abused by the governments looking to consolidate power. I am particularly troubled by the restrictions on press freedoms being implemented in certain countries under the pretext of preventing the spread of disinformation on the virus.

While the spread of false information on COVID-19 has serious potential health risks, the exploitation of these restrictions cannot be ignored. I am sure we will hear more on this from the minority’s witness in the form of the president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Jamie Fly.

The pandemic has already caused too much pain and suffering, and the United States’ like-minded allies and partners must work together to ensure our shared democratic values and rule of law are not another casualty of this virus.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this hearing and I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you very much, Representative Yoho. I think your remarks indicate a strong bipartisan concern going on in Belarus and what is going on in the region, and I will take this opportunity now to introduce our witnesses.

And I want to thank you for being part of this here today.

Mr. Douglas Rutzen is the president and CEO of the International Center for Not-For-Profit Law. He also teaches at Georgetown Law Center and serves on USAID’s Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid and the advisory boards of the OSCE Civic Space Observatory, and the U.N. Democracy Fund.

He previously co-chaired the State Department’s Global Philanthropy Working Group and served as a legal advisor in the Czech parliament. Thank you for being here, Mr. Rutzen.

Ms. Therese Pearce Laanela leads the Electoral Process Unit in the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. She served as the founding staff member at International IDEA

and as assistant director for the Democracy Program at the Carter Center.

She served on elections across Africa, Europe, and Asia for organizations including OSCE, the EU, and the Carter Center. Thank you for being here.

Ms. Joanna Rohozińska is the resident program director for Europe for the International Republican Institute. She previously served as senior program officer for Europe at the National Endowment for Democracy. Again, thank you for your participation here.

Mr. Jamie Fly is a senior fellow and senior advisor to the president at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. He's the former president and CEO of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.

Prior to these roles, Mr. Fly served as counselor for foreign and national security affairs to Senator Marco Rubio and was Senator Rubio's foreign policy advisor during his 2016 Presidential campaign.

I will now recognize the witnesses for 5 minutes, and without objection, your prepared written statements will be made part of the record.

Mr. Rutzen, you are now recognized for your opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF DOUGLAS RUTZEN, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW**

Mr. RUTZEN. Thank you, Chairman Keating, Congressman Yoho, members of the committee.

It is a privilege to join you today.

In April, Lukashenko declared that no one in Belarus would die of coronavirus. To allay concerns, he advised Belar Russians to drink vodka, go to saunas, and drive tractors.

In Hungary, Orban took a different approach. He admitted there was COVID, and he used this as a pretext for an emergency law that allowed him to rule by decree.

Meanwhile, China is using the pandemic to project its political influence. When China sent a plane to Belgrade with COVID aid, the Serbian president was on the tarmac and kissed the Chinese flag. Billboards then appeared in Belgrade with the words, "Thanks, Brother Xi" written in both Serbian and Chinese.

COVID-19 is not the root cause of Lukashenko's deceit, Orban's power grab, or China's projection of political influence. But the pandemic exposed and, in some countries, exacerbated underlying challenges to democracy.

In my testimony I will summarize these preexisting challenges, I will discuss how COVID accelerated democratic decline, and I will conclude with recommendations.

First, preexisting challenges. According to Freedom House, 2019 marked the fourteenth year of decline in democracy around the world. The challenge is particularly acute in Eurasia, where Freedom House classifies zero countries as free.

And for years at ICNL we have seen considerable pressure on the core civic freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. For example, in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, it is essentially a political decision whether citizens can form a nonprofit.

So in Turkmenistan, for example, only a handful of nonprofits have been able to form in the last decade. Or consider Belarus,

where it is a crime to publicly insult the president, and this has been used to arrest activists. This is a dictator's dream.

So democracy was already in fragile health in various countries, and once COVID struck the condition worsened because of emergency laws and other measures.

A few vivid examples. First, a number of countries enacted fake news laws. For example, Russia criminalized false information about the pandemic, which has been used to restrict and stifle independent reporting about the pandemic.

Second, countries have begun using invasive surveillance. In Poland, for example, people suspected of having COVID are required to download an app so the government will know their location at all times.

Third, governments are repressing peaceful protests. Consider Belarus. Students peacefully protesting are abducted by masked security forces and beaten, and this week Lukashenko told prosecutors they have all the laws they need to crack down on protests. Just like other authoritarians, Lukashenko has converted the rule of law into the rule by law.

Meanwhile, China is working hard to convert a public health crisis into a political opportunity, everything from so-called mask diplomacy in Serbia to the provision of surveillance equipment throughout the region.

So there are challenges to democracy but there are also good practices, and we have seen this in the region in countries including Denmark, Germany, Georgia, the Netherlands, Sweden, and others, and there are specific ways the U.S. can help.

Three recommendations from my written testimony. First, the House should enact H.R. 6986, the Protecting Human Rights During Pandemics Act, including provisions to protect democratic institutions, civil society, and independent media.

Two, let us lead by example by enacting reform to our laws governing national emergencies and digital surveillance. And third, let us focus on Belarus. Let us grant diplomatic support bilaterally and multilaterally to forge a path to free and fair elections, the release of political prisoners, media freedom, and the protection of those courageous activists on the front line.

In closing, democracy is in fragile health in many parts of the world. When exposed to COVID, many of these countries became high risk for democratic decline.

In Belarus and elsewhere, authoritarian leaders seem scared of the will of their people. They do not want to count every vote. They do not want to address why people are protesting. Rather, they resort to suppression and repression.

But there is time to protect democracy and that time is now.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Rutzen follows:]

**Protecting Democracy During COVID-19 in Europe and Eurasia
and the Democratic Awakening in Belarus**

**Testimony by Douglas Rutzen
President and CEO International Center for Not-for-Profit Law**

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment
September 10, 2020

In April, Alexander Lukashenko declared that no one in Belarus would die of coronavirus.¹ To allay concerns, he advised Belarussians to drink vodka, go to saunas, and drive tractors.² In Hungary, Orban took a different approach. He admitted there was COVID-19, and he used this as an excuse to construct a legal framework allowing him to rule by decree.³

Meanwhile, China is using the pandemic to project its political influence. When a plane carrying medical aid landed in Belgrade, the Serbian President greeted the plane and kissed the Chinese flag. Billboards soon appeared in Belgrade, with Xi Jinping's photo and the words "Thanks, Brother Xi" written in Serbian and Chinese.⁴

COVID-19 is not the root cause of Lukashenko's deceit, Orban's power grab, or China's projection of political influence. But the pandemic exposed – and in some countries, exacerbated – underlying challenges to democracy.

In my testimony, I will summarize pre-existing challenges to democracy. Second, I will examine how COVID-19 combined with pre-existing conditions to accelerate democratic decline in Europe and Eurasia. Third, I will share attributes of authoritarian and democratic responses to the pandemic. I will conclude with recommendations.

Pre-Existing Challenges to Democracy

According to Freedom House, 2019 marked the 14th year of decline in democracy around the world.⁵ The "democratic depression" is particularly acute in Eurasia, where the rule of law and freedom of expression declined more than in any other region.⁶ Indeed, Freedom House classifies zero countries in Eurasia as "free."

ICNL specializes in the legal framework for civil society, particularly the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression. Therefore, my testimony will focus on these three aspects of civic space, recognizing that additional challenges to democracy exist in Europe and Eurasia.

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-belarus/nobody-will-die-from-coronavirus-in-belarus-says-president-idUSKCN21V1PK>

² [Id.](#)

³ <https://www.helsinki.hu/en/emergency-law-gives-carte-blanche-powers-to-government/> and <https://www.helsinki.hu/en/assessment-of-the-transitional-act/>

⁴ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-sets-the-stage-for-beijings-mask-diplomacy/1450727/>

⁵ https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf

⁶ <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/%E2%80%99democratic-depression%E2%80%99-could-be-around-corner> and https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf

Prior to the pandemic, civic space was already constrained in many countries in the region. For example:

- In Azerbaijan, Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the government has broad discretion to decide whether a civil society organization can register (i.e., incorporate). Illustrating the impact of these measures, in Turkmenistan, only a handful of civil society organizations (“CSOs”) have successfully registered in the past 10 years.
- In Russia, a CSO that receives international funding and engages in broadly defined “political activities” must publicly identify itself as a “foreign agent,” a term which is synonymous in Russian with “foreign spy”.⁷
- In Uzbekistan, CSOs are required to notify the government before holding any event. The Ministry of Justice has the authority to attend the event or to prohibit the event from occurring.
- In Kosovo, the law requires all CSOs to have a specially trained compliance officer responsible for countering terrorist financing and money laundering, a burdensome requirement that applies even if the CSO has no budget and no staff.
- In Hungary, the “Transparency Law” placed undue registration and reporting burdens on CSOs receiving funding from abroad;⁸ the Law on foreign branch campuses forced the Central European University to leave Hungary; and the Law on Assemblies provided police a wide range of reasons to ban protest without appeal through regular courts.⁹
- In Belarus, it is a crime to disseminate information “publicly insulting” the President. Activists Valeri Levonevski and Alexander Vasilyev spent two years in jail for publishing a poem about Lukashenko, which was deemed by a court to be an insult to the President.¹⁰

As these examples illustrate, in certain countries, democracy was already in fragile health.¹¹ After the outbreak of COVID-19, the risk of democratic backsliding significantly increased.

COVID-19: Emergency Measures and Challenges to Democracy

In Europe and Eurasia, at least 27 countries adopted states of emergency and other exceptional legal measures in response to COVID-19.¹² While certain restrictions are justified in the effort to curb the

⁷ The Russian law was inspired by the US Foreign Agents Registration Act, a 1938 law in need of focus and updating. <https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=4013&context=dj>

⁸ Law No. LXXVI of 2017 on the transparency of organizations supported from abroad. The European Court of Justice ruled in June 2020 that the restrictions imposed on civil society organizations do not comply with EU law. See the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law’s [analysis](#) and [this summary](#).

⁹ Law No. LV of 2018 on the right to assembly. For an analysis of additional challenges in Hungary, see <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/nato-hungary-authoritarianism/557459/>

¹⁰ <https://naviny.belsat.eu/ru/news/s-nih-nachinalas-zachistka-informatsionnogo-polya-belarusi-v-grodno-prezentovali-kalendar-istorii-svobody-slova/>

¹¹ As discussed in this Subcommittee’s hearing in May 2019, China also extended its influence in Europe and Eurasia prior to the outbreak of COVID. See, e.g., <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/09/on-china-s-expanding-influence-in-europe-and-eurasia-pub-79094>.

¹² <https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/>

pandemic, many governments overreached and unduly burdened fundamental freedoms. For example, during this period:

- **Russia criminalizes “false information”.** April 1 amendments to the criminal code criminalize public dissemination of “false information” that threatens public health during an emergency – punishable by fines of up to \$25,000 and up to 5 years in prison.¹³ The law has already been used to target and intimidate journalists.¹⁴
- **Turkey arrests citizens for social media posts and burdens civil society.** Turkey has arrested hundreds of people for making “provocative” posts about COVID-19 on social media.¹⁵ The Minister of Culture also issued a letter prohibiting organizations from holding their general assembly meetings online, significantly restricting the operation of civil society organizations.
- **Belarus shuts down the internet.** The shutdown occurred during recent elections and subsequent protests, and the shutdown was reportedly accomplished using technology developed by a US company.¹⁶
- **Russia enforces quarantine measures using facial recognition technology.** Authorities used a network of 100,000 CCTV cameras in Moscow, controlled from a centralized COVID-19 control center, to enforce quarantine measures using facial recognition.¹⁷ Activists filed lawsuits against Moscow’s Department of Technology, which manages the capital’s video surveillance program, seeking to ban the technology’s use at mass events and protests, but the legality of the system was upheld.
- **Hungary granted the government sweeping new powers.** On June 18, the Parliament ended Hungary’s “state of danger” and withdrew the law that gave Orban the power to rule by decree. In its place, though, lawmakers passed a new law that expands the powers of the government during a “state of medical crisis.”¹⁸ During such a state, the government is authorized to suspend existing laws and restrict fundamental rights such as freedom of movement and assembly without parliamentary approval. The government may declare a “state of medical crisis” unilaterally, based on the recommendation of a government-appointed medical officer.¹⁹
- **Kazakhstan restricts peaceful assemblies.** A recently enacted law requires citizens to obtain governmental approval to assemble, allows authorities broad discretion to ban an assembly, and even covers demonstrations where a single person is present.

¹³ <https://apnews.com/dbbf02a747b11d8ffe3b07d5e33ff129>

¹⁴ <https://ipi.media/new-fake-news-law-stifles-independent-reporting-in-russia-on-covid-19/>

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-turkey/turkey-rounds-up-hundreds-for-social-media-posts-about-coronavirus-idUSKBN21C1SG>. See also <https://osce.usmission.gov/on-human-dimension-violations-during-covid-19/>

¹⁶ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-28/belarusian-officials-shut-down-internet-with-technology-made-by-u-s-firm>

¹⁷ <https://www.france24.com/en/20200324-100-000-cameras-moscow-uses-facial-recognition-to-enforce-quarantine>

¹⁸ <https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/16/hungary-debates-end-to-emergency-powers-but-new-law-opens-up-potential-to-re-apply-them>

¹⁹ <https://www.helsinki.hu/en/assessment-of-the-transitional-act/>

- **Activists are at risk.** There are numerous examples, including the conviction of Amnesty International representatives on terrorism charges in Turkey,²⁰ the arrest of Sergei Tikhanovsky in Belarus,²¹ and the poisoning of Alexei Navalny.²²
- **Meanwhile, China projects its influence in the region.** According to a report published by the German Marshall Fund, during a five week period this Spring, “the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and large Chinese companies made 70 prominent donations to 27 countries across Europe.”²³ Moreover, “[o]n state media, embassy websites, and social-media platforms, the authorities used the Chinese donations to Europe to deliver the CCP’s story.”²⁴ Among other examples, China also threatened Czech leaders because of a visit to Taiwan,²⁵ and Chinese companies are providing surveillance technology to countries including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Serbia.²⁶

Common Authoritarian Tactics

Shifting from a geographic to thematic perspective, the following are common tactics adopted by authoritarian-leaning governments while responding to the pandemic:

1. **Engaging in deception and propaganda.** A time-tested technique of authoritarians is to conceal facts and engage in political propaganda. In the COVID-19 context, officials in Turkmenistan²⁷ and Tajikistan denied the existence of COVID-19, while Lukashenko tried to allay public concern by telling people to drink vodka. Trust in government is important for public consent for COVID-19 responses.²⁸ Nonetheless, many leaders with authoritarian tendencies have reverted to mendacity and manipulation, undermining both public health and democracy.
2. **Constraining independent information.** Azerbaijan, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan are some of the countries in the region that criminalized the dissemination of “false information” about the pandemic.²⁹ According to a report by the US Mission to the OSCE, more than 200 people, including journalists and activists, have been prosecuted for supposedly spreading “fake news” related to COVID-19 in Russia.³⁰ Other countries, including Poland and Serbia, restricted access to government information.³¹ Belarus also revoked press credentials of foreign journalists and otherwise restricted independent

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/world/europe/turkey-human-rights-conviction.html>

²¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/22/belarus-activists-journalists-jailed-election-looms>

²² <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/24/905423648/navalny-was-poisoned-but-his-life-isnt-in-danger-german-hospital-says>

²³ <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/masks-chinese-coronavirus-assistance-europe>

²⁴ <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/masks-chinese-coronavirus-assistance-europe> and <https://apnews.com/76dff4b113e82d85716262895909f151>

²⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/czech-china-taiwan/a-54764477>

²⁶ <https://eurasianet.org/china-taking-big-brother-to-central-asia> and

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/china-ai-surveillance/614197/>

²⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/death-and-denial-in-turkmenistan/>

²⁸ <https://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm>

²⁹ Page 114, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf

³⁰ <https://osce.usmission.gov/on-human-dimension-violations-during-covid-19/>

³¹ Page 53, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf

media.³² Globally, we have seen governments, including China, silence COVID-19 whistleblowers. Accurate information is necessary for evidence-based, effective responses to the pandemic. But authoritarian-leaning leaders seek to restrict the freedom of speech and expression, block access to information, and attack the press and whistleblowers.

3. **Burdening civil society.** Despite civil society's essential role in the COVID-19 response, governments with more authoritarian tendencies continued to take steps to constrain the space for civil society. Turkey adopted decrees that restrict the operations and activities of CSOs, including banning all in-person workshops and trainings and prohibiting online general assemblies.³³ President Lukashenko issued a decree further restricting international funding for civil society organizations in Belarus.³⁴ More generally, constraints on the freedom of information and access to information, restrictions on peaceful assemblies, and over-broad surveillance have impeded the ability of civil society to pursue their work.
4. **Repressing peaceful protests.** Governments that do not listen to their people hear from them in the streets. In some countries, the protests are directly related to the government's COVID-19 response.³⁵ In other countries, the pandemic helped ignite a tinder box of societal concerns, whether related to elections, public health, racial justice, or other issues. As a result, during the COVID-19 era, we are witnessing a significant number of protests around the world.³⁶ Some countries, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are adopting legal restrictions on protests. Other countries are responding with force and intimidation. For example, in Belarus, peaceful protests were met with violent crackdowns from security services and arbitrary arrests.³⁷ In addition, Belarussian authorities are threatening to remove children from their families if parents participate in protests, based on the argument that the parents are engaged in an "immoral way of life" and are not properly implementing their responsibilities, thereby placing children in a "socially dangerous position."³⁸ Throughout the region, the authoritarian response is to seek to repress protests instead of seeking to address the root causes of societal concern.
5. **Imposing surveillance.** Some governments have incorporated surveillance technology into their efforts to halt the spread of COVID-19, without sufficiently considering the privacy and human rights implications of surveillance technology. In Poland, people required to quarantine are given a choice: either receive unexpected visits from the police or download the "home quarantine app."³⁹ In Russia, Moscow's quarantine app is mandatory for anyone with the virus or "suspected of having it." The app tracks users via GPS – accessing their location, calls, camera, network info, and other data – and randomly issues requests for selfies to prove that they are at home. If they fail to do so, they receive a \$56 fine each time. Thousands have complained that

³² <https://thehill.com/policy/international/europe/514263-belarus-strips-press-credentials-for-several-foreign-journalists>

³³ <http://www.balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/78-5-Balkan-Civil-Society-in-the-COVID-19-Crisis.pdf>

³⁴ Page 113, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf

³⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/violence-breaks-out-at-new-serbia-protests/a-54098931>

³⁶ <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker>

³⁷ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/bipartisan-us-congress-appeal-calls-for-greater-leadership-in-support-of-democracy-in-belarus/>

³⁸ <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/belarus-znak-protesty-deti/30817300.html>

³⁹ <https://www.privateinternetaccess.com/blog/polands-covid-19-selfie-app-raises-privacy-questions-will-everyone-eventually-be-tracked/>

the fines were wrongly issued due to app malfunctions. Authorities had raised \$3 million with the app by early June.⁴⁰

6. **Prioritizing politics over an integrated governmental response.** An effective response requires close collaboration between national and subnational leaders. In Turkey, mayors affiliated with the opposition were elected in Istanbul and Ankara. According to a recent report, President Erdoğan “actively tried to undermine them whenever possible—announcing weekend curfews on short notice to leave the opposition mayors flat-footed, canceling charity fundraisers that the mayors organized, and shutting down opposition-run food kitchens—even at the cost of weakening the country’s broader response to the pandemic.”⁴¹ Similarly, the mayor of Budapest is associated with the opposition party. Orban has worked to undermine the mayor’s effectiveness, draining the city of resources and casting blame for infections and deaths in nursing homes.⁴² This approach prioritizes politics over public health, and it undermines an effective approach to combatting COVID-19.
7. **Eroding democratic checks and balances.** Some countries, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Serbia, transferred authority from the legislative branch to the executive branch. Among other civic space problems, this “restricted the right to freedom of assembly through governmental decisions.”⁴³ In terms of the judiciary, in Kazakhstan, “civil society organizations consistently reported difficulties for lawyers to effectively defend their clients” because entering court buildings could be considered a violation of the quarantine.⁴⁴ Russia and other countries suspended virtually all judicial proceedings while their countries were in lockdown.⁴⁵ In many countries in the region, COVID-19 led to the concentration of power in the executive branch and the erosion of democratic checks and balances.

These are common tactics in authoritarian-leaning governments. That said, democratic governments have also embraced some of these approaches. It is important for democracies to lead by example, and to advance that goal, below I summarize examples of good practices adopted by democracies in the region.

Healthy Democratic Responses

The COVID-19 pandemic does not have to be a crisis for human rights – many governments have demonstrated that it is possible to safeguard rights while effectively countering the virus. The following are a few examples⁴⁶ from countries in the region:

1. **Facilitating the free flow of information.** Governments build trust, secure necessary feedback, and enlist the public in the fight against COVID-19 by encouraging the free flow of information. Toward that end, both Portugal and Georgia⁴⁷ have developed a website, app, and mass media

⁴⁰ <https://apnews.com/ca08db0bc06f0a9d20e205104680c881>

⁴¹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/17/erdogan-turkey-coronavirus-relief-politics-akp-chp-brother-tayyip-soup-kitchen/>

⁴² <https://www.france24.com/en/20200424-virus-hit-hungary-care-home-on-frontline-in-orban-powerplay>

Borrowing Tom Wolfe’s term from the 1970s, some national leaders are also turning local politicians into “flak catchers.”

⁴³ Page 107, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf

⁴⁴ Page 76, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf

⁴⁵ <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/04/08/law-and-order-under-lockdown>

⁴⁶ Additional examples are available at https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf

⁴⁷ <https://stopcov.ge/en>

campaign presenting information on the pandemic and government actions to address it. According to Ireland's Freedom of Information website, officials must comply with the Freedom of Information Act, despite the pandemic.⁴⁸ In addition, France, Germany, Italy, Romania, and Sweden undertook steps to make public information about the pandemic available to people with disabilities.⁴⁹

2. **Developing responses with public input.** Public participation in designing COVID-19 responses bolsters their efficacy, while encouraging compliance with measures that may be disruptive or inconvenient. Scotland published a Route Map that describes an evidence-led, transparent, and phased approach to varying restrictions, and it releases supporting evidence to inform external review.⁵⁰ Other countries utilized technology to encourage public participation. French parliamentarians opened a platform designed to collect citizen input on the way forward after the pandemic subsides.⁵¹ In Lithuania and Germany, members of the government, corporate sector, start-up community, and civil society organized virtual "hackathons" to solicit innovative solutions to the crisis.⁵²
3. **Empowering civil society to respond to COVID-19.** Civil society—with its expertise, close ties to local communities, and experience dealing with crises—is a critical partner in combatting COVID-19. Some governments have taken steps to ensure that civil society has the resources it needs to help respond to the crisis. For example, Denmark allocated 15 million Danish Krone for Danish civil society organizations to work on COVID-19 related issues. The UK Government has matched £10 million in donations to the Disasters Emergency Committee Coronavirus Appeal, which supports the work of CSOs helping to stop the spread of the virus.⁵³
4. **Protecting peaceful protests.** In Denmark, for example, the law prohibiting gatherings explicitly exempts "opinion-shaping assemblies," such as demonstrations and political meetings, while urging organizers and participants in such gatherings to follow health recommendations regarding social distancing. Similarly, according to OSCE/ODIHR, "In Romania, the General Directorate of the Gendarmerie in Bucharest urged people not to participate in a planned assembly and cautioned them that organizing and conducting an assembly was prohibited, but in the same message published an infographic with instructions how to behave during an assembly."⁵⁴
5. **Ensuring surveillance is narrowly tailored and transparent.** Governments using digital surveillance technology based on personal data in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19 should prioritize privacy, transparency, public consultation, and narrow limits on these programs. In Norway, authorities have worked with a private company to develop an app which warns users if they have had contact with someone infected by COVID-19 and shares

⁴⁸ Page 55, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf

⁴⁹ Page 55, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf

⁵⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-scotlands-route-map-supporting-evidence-20-august-review/>

⁵¹ <https://lejourdapres.parlement-ouvert.fr/>

⁵² <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/collecting-open-government-approaches-to-covid-19/>

⁵³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-matches-another-5-million-of-donations-for-coronavirus-appeal-after-huge-public-response>

⁵⁴ Page 110, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf

anonymous movement data with the authorities. Use of the app is voluntary, users receive clear information about the purpose, storage, and nature of the data collected, and users can delete their data at any time. Similarly, a Dutch draft COVID-19 App Law extensively regulates which data will be processed and how it will be used. Under the draft, the use of the COVID-19 app must be voluntary, and it is illegal to force anyone to use the app.⁵⁵

6. **Cross-party cooperation to public health.** Germany's early success in containing the pandemic is attributable, in part, to cross-party cooperation at various levels of government.⁵⁶ Among other examples in the region, cooperation across political parties helped Denmark⁵⁷ and the Netherlands⁵⁸ respond to the pandemic.
7. **Ensuring responses are lawful and subject to oversight and review.** Legislatures have critical roles to play in developing, authorizing, and overseeing COVID-19 responses. Countries including Denmark, Estonia, Luxembourg, Norway, and Portugal, have taken steps to allow Parliaments to work efficiently and safely during the pandemic.⁵⁹

Recommendations

The following actions would help safeguard democracy in the era of COVID-19:

- Enact legislation requiring the Department of State and USAID to develop a strategy to address democracy and human rights issues in the aftermath of COVID-19, including provisions to provide support for democratic institutions, civil society, independent media, access to information, and human rights defenders. One option is H.R. 6986, the Protecting Human Rights During Pandemics Act.
- Incorporate democracy efforts into COVID-19 international emergency and recovery assistance.
- Enact legislation that will safeguard Americans from intrusive use of surveillance technologies, such as H.R. 7356, the Facial Recognition and Biometric Technology Moratorium Act.
- Enact National Emergencies Act reform legislation, such as H.R. 1755, the ARTICLE ONE Act.
- Modernize the 1938 Foreign Agents Registration Act to focus the Act on agents of foreign governments and to ensure that it enables international civil society activity and cross-border philanthropy.
- For Belarus, continue diplomatic support, both bilaterally and multilaterally, to forge a path for free and fair elections with the participation of international observers, the release of political prisoners, the cessation of violence and arrests of peaceful protestors, the accountability of

⁵⁵<https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/wetsvoorstellen/detail?cfg=wetsvoorsteldetails&qry=wetsvoorstel%3A35538>

⁵⁶<https://www.wsj.com/articles/local-practical-apolitical-inside-germanys-successful-coronavirus-strategy-11588325403>

⁵⁷<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/28/business/nordic-way-economic-rescue-virus.html>

⁵⁸ In the Netherlands, for example, the Prime Minister and Minister of Health cooperate with the chairs of 25 security regions in the COVID-19 response. The chairs are the mayors of large cities in those regions. See also <https://nltimes.nl/2020/08/04/amsterdam-rotterdam-prepare-mandatory-face-masks-certain-areas>

⁵⁹ Pages 66-67, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf

perpetrators for human rights violations, the protection of media freedom, and the safeguarding of civil society.

- Hold additional hearings on backsliding countries, the export of US technology to undermine democracy, and the projection of Chinese influence in the region.
- Support international initiatives to enable legislators, government officials, civil society representatives, and others to share lessons learned on how to protect democracy during pandemics.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Rutzen.

The chair now recognizes Ms. Pearce Laanela for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF THERESE PEARCE LAANELA, HEAD OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES, INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE

Ms. LAANELA. Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you so much for this opportunity to address you about the impact of COVID-19 on elections in Europe and Eurasia, and by choosing this topic and hearing what you have already said you are really signalling that you see this pandemic not only as a health and economic crisis but also as a governance one.

And we agree. Together, with other leading democratic organizations, including some in this panel, we have issued a call to defend democracy and we argue that this pandemic risks more than lives and livelihoods. It is threatening liberal democracy itself.

At International IDEA, we are tracking the impact of this pandemic through a series of global indexes and I can only confirm the previous speakers. We are seeing evidence of further democratic backsliding exactly as you have laid out so I will not repeat it.

I will focus on the impact on elections. Since March, countries, actually worldwide but also in this region, have been scrambling to determine whether to postpone or when to hold scheduled elections and how to do so legally, legitimately, safely.

COVID-19 is a stress test for elections. Across Europe, the pandemic has placed tremendous pressure on authorities and challenged public trust, and that is in the West and the East, North and South.

In response to these pressures, we are seeing examples of resilience and resourceful authorities and citizens adapting to radical new conditions at breakneck speed.

In Bavaria, they introduced all-postal elections in 2 weeks. We have seen examples of voters turning out even more than usual in Poland and Montenegro.

We have seen acceptance of close results in Poland and Montenegro as well, and even in North Macedonia. We have seen inspiring examples of how special voting arrangements have helped at-risk citizens vote safely across Europe.

But we are also seeing COVID elections creating controversy and confusion, and this undermines public trust. We saw anger in Poland when the initial plans for an election with an all mail-in ballot was introduced without consultation or due process.

We saw the opposition boycotts in Serbia and we have seen a decrease in turnout in most of the region except for those exceptions I said above.

Turnout, acceptance of results, and cooperation—these indicators of public trust they matter. Organizing an election is difficult even under ordinary circumstances: brutal logistics, ruthless deadlines, an army of temporary workers all under intense political scrutiny.

Now add a pandemic with the sudden need to introduce untested or scaled up voting and health measures, all under very tight timeframes.

These pressures are exposing gaps and weaknesses in legal frameworks, incapacity, and in infrastructure, and this is a prob-

lem because if election authorities fail to deliver the elections that people believe in, if the authorities fail to safeguard the elections from harm, they lose public trust.

They lose the legitimacy that is really such a precious commodity, because once it is lost it is exceptionally difficult to regain again.

And in Belarus, we have seen how elections without legitimacy can be a tinderbox that ignites underlying problems of past injustice or deep-seated societal grievances.

Now, there is no one-size-fits-all answer as to whether a country should postpone or proceed with elections or how, and there is no one precise mechanism or regulation to ensure that elections are safe or fair or credible, because building public trust, which has been severely challenged by this pandemic, requires not only operational excellence but also a common platform where the rules are fair and clear, and most importantly, fostering a sense of shared purpose for political consensus and consultation.

We need American leadership right now and we support the bipartisan or we encourage the bipartisan congressional earmarks for democracy assistance to support the courageous people on the ground who are doing it tough right now: the election managers, the observers, and the advocates for reform.

Thank you so much.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Laanela follows:]



COVID-19 Impact on Elections – Written Submission

Therese Pearce Laanela, Head of Electoral Processes, International IDEA

*House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment
Hearing on Democracy and COVID-19*

Date of hearing: Thursday, September 10th, 2020

This written submission accounts for the main trends and lessons learned regarding the impact of COVID-19 on elections in Europe, Eurasia, and globally. A first annex provides general policy recommendations for holding elections during a pandemic. A second annex provides information on the democracy-related topics identified for the Committee Hearing. A third annex provides resources for further reading on the impact of COVID on democracy and elections.

The impact of COVID-19 on elections has been significant. During 2020, we have seen examples of resilient and resourceful decision-makers and election authorities adapting to radically new conditions at breakneck speed, resulting in high voter turnout, the acceptance of close results, and remarkably quick resolution of obstacles through interagency cooperation and political consensus building. We have also seen examples of opportunistic use of incumbency advantage, opposition boycotts, decreased turnout, and disregard for public health. While initially many countries did postpone elections, today the trend has shifted toward holding elections, with both health and hygiene measures as well as special voting arrangements to avoid large crowds on election day.

Electoral authorities in Europe, Eurasia, and beyond face threats to elections on many fronts – from terrorist attacks, natural disasters such as hurricanes or floods, or the deliberate undermining of elections through cyberattacks or disinformation campaigns. The COVID-19 pandemic has further challenged the electoral process and revealed pre-existing weaknesses in electoral structures and systems as countries grappled with difficult decisions on whether to postpone or hold elections, and how to do so legally, safely, and legitimately. This process has exposed infrastructure that is not fit for purpose, out-of-date legislation (as in France), sub-optimal mechanisms for cooperation with other authorities, and societal fault lines (as in Poland).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also accelerated election trends that were already underway prior to the pandemic, such as the shift away from election day polling station voting to remote and early forms of voting. This expansion of special voting arrangements, motivated by technology opportunities and efforts to enhance the convenience of voting, has added layers of both logistical difficulty and vulnerability to the integrity of the elections.

There is no one-size-fits-all answer as to whether a country should postpone or proceed with elections, and under what conditions, during this crisis. Best practices for safeguarding



elections include institutional quickness, transparency, sufficient resources, and an ability to mobilise and cooperate. A clear, transparent, and consistent communications strategy has also been essential, with successful voting countries like South Korea providing regular information to the public about both alternative and early voting arrangements as well as safety requirements at polling stations. Recommendations include:

- Careful consideration of staff and public safety, constitutional constraints and procedures, and implications for democracy—inclusion, equality and accountability;
- Logistical and legal considerations for alternative voting arrangements;
- If proceeding with an election, processes for mitigating risks;
- If postponing an election, pathways for addressing the electoral issue at hand and stringent guidelines for caretaker arrangements; and
- Public communication about the issues at stake, the reasons for the decision and the processes in place to safeguard democracy.

However, the key ingredient for success and legitimacy has proven to be trust and consensus. Problems have occurred when the main contenders did not agree on how to proceed, and this lack of consensus has led to protests and even violence. In Serbia, the government proceeded against widespread calls for postponement and resulted in the boycott by the opposition, securing a landslide for the government. While in other places, the incumbent has wanted to delay elections against opposition wishes in order to extend its grip on power.

Citizens should never have to choose between their health and their franchise. The United States, along with its EU partners, should support and bolster transparent, inclusive decision-making processes with regard to holding safe elections during COVID-19, building upon lessons learned.



Annex A: Technical Considerations for Holding Elections under COVID-19

This annex is extracted from the International IDEA Technical Paper on [Elections and COVID-19](#).

The global spread of COVID-19 (the novel coronavirus disease) has profoundly impacted the delivery of public services and routine events that are integral to inclusive societies. Electoral processes are one such event.

The opportunity for a society to confirm officials in elected office or remove them, within a constitutionally defined timeframe, is a pillar of democratic values and standards. The process of doing this is a communal one, and communal events intrinsically bring people together—a process that is contrary to the informed advice for limiting the transmission of a virus, such as the one that causes COVID-19.

Decisions must be made to ensure democratic institutions function as they ordinarily would do, during extraordinary times, such as the outbreak of a global health pandemic. This Technical Paper offers an initial overview of key points for electoral administrators, governments and civil society organizations on administering elections amid the continued spread of COVID-19.

Introduction

The spread of communicable diseases such as COVID-19, and the measures to contain the virus imposed by governments and state agencies, have both constitutional and technical implications for the timing and administration of elections.

Electoral processes held under normal circumstances entail a degree of risk to both voters and poll workers. During extraordinary times, such as responding to a new and unfamiliar pandemic, the guidance issued by national public health authorities on the movement of people should inform the decisions taken by governments and electoral management bodies (EMBs) to either postpone or hold an election. Consideration should also be given to the safe conduct of activities throughout the entire electoral cycle (voter registration, staff recruitment and training, candidate nomination, political campaigning, procurement and electoral dispute resolution).

Restrictions placed on free movement will naturally affect an electoral process. Revised health and safety guidance can be incorporated into the administration of an election to protect election staff and voters, but the extent to which it is possible is dependent on the financial resources of the EMB and the time between the introduction of the new health and safety routines and the election.

EMBs must identify and assess the feasibility of implementing any new requirements without compromising the integrity or legitimacy of an election. Cooperation between different state agencies should take place and the consultation outcome should inform any decisions taken.



Decisions must balance the risk of holding an election through voting in person in a polling station with the potential health implications of bringing people together in a confined space, against alternative voting methods, and the impact postponing an election would have on democratic standards. New and untested logistical arrangements will pose increased challenges in addition to existing arrangements, such as EMB mandates expiring, new procedures not complying with existing regulations or contracts with vendors, or an allocated budget being withdrawn.

Legislative elections were held during the Ebola epidemic in Liberia in 2014, with some urban areas exempt from participating. Similarly, conflict-affected countries, such as Pakistan in 2018, have not held elections in certain regions because of insecurity. In March 2020, Italy, Spain and then France restricted citizens' movement as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Local elections in France were held, but with a much lower turnout than predicted or in previous elections, while a referendum on constitutional reform in Italy was indefinitely postponed.

[Key considerations for planning an election](#)

[The constitutional significance of an election](#)

Elections are held at national, subnational and supranational levels. Some elections are constitutionally or politically critical, serving as a 'mechanism' in a sequence of events, such as a step in a peace process or a legal reform process or in securing a national budget. Some elections require a voter turnout threshold to be reached. For local elections, certain areas of a country may not be as vulnerable to public health threats as other areas, therefore less likely to experience the impact of COVID-19.

[Alternative mechanisms of campaigning](#)

Campaign rallies, door-to-door canvassing and town hall meetings are an important part of a vibrant and inclusive democracy. Electoral campaigns are, however, increasingly conducted on the Internet and through social media platforms. This medium offers an alternative option when electorates and political contestants have their movement restricted or are required to maintain a recommended physical distance between each other.

[Alternative remote voting methods](#)

Special voting arrangements that allow citizens to cast their votes remotely (i.e. not in person at a polling station)—by post, or online through a computer or mobile phone application—could mitigate health or security hazards presented by voting in person. However, financial costs may be prohibitive, implementation timeframes may be insufficient for adequate preparation, procurement and training, and legal frameworks may prohibit their introduction. Political distrust may also undermine confidence in any alternatives, while possible threats to the integrity of elections can undermine the feasibility of alternative voting options.



Existing remote voting arrangements are designed to complement, not replace, in person voting at a polling station. Remote voting methods are largely uncontrolled and, in some contexts, known to undermine the integrity of an election. From an electoral management perspective, voting in a polling station is optimal to safeguard the integrity of an election. It reduces the opportunity for irregularities, such as vote buying and coercion or family voting, while guaranteeing the secrecy and integrity of an election. Voting at a polling station can further protect and strengthen the societal value of political engagement that elections provide.

Postal voting typically requires a large-scale logistical effort, from procuring reliable postal services to recruiting ballot-counting staff, and numerous counting officers to cooperate under close supervision. Such an exercise would also be challenging to conduct safely during a viral pandemic, such as COVID-19.

Elections that are held in an area of a country with a greater number of people with an increased health risk, such as older people, remote voting may be an effective option to encourage their participation and maintain voter turnout, while limiting contagion and protecting citizens' and poll workers' health. Proxy voting within a clear legal framework could offer a further option for older people and vulnerable groups to participate in an election without being required to visit a polling station.

Voters will need to be informed about any new voting methods that have been adopted. During a period when citizens' movements are restricted, such as in response to COVID-19 in some countries, a media campaign must be tailored to reach voters through the most popular means of communication used by citizens restricted to their homes. This would include traditional channels, such as national TV and radio, but also the Internet and social media platforms.

[Will postponing or continuing to hold an election affect its legitimacy?](#)

The type and constitutional significance of an election, as well as the original date scheduled, will be a factor in the decision to postpone or continue to hold an election. The advantages and disadvantages of postponing also need to be compared to the advantages and disadvantages of continuing, as holding an election may also see reduced legitimacy.

[Loss of voice](#)

Elections are the opportunity for citizens to remove and replace a representative or government. This opportunity is lost for a period of time if an election is postponed.

[Claims of political opportunism](#)

Postponement could—and ideally should—be agreed through consensus between all political parties. The risk that incumbent governments may act unilaterally for political advantage, or



at least perceived political advantage, should be considered, to avoid undermining confidence in the process and the legitimacy of the result.

Effect on turnout

Democratic elections, at their best, are characterised by high turnout and equal levels of participation across different groups in a society. Without this, the result of an election may be shaped by some groups more than others. Holding an election during a pandemic could undermine, or be perceived as undermining, this aspect of democracy by reducing turnout. Citizens might be less likely to vote if they are concerned for their health and the health of their family members. The legitimacy of the contest may therefore be undermined by uneven participation. Those with underlying health conditions who could be more affected by COVID-19 might be especially less likely to vote. Continuing with elections could therefore make the electoral process less inclusive (James and Garnett 2020).

Effect on political debate

Democratic elections should feature a wide political campaign and broad public debate on public policy issues, which may be curtailed if citizens are restricted from moving freely. Moreover, any election campaign may be dominated by the current pandemic, preventing a comprehensive discussion on wider public policy issues from taking place.

Is postponing an election constitutional?

Many constitutions provide for the postponement of elections during emergencies. Holding an election during emergency conditions can be difficult. Holding an election during an emergency might divert resources from more urgent life-saving work. There is also a risk that an unscrupulous government could use emergency restrictions on rights (e.g. the power of administrative detention) to repress opposition candidates or critical media, which may make elections held under emergency conditions less free and fair than they should be. Alternatively, postponing elections may be decoupled from the declaration of a state of emergency, making it possible to declare a state of emergency without postponing elections, or to postpone elections without necessarily declaring a state of emergency.

Some constitutions forbid the passage of constitutional amendments during emergencies. The rationale behind this is fourfold: (a) during an emergency, hasty decisions may be made that address current fears and concerns but neglect longer-term interests in ways that may ultimately be harmful for democracy; (b) the enhanced powers of the executive and the restrictions on rights during an emergency may make it easier for the government to unfairly influence the amendment process; (c) amendment processes sometimes require an intervening general election or referendum to allow the people to express their approval or disapproval of a constitutional change, and that might be difficult to arrange during an emergency; and (d) it prevents the constitutional provisions regulating states of emergency (in terms of their effects, duration and safeguards) from being changed while the state of



emergency is in force, thereby preventing changes that could extend a state of emergency or otherwise open the way to a misuse of power.

Guidelines for operating polling stations during the COVID-19 pandemic

Actions for election officials in advance of election day:

- Voters should be offered voting methods that minimise direct contact with other people and reduce crowd size at polling stations.
- Postal voting should be encouraged if allowed in the jurisdiction.
- Early voting should be encouraged, to reduce crowds throughout the day.
- Voters planning to vote in person on election day should be encouraged to arrive at off-peak times.

Preventive actions polling workers can take for themselves and voters:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser that contains at least 60 per cent alcohol. Clearly display instructions inside the polling station.
- Avoid unnecessary handling of voter identification documents.
- Incorporate social distancing strategies, as feasible: more than 1.5 m between voters, and a limited number of voters allowed to enter the polling station at the same time.
- Provide an alcohol-based hand sanitiser with at least 60 per cent alcohol for use before and after using the pencil, the voting machine or the final step in the voting process. Consider placing the alcohol-based hand sanitiser in visible, frequently used locations such as registration desks and exits.
- Routinely clean frequently touched surfaces with household cleaning spray, including tables, doorknobs, light switches, handles, desks, toilets, taps and sinks.
- Clean and disinfect voting-associated equipment routinely, such as pencils, voting machines, laptops, tablets and keyboards.

Deciding to postpone or continue with holding an election

Proceeding with an election or postponing an election entails risks for a government, an EMB and health authorities. While postponing elections may be the most feasible and responsible option from the public health perspective, the decision can cause other risks to materialise, for example:

- reputational risks (for an organization that makes decisions, for trust in democratic processes and institutions, for international relations);
- political risks (disturbing the level playing field and undermining the incumbent or opposition);
- financial risks (budgetary implications, e.g. money invested that cannot be recovered);



- operational risks (alternative dates are not feasible because of other risks, e.g. monsoon season, winter, other events); and
- legal risks (the decision can be legally challenged).

Recommendations

Interagency consultation and communication mechanisms should be sought and include both electoral authorities and public health authorities. International IDEA recommends:

- Careful consideration of staff and public safety, constitutional constraints and procedures, and implications for democracy—inclusion, equality and accountability;
- Logistical considerations for alternative voting arrangements;
- If proceeding with an election, processes for mitigating risks;
- If postponing an election, pathways for addressing the electoral issue at hand and stringent guidelines for caretaker arrangements; and
- Public communication about the issues at stake, the reasons for the decision and the processes in place to safeguard democracy.



Annex B: The Impact of COVID-19 on Elections and Democracy in Europe

This section covers the areas of interest identified by the committee for discussion at this hearing. The information is drawn primarily from two sources: the Global Overview of COVID-19 Impact on Elections and the International IDEA Global State of Democracy database – both available on the website www.idea.int.

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world in early 2020, most countries in the world were formally democratic, with 60%, or 98 countries, democratic in 2019, and more than half (55%) of the world's population living in a democracy. However, only 17 of these countries could be classified as high-performing and half of all democracies experienced democratic erosion in 2019. Meanwhile, the share of authoritarian regimes represented only 21% of countries, down significantly from 66% in 1975.

Emergency Authorities and Restrictions on Democratic Freedoms

As a general summary, most restrictions that have been imposed on fundamental freedoms are fairly justified as part of the ongoing fight against the spread of the pandemic. Most countries in Europe have restricted the movement of its citizens, with different degrees of severity. Social distancing measures are curtailing freedoms of assembly with the objective of containing the spread of the pandemic. Yet some countries have concerning developments with regard to freedom of association and assembly (Belarus, Israel, and Serbia). Other countries, including Hungary, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, have initiated further restrictions on political parties, freedom of expression, and media during the pandemic. Seven countries (Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Israel, Russia, Slovenia, Turkey, and Ukraine) have implemented questionable measures with regard to personal data, namely by using contact tracing apps or mobile data to trace contacts for the purpose of reducing COVID-19 spread.

The use of State of Emergency declaration has been relatively widespread. A total of 64% of countries in Europe have declared it, with 65% of EU nations. Of the 28 countries that declared a SoE, 17 were EU member states and 11 non-EU countries. In total, 24 countries (86%) specified an original end date to the declaration, though some were extended. Declarations of States of Emergency have largely been done according to national legislation and procedures. In the case of Serbia, protests erupted in the country when the President planned to re-impose the State of Emergency as cases surged. As of September 5, the State of Emergency was still active in at least three countries, Armenia, Italy, and Moldova.

A significant effect of the government-led measures taken in Europe is observed in relation with freedom of expression and media integrity. At least 15 countries (34%) have passed laws or taken actions to restrict freedom of expression, including the use of the penal code to



criminalize COVID-19 misinformation (Spain), arrests of journalists and critics (Belarus), and threatening doctors with criminal cases (Moldova). In Azerbaijan, the information law was amended to prosecute those spreading “inaccurate” information about the pandemic and several journalists have been arrested. In Hungary, the penal code has been amended so the government can jail those “spreading false information.” Belarus cracked down on journalists heavily ahead of the elections, and even arrested the editor-in-chief of an online news outlet for reporting on the government’s attempts to cover up information about the pandemic. In Turkey, more than 400 people have been arrested for posting so-called “provocative” posts on social media regarding the pandemic. In total, IDEA’s COVID Monitor finds that 14% of countries in Europe have concerning developments when it comes to freedom of expression.

Elections in Europe

Election dates have been altered in 69% of the cases in Europe, with 46% of elections postponed and 23% postponed and then held. Elections in Poland and Serbia are among the most affected in Europe. Belarus elections were held in the midst of the pandemic. Belarus’ strategy towards the pandemic has been to downplay its risks while simultaneously using it as an excuse to further suppress the opposition.

Elections Held

Between February 21 and August 31 2020, at least 56 countries and territories around the globe have held national or subnational elections. In Europe, there have been 19 elections held, 13 of which were national.

Country	EU member state	Event description	Election Status
Croatia	EU country	Parliamentary Elections	Held on schedule
Czech Republic	EU country	Senate by-elections	Postponed then held
Ireland	EU country	General Elections	Held on schedule
Poland	EU country	Presidential elections	Postponed then held
Slovakia	EU country	General Elections	Held on schedule
Spain	EU Country	Regional Parliament Elections (Galizia and Basque Country)	Postponed then held
Belarus	Non-EU country	Presidential elections	Held on schedule
Iceland	Non-EU country	Presidential elections	Held on schedule
Israel	Non-EU country	Legislative elections	Held on schedule
Montenegro	Non-EU country	Parliamentary election	Held on schedule
North Macedonia	Non-EU country	Parliamentary	Postponed then held
Russia	Non-EU country	Referendum	Postponed then held
Serbia	Non-EU country	General elections	Postponed then held
Ukraine	Non-EU country	By-election (SMD No. 179 in the Kharkiv region, 15 March 2020)	Held on schedule



For these elections, all countries enacted health and safety measures for voters and polling officials. Protective measures included personal protective equipment (PPE) for polling staff, such as face shields, medical gloves, and protective clothing, as well as obligatory masks and/or vinyl gloves for voters entering polling stations. For polling stations, electoral management bodies have also provided hand sanitizer, sanitizing tissues, contactless thermometers, plexiglass screens, and tape rolls. Health and safety procedures also have included regular disinfection of surfaces touched by voters and other people inside polling stations, regular airing of polling station premises, and not covering tables with cloth or other absorbent materials. Other measures included mandatory temperature checks for voters before entering polling stations, extended opening hours, dedicated time for voting for vulnerable groups, and limits on the number of people allowed entry at the same time. Many of these health and safety measures were introduced in collaboration with national health authorities.

Several European countries also used special voting arrangements -- including early voting (North Macedonia, Russia), postal voting (Styria/Austria, Bavaria/Germany, Poland), mobile voting (Russia), proxy voting (France), and remote Internet voting (Russia) -- in order to reduce crowds on election day and lower the risk of infection.

For the local elections in **France** (March 15, 2020 and June 28, 2020), proxy voting as a special voting arrangement was simplified. Postal voting, which was abolished in France in 1975, was also explored as an option but rejected. In the end, voter turnout dropped to 51.9% compared with the 2015 local government election when the voter turnout was 62.9%.

For the first round of local elections in Bavaria, **Germany** (March 15, 2020), voting methods included in-person voting at polling stations (with certain health precautions) and more flexible postal voting. During the runoff (March 29, 2020), the pandemic reached its climax and state officials decided to hold an all-postal voting election. Questions were raised about the legality of this decision. After a negotiated process in the state parliament, which included all political parties, a clause on postal voting was added to the Bavarian Infection Protection Law. In both rounds, voter turnout was slightly higher than during the last local elections, at 58.8% and 59.5% respectively.

The initiative of the ruling party was to hold the presidential election in **Poland** exclusively by postal voting. Preparations for an all postal vote were underway and the date for the election was set for May 10, 2020 without waiting for the respective legislation to be adopted by the parliament and bypassing the National Election Commission. The government's determination to proceed with the May postal election brought Poland to the brink of a political and institutional crisis. In the face of growing criticism at home and abroad, a compromise was brokered. The election scheduled for May 10 did not take place, enabling the scheduling of a new election date of June 28 (first round) and July 12 (second round). The special election act adopted on June 2, introduced several changes, including the option for all voters, in Poland or abroad, to vote by post. This voting method was used by only a small



percentage of the voting population (185,000 out of 30.2 million for the first round) as most voters decided to vote in-person. The voter turnout for the 2020 presidential election was 68.2%, which was high compared to 55.3% during the 2015 presidential elections.

Elections Postponed

Between February 21 and August 31, 2020, 24 countries and territories in Europe postponed national and subnational elections and referendums.

Country	EU member state	Event description	Election Status
Czech Republic	EU country	Senate by-elections	Postponed then held
France	EU country	Overseas advisers and consular	Postponed with no new date
Poland	EU country	Presidential elections	Postponed then held
Italy	EU country	Referendum	Postponed and rescheduled
Gibraltar* (British Overseas Territory)	British Overseas Territory	Referendum	Postponed with no new date
Guernsey* (UK Crown Dependency)	UK Crown Dependency	General Elections	Postponed and rescheduled
Armenia	Non-EU country	Referendum	Postponed with no new date
North Macedonia	Non-EU country	Parliamentary	Postponed then held
Russia	Non-EU country	Referendum	Postponed then held
Serbia	Non-EU country	General elections	Postponed then held
Switzerland	Non-EU country	Federal Referendums on immigration, hunting and tax	Postponed and rescheduled

*Gibraltar and Guernsey are considered here as part of the UK.



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Mr. KEATING. Well, thank you very much for your testimony.

The chair now recognizes Ms. Rohozińska. Thank you for being here.

STATEMENT OF JOANNA ROHOZIŃSKA RESIDENT PROGRAM DIRECTOR, EUROPE, INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

Ms. ROHOZIŃSKA. Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you at this dynamic time.

The following is a summary of my written testimony.

The COVID-19 pandemic and attendant infodemic exposed and exacerbated transparency and governance gaps across Europe and Eurasia.

The pandemic was and continues to be and unprecedented stress test for democratic resilience, one that the Belarusian regime has failed spectacularly, demonstrating the impotence and lack of sustainability inherent in authoritarian structures.

President Lukashenko is opting for repression and retrenchment over engagement and dialog. Yet, despite this, the Belarusian nation has been borne and we are all in awe.

What distinguishes democracies is their ability to critically self-examine, learn lessons, adapt to become more resilient to better serve the interest of the people. Distrust, like disinformation, thrives when there is a perceived lack of transparency and accountability, and ultimately paralyses the State.

As the number of infections rose, European authorities found that they not only had to deal with an evolving public health crisis but also with a surge of dis- and misinformation that actively undermined efforts to ensure public compliance with continued measures.

By mid-March, the EU's External Action Service concluded that the disinformation could have a direct impact on public health and security and began more closely tracking and reacting to the infodemic, particularly narratives coming from Russian and Chinese official and State-backed actors.

However, there is a positive. There is new impetus to improve accountability and transparency, to increase public trust in institutions on the national and EU levels.

The pandemic caused disinformation to jump the proverbial fence from a security issue to being understood as posing a physical threat to the whole of society and thus requiring a whole of society response.

Crucially, there is an even greater appreciation for the need to engage nongovernmental actors both in efforts to push back against disinformation as well as to engage them and civil society as an important partner.

Authoritarian regimes like to present themselves as more resilient. Yet, COVID-19 likewise exposed governance gaps Belarus was unable or unwilling to acknowledge and remedy.

By continuing to deny the existence of COVID-19 and advising the use of vodka as a preventative treatment while people were becoming gravely ill and dying, Alexander Lukashenko lost public trust and undermined his image as benevolent father of the Belarusian. It also directly contravened one of the core pillars of

his social contract whereby State-sponsored benefits are offered in exchange for political apathy.

After 26 years in power, Lukashenko, clearly, lost touch with the source of his legitimacy, the Belarusian people. He failed to appreciate that human society by its nature is not stagnant.

Belarusian society has transformed, as have its expectations toward its leaders. Though the State eventually rallied its considerable resources to contain the virus, it was too little too late.

His failure to act created the impetus for civic society to civic engagement by nontraditional actors, drawing in the business community, notably, the IT sector, and united society in common cause.

Belarusian citizens, for the first time, took to the ballot box as a means of political expression. The 80 percent margin of victory was too much to swallow. The blatant falsifications of official election results as well as every move away from post-election dialog further chips away at the regime's legitimacy and options.

The ongoing protests are historic for their size, scale, constancy, and duration. The violent crackdowns on protestors have exposed the brutality that the regime has been keeping in check as it courted the U.S. and the EU.

Previously, violence and arrests effectively cowed dissent. This time it has fuelled it—drawing more people into the streets. The role and prominence of women both in the election and protests has been a game changer.

As candidates, muses, and as protestors, Belarus's women have shown they are a force to be reckoned with, another challenge to Lukashenko's misogynist culture.

We are witnessing the birth of a new form of civic nationalism, rallying around calls for good governance, transparency, and accountability as well as State sovereignty and independence.

Though it is not clear how the protests will end, there is no going back. The EU and the U.S. must above all respect and support the will of the Belarusian people.

Lukashenko must be held responsible for his choices and actions. Coordinating strategies with trans-Atlantic allies should be a priority and include calls for dialog, immediate release of political prisoners, and support for the political opposition's demands for holding new elections under international supervision and beginning negotiations on a post-Lukashenko transition, also increasing long-term support to democracy building efforts and introducing targeted economic sanctions.

Support for democracy requires patience as well as long-term commitment to a vision. This has been made possible with the support of Congress to IRI and the family.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Rohozińska follows:]

**Tale of Two Pandemics: How COVID-19 exposed
governance gaps in authoritarian states**

TESTIMONY OF: Joanna Rohozińska,
Resident Program Director Europe

U.S. HOUSE Foreign Affairs COMMITTEE ON Protecting
Democracy During COVID-19 in Europe and Eurasia and the
Democratic Awakening in Belarus
10 September 2020

Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, and other members of the committee: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment to address the importance of Protecting Democracy During COVID-19 in Europe and Eurasia and the Democratic Awakening in Belarus. I would like to thank my colleagues who oversee the Belarus portfolio in the Eurasia division of the International Republican Institute (IRI) for their support and input in preparing this testimony.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and attendant *infodemic* exposed and exacerbated transparency and governance gaps across Europe and Eurasia. The pandemic was – and continues to be – an unprecedented stress test for democratic resilience, one that the Belarusian regime has failed spectacularly, demonstrating the impotence and lack of sustainability inherent in authoritarian structures. Spontaneous civic activism filled the gap left by the state's failure to address or even acknowledge the pandemic, which exposed how disconnected the country's leadership was from the concerns of its citizens. Suddenly, more than two decades since coming to power, *batka* – Lukashenka's nickname which means father in Belarusian – was no longer the fatherly protector of the nation. He was an authoritarian relic of the Soviet past that the Belarusian people have collectively transcended. What distinguishes democracies from other forms of government is their ability to learn lessons, adapt and evolve to become more resilient and better serve the interest of the people. So far, President Lukashenka is instead opting for repression and retrenchment. Despite these authoritarian tactics the Belarusian nation has been born and garnered admiration from all corners of the world.

COVID-19 – Challenges and Responses

In Europe, as elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed institutional and governance inefficiencies that undermined the efforts of states to address the public health crisis and further eroded public confidence in the government. The full fallout, both in terms of political competitions as well as long-term public health consequences, remains to be seen. However, the impact on public trust, elections and electoral processes around the European continent has already been felt as the often-criticized handling of the crisis dominated political discourse on the individual state, as well as EU-wide levels. As the number of infections rose, authorities found they not only had to deal with an evolving public health crisis but also an attendant surge of dis- and mis-information that in some places actively undermined efforts to ensure public compliance with proscribed efforts to contain the virus.¹ According to the OECD, trust in government² is key to its ability to effectively implement policy and maintain social cohesion. Moreover, a "government's values, such as high levels of integrity, fairness and openness of institutions are strong predictors of public trust. Similarly, government's competence - its responsiveness and reliability in delivering public services and anticipating new needs - are crucial for boosting trust in institutions." As elaborated below – Lukashenka lost public trust by continuing to deny the

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf

² <https://www.oecd.org/governance/trust-in-government.htm>

existence of COVID-19 and advising the use of vodka as a preventative treatment while people were becoming gravely ill and dying.

Infodemic

Disinformation thrives in an environment of fear, uncertainty and mistrust. It can be targeted, malicious in intent and driven externally, but also organic. Influence operations, including the spread of mis- and dis-information have long been part of the arsenal of competition among political actors. Whether the aim is to propagate a certain position or to sow uncertainty, ultimately the effect is an erosion of social cohesion and public trust in the authorities. And today's unprecedented global pandemic offered fertile ground for the transmission of these societal ills.

However, there were also positive developments. Prior to the pandemic, although awareness of the challenges malicious disinformation poses increased, it was still largely contained to specific interest circles. However, COVID-19 caused such perceptions to jump the proverbial fence from defense and security concerns to those revolving around a genuine existential crisis to societies worldwide, spurred by the disinformation-fractured social fabric. Another positive outcome was the realization that the threat and challenge could only be met with a whole of society response. A number of governments, as well as EU institutions, understood the need to engage non-governmental organizations,³ including several members of IRI's [Beacon Network](https://www.tribeaconproject.org/),⁴ to push back against the flood of conspiracy theories and disinformation. This not only entailed identifying and debunking false information but also recognizing that civil actors enjoyed greater trust among the general population and therefore were more effective in ensuring compliance than government agencies.

The European Union's External Action Service concluded by mid-March that disinformation could have a "direct impact on public health and security."⁵ In response, its StratCom division began publishing a series of reports tracking the narrative arc of the infodemic, particularly from the Russian and Chinese "official and state-backed" actors targeting audiences in the EU and its neighborhood with misinformation and conspiracy narratives.⁶ The upshot was that while the themes of disinformation revolved around the health crisis, they essentially repeated earlier narratives that sought to erode trust in public institutions and question the ability of democracies to serve their citizens or – in other words – to deliver. Distrust, like disinformation, thrives when there is lack of transparency and perceived lack of accountability that ultimately renders the state ineffectual. In the context of COVID-19, the stakes of distrust-fueled lack of public compliance with health measures were very high. Thus, the need to identify and close governance gaps in order to regain public confidence and increase democratic resilience have taken on a new impetus and gained traction in policy circles within the EU. A crucial component of this became increasing transparency and accountability, including the need for greater civil society engagement.⁷

³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/coronavirus/fighting-disinformation/>

⁴ <https://www.tribeaconproject.org/>

⁵ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/category/blog/eeas-special-reports/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desi-policy-brief-74-resilient-institutions-in-times-of-crisis-transparency-accountability-and-participation-at-the-national-level-key-to-effective-response-to-covid-19/>

Broken Social Contract and New Demand for Accountability in Belarus

Aliaksandr Lukashenka has maintained his regime for 26 years based on the legitimacy of his image as a benevolent father of the Belarusians. He protected the interests and well-being of his people and in return they implicitly consented to not questioning the methods used to maintain stability and order. His legitimacy was lost in the course of the recent presidential election campaign and the blatant falsification of official election results. Each subsequent move away from post-election dialogue backed the regime further into a corner and chipped away at both its legitimacy and its options. In the immediate aftermath of the election, Lukashenka could have walked away from office with some credibility to assert his legacy as father of the modern independent Belarusian state. Instead, he now seems set on destroying it.

Belarus has witnessed almost continuous protests since the Central Election Commission handed the victory to Lukashenka. Few question that the elections were fraudulent and not representative of the will of the people of Belarus. Consequently, the violent crackdown on protesters in the days that followed exposed the brutality the regime had been keeping somewhat in check the past few years as it courted the US and EU in its ongoing attempts to balance between its eastern and western neighbors. The size, scale, consistency and duration of the protests have caught many by surprise, not the least the Belarusian regime itself. This raised the question of what had changed in a country many characterized as a stagnant Soviet-era theme park with a repressed democratic opposition and an unchallenged dictator who guaranteed the country's stability cherished above all by its citizens and the international community.

What was different this time was that ironically – given his populist predilection and roots – Lukashenka clearly lost touch with the source of his legitimacy, the Belarusian people. And perhaps succumbing to the hubris that often seems to be the undoing of authoritarian leaders, he failed to appreciate that human society by its nature is not stagnant. Over the past 26 years, Belarusian society has transformed as have its expectations towards its leaders. But Lukashenka's blind mishandling of the COVID-19 epidemic seemed to have turned the tide for many. His insistence to hold Victory Day celebrations (the only other post-Soviet state to do so this year was Turkmenistan) undermined his image as the protector of Belarusians, exposing him instead to criticism that he cared more for his public image than the welfare of vulnerable war veterans. Moreover, Lukashenka's callous disregard for the health and safety of citizens by first denying and then underplaying the pandemic, directly contravened one of the core pillars of his 'social contract'⁸ with the people, whereby state-sponsored benefits are offered in exchange for political apathy. Though the state eventually rallied its considerable resources to contain the virus, the intermittent period was enough to raise public ire and launch unprecedented civic mobilization efforts that would roll its momentum into the election race. Additionally, roused by a fresher, more diverse and more viable slate of opposition candidates, the Belarusian citizens for the first time took to the ballot box as a means of political expression.

COVID-19 as driver of social cohesion

There has been an uptick in public protests in Belarus in recent years, usually localized or addressing specific topics, such as the parasite tax (a controversial law obliging unemployed

⁸ <http://balticworlds.com/the-covid-19-pandemic-in-belarus-with-the-social-contract/>

people to pay taxes as punishment for unemployment), also indicating the country was perhaps not as stagnant as it appeared from outside and that slowly the public's relations to its government was changing. The state's failure to act against the pandemic created the impetus for civic engagement by non-traditional actors and set the stage for what followed.⁹ As reports spread of medical staff lacking adequate equipment and the state continued to underreport infections, there was a flourishing of efforts to support the medical community from online fundraising efforts, to 3D mask printing, to school teachers sewing cloth masks. Support for the medical workers and the country's most vulnerable also drew in the business community, most notably within the burgeoning IT sector,¹⁰ and united society in a common cause. The belated and somewhat blasé response by authorities to the pandemic merely stoked public anger, as did the regime's behavior in the months leading up to the elections. Opposition candidates had always been arrested after elections, not before. Similarly, the preemptive moves clamping down on independent media and opposition actors, while rather par for the course, were unusual in their timing and intensity.

The emergence of Sviatlana Tikhonouskaya as the main opposition candidate, reluctantly assuming the mantle after the arrest of her husband, a famed video blogger who ran in the election prior to his arrest, served as a catalyst for public discontent and rejection of the status quo. This is evidence of the birth of a form of civic nationalism rallying around calls for good governance, transparency and accountability, as well as state sovereignty and independence. Ironically, the emphasis on national sovereignty has been one of Lukashenka's leitmotifs of recent years as he balanced the country's interests between Russia and the West. That balancing act is now done as he his future is firmly in the hands of Russia.

Just as the state's action (or inaction) vis-a-vis COVID-19 mobilized citizens to the polls, so too did its egregious behavior on election day send people into the streets to protest. It is hard to gauge the degree to which there was a genuine expectation that the Central Election Commission would break with tradition and accurately tabulate election results. However, the margin by which the incumbent was claimed to have won (80%) was disingenuous enough to further erode support for the regime and spark public outrage. Likewise, the disproportional violence and mass arrests during protests immediately following the elections that in the past had so effectively cowed dissent, this time simply drew more people into the streets.

Women changing the game

The role and prominence of women both in the election and protests has been a game changer. Lukashenka's dismissal of the viability of a female challenger, allowing Tikhonouskaya to register as a candidate and letting her campaign to roll through the country largely undisrupted, reflects the regime's inherent misogyny. It also marks another point at which Lukashenka failed to read the public mood until it was too late. The post-election women's protests also throw a wrench into the security services' usual crowd dispersal tactics, both in terms of their hesitancy to use physical force against women and being powerless when women interfere to prevent the harsher treatment of their male compatriots. The apparent abduction of Maria Kolesnikova, one last of the trio of women who led the campaign to have remained in the country, reportedly by masked men in Minsk this past Monday (7 September) could be a sign of the regime's further desperation and lack of

⁹ <https://capcivilsociety.eu/news/civil-society-news/localcorrespondent-opinion-how-covid-19-changed-life-in-belarus.html>
¹⁰ <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/eu-in-action/stories/how-techies-belarus-help-prevent-spread-covid-19-eu-help>

options. Reports of her subsequent resistance to forced deportation into Ukraine the following morning, by tearing up her passport, creates a dilemma for the regime.

Looking ahead

Though it is still not clear how or when the ongoing wave of protests will end, it is clear there is no return to status quo ante. Lukashenka's position is untenable, but this is clearly not a lesson he is learning. While there have been resignations (reportedly 900 officers resigned from the OMON, a special police unit), it seems overall the administration and security forces have decided to continue supporting the regime rather than opting for the negotiated transition proposed by the opposition. Perhaps they are sticking with the devil they know due to the fear that transition will seek to call them to account. There has also been a notable increase in the presence of Russian nationals, particularly in Belarusian State media, which saw a number of resignations and strikes, as well as in security services. Notably, it is often RT journalists who are replacing them and the outlet's presence in Belarus is growing. It was one of the few foreign media not stripped of accreditation, whereas all independent local and Western media were banned. Indeed, Lukashenka officially thanked RT for the support and friendly coverage,¹¹ and Margarita Simonyan, RT's editor in chief/lead ideologue is currently in Minsk. Lukashenka has few options but to turn to Moscow (as well as China and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States) openly for support. But this is the choice he has made and with every decision to crush and punish protests, instead of seeking to engage in dialogue, he makes a conscious choice of where he is taking his country.

The EU and US must above all respect the will of the Belarusian people and its calls for democratic governance, accountability and transparency. Lukashenka must accept responsibility for his choices and actions. His temperament makes him an uncomfortable nuisance in the eyes of Moscow, which would likely also welcome his departure. However, the replacement they might propose won't be better for Belarus and simply serve the Kremlin's geopolitical interest of having a strongly Pro-Russian leader in place.

Recommendations

For the international community, the main takeaway is that support for democracy requires patience, as well as a long-term commitment and vision. The crowds that come out to the streets of cities, towns and villages of Belarus are calling for accountability, transparency, fairness and respect. And that in part is thanks to the work of IRI, along with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), Solidarity Center and National Endowment for Democracy (NED), as well as IRI's European partners.

The Civic Forum of the Eastern Partnership conducted a monitoring mission to Belarus in August and formulated a series of recommendations to the EU and member states¹². Additionally, the EU and its individual members continue to make strong statements of the state of affairs in Belarus. Coordinating strategies with transatlantic allies should be a priority and include:

- Calls for dialogue between the authorities and representatives of the Belarusian people.

¹¹ <https://www.polishnews.co.uk/alyksandr-lukashenka-thanks-rt-tv-for-the-support-of-belarusian-state-media/>

¹² <https://eap-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/EaPCSF-Monitoring-Mission-report-Belarus-political-societal-developments-elections.pdf>

- Calls for immediate release of political prisoners, as well as dismissal of any pending cases, charges and fines against those detained.
- Support the political opposition's demands for holding new elections under international supervision and beginning negotiations on a post-Lukashenka transition.
- Increasing long-term support to democracy-building efforts, including providing institutional assistance to independent media, particularly those within the country, and fostering civic activism in the country's regions.
- Broadening of sanctions against the Lukashenka regime and its supporters.
- Reintroducing targeted economic sanctions.
- Withdrawing funding to programs involving state institutions, including professional training exchanges.

Conclusion

I am grateful for the opportunity to represent an organization that is helping to promote good governance in Europe and Eurasia and around the world, with the ongoing generous support of the Congress. I am proud to have previously long served with NED and worked with NDI, CIPE and Solidarity Center on Belarus and the region.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you for your testimony and for highlighting the role of women. It is, indeed, a game changer, not just in Belarus but around the world, and we need look no further than Afghanistan and see the role of women and how that has changed their society, how important that is as well.

So the chair now recognizes Mr. Fly for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JAMIE FLY, SENIOR FELLOW, SENIOR ADVISOR TO THE PRESIDENT, GERMAN MARSHALL FUND OF THE UNITED STATES (FORMER PRESIDENT OF RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY)

Mr. FLY. Thank you, Chairman Keating, Representative Yoho, and other members of the committee. I am glad you are holding this hearing today and I appreciate you inviting me to testify.

I am going to briefly summarize parts of my written testimony. The other witnesses, I think, have already done a good job of describing the way that authoritarians across Eurasia have responded to the pandemic and tried to exploit it, as well as the efforts of external actors including China and also Russia to take advantage of this moment. So I will skip over that.

I am going to talk a lot about the role of independent media during this moment that we are in. In the 21st century, the information domain is where powers are attempting to shape their narratives.

It is where authoritarians are fighting to retain their power and where masses, as we are now seeing in Belarus, are going to organize and overthrow illegitimate rule.

Given the centrality of information in all of our modern societies, it is more important than ever to the fate of democracy that we in the United States modernize the tools that helped win the cold war and achieve victory over Soviet communism.

And I was reminded by the chairman's comment about Lech Walesa about his quote about the organization that I recently led, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, when he was asked about Radio Free Europe's role in supporting solidarity.

And he said, "Would there be Earth without the sun," which I think is very true today in terms of RFERL's role in fledgling democracies across Eurasia.

Until June I was honored to serve as president and CEO of this organization, which is a congressionally funded broadcaster that reaches 38 million people across 23 countries in 27 languages.

RFERL and its sister networks play an important role during normal times, and during the pandemic have been central to providing objective news and information to citizens across the region as they try to hold governments accountable for their actions.

What I witnessed while at RFERL was governments from Russia to Belarus to Hungary to Central Asia using the pandemic to attack the work of an independent press. They attempted to criminalize free speech and journalism about the pandemic through emergency legislation under the guise of public health controls.

Regimes attempted to justify mass—investments in mass surveillance technology. They developed new accreditation requirements for journalists, and in countries like Russia, government regulation of media content was expanded.

To counter these renewed threats to the free flow of information across the region, I outline in my testimony several recommendations.

First, I think we need to do more to push back against authoritarian restrictions on media. We should prioritize this issue in bilateral engagements with governments across the region and use punitive measures such as sanctions to back up our engagement when necessary.

Second, I spend a significant amount of time in my written testimony discussing potential reforms to U.S. international broadcasting. The organization that I led, RFERL, is just one of several networks that are congressionally funded.

The taxpayers currently spend about \$800 million a year on these outlets. Yet, unfortunately, I believe we are still falling behind other actors in this space.

The recent leadership changes at the U.S. Agency for Global Media and the arrival of a new CEO of that agency, which ultimately led to the removal of all of the network heads, including me from RFERL, have put journalists at risk of political interference and greater pressure from the governments that they are attempting to cover on a daily basis.

Third, we should demand reciprocity with adversary funded and directed media outlets. Kremlin-controlled media like Russia Today and Sputnik, and increasingly Chinese government media outlets enjoy significant access to Western audiences. Yet, U.S.-funded outlets often struggle to get access to audiences in Russia and China.

Finally, we need to build on recent initiatives like RFERL's return to Central Europe. Just earlier this week RFERL launched a digital Hungarian service, which follows on RFERL's recent return to Bulgaria and Romania last year.

These efforts are important to ensure that the media landscape in EU member States and NATO allies is not weakened and subject to external infiltration by countries such as Russia and China, and I think that the U.S. should do more with Europe to cooperate on these projects.

In conclusion, the importance of the information space, I think, has been highlighted, as others have pointed out, by recent developments in Belarus. We need to do all we can to surge support for independent media in Belarus just as Russia is trying to surge support for Belarusian State media.

We should do more to ensure that the people of Belarus and others across the region have access to basic information about their government and the policies affecting their lives. Redoubling our support for them and freedom of the press is key to ensuring a democratic future for this vital region.

Thank you for your attention.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Fly follows:]

Jamie Fly
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German Marshall Fund of the United States
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House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment

September 10, 2020 Hearing on “Protecting Democracy During COVID-19 in Europe and Eurasia and the Democratic Awakening in Belarus”

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

The world has not witnessed a global, life altering event like the coronavirus pandemic for more than a century. There are facets of modern life that will likely be fundamentally changed, even as the virus is brought under control. Yet certain trends that were underway well before the pandemic remain. One is the growing importance of information in our societies. Information is more accessible than ever, yet access to unbiased, objective information is increasingly difficult to obtain. Across Eurasia, information is jealously guarded and wielded by authoritarians attempting to maintain control. Yet it is also being weaponized by average citizens in the region seeking freedom from oppression and better lives for themselves and their children.

Thomas Jefferson famously wrote, “our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.”¹ The free flow of information that derives from a vibrant press is essential to the functioning of democracy. Citizens in a democracy base their decisions about who to vote for and whether to continue to place their trust in their government on such information. This is why authoritarians attempt to control information, subjugate independent media, and shape the media narrative to their advantage through outlets of state propaganda.

Freedom House describes Eurasia as “long one of the worst-performing regions” in its latest edition of *Freedom in the World*, its annual assessment of the state of freedom globally. Even in democracies in the region, democratic norms and institutions have been under challenge by the forces of populism.² Prior to the pandemic, authoritarians were under pressure in many countries across the region due to sclerotic economies, corruption, mismanagement, and abuse of authority. From protests challenging Putin’s attempts to make himself President of Russia for life, to growing dissent in parts of Central Asia, the pandemic and the fumbled response of many governments has added fuel to an already burning fire. When citizens attempt to take more responsibility for their governance, it is a positive thing, yet the pandemic has the

¹ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Currie, January 28, 1786, accessible at https://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.005_0216_0218/?sp=1.

² Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy,” p. 23 https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf.

potential to give authoritarians more influence as they use a public health emergency to impose broader restrictions on society.

These developments are occurring as America's strategic competitors are jostling for influence across Eurasia, hoping to stall the advance of democracy and to further their economic goals. First and foremost, Russia, with its cultural connections and shared past with much of the region, still exerts significant influence. China looms on the horizon, and Iran and others are attempting to expand their ties. The region contains populations vulnerable to extremism and radicalization, an ongoing concern. For all these reasons, it is in the interest of the United States to assist fledgling democracies in Eurasia in their transition into full-fledged members of the European community and avoid their exploitation by other powers.

In the twenty-first century, the information domain is where powers are attempting to shape their narratives. It is where authoritarians fight to retain their power and where the masses are going to organize and overthrow illegitimate rule. Given the centrality of information in our modern societies, it is more important than ever that we modernize the tools that helped win the Cold War and reduced Soviet communism to President Reagan's "ash heap of history."

For this reason, I focus this testimony on the impact of the pandemic on free speech and freedom of the press. For much of the last year, I witnessed the centrality of these freedoms to the maintenance of democracy and its expansion throughout this region every day from my perch at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) in Prague. As Americans and Europeans, we are not devoting enough time and attention to these challenges and we are running the risk of ceding space to those who seek to control and limit access to information rather than expand that access and shore up the ability of all of the people of this vital region to, in the words of Vaclav Havel, "live in truth" and expose the lies that mask the inherent fragility of authoritarian regimes.

The Pandemic's Impact on Freedom of Information

Countries across Eurasia have struggled to deal with the pandemic. It has ravaged weak health systems and tested governments' coordination abilities. Early on, authoritarians throughout the region viewed the pandemic as a political threat, not just a public health problem. They acted accordingly, often denying the existence of the virus or disputing its arrival in their countries.³ Independent, accurate reporting about the pandemic thus ran counter to the goals of many governments across the region.

From Russia to Belarus to Hungary to Central Asia, governments attempted to criminalize free speech and journalism about the pandemic through emergency legislation and ad hoc measures. Under the guise of public health controls, regimes

³ The strange journey of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus from COVID-denier to COVID victim is just one example but there are many others. See Mike Eckel, "Tractors, Herbs, Vodka, Saunas? Some Leaders Offer Strange, Unhelpful Advice on Warding Off COVID-19," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/coronavirus-unhelpful-advice-tractors-herbs-vodka-saunas-gurbanguly-lukashenka-vucic/30495810.html>.

have attempted to justify investments in mass surveillance technology. They developed new accreditation requirements for journalists. In some countries, bans on physical movement of citizens did not exempt journalists (as is common practice in the United States and Europe), making it difficult for journalists to meet sources, cover protests, and provide relevant information for their audiences. In places such as Russia, government regulation of media content was expanded. Demonization of journalists covering the pandemic became routine.

The pandemic also accelerated changes already underway in the business models of many media outlets. Just as local media have come under economic pressure in the United States due to the disappearance of traditional advertising revenue, the media landscape in parts of Eurasia has been fundamentally changing. In countries where a vibrant independent media developed in the decades after the fall of communism, market forces are now limiting options for consumers. As economies take a hit from lockdowns and other effects of the pandemic, media outlets in many countries across the region will be even more susceptible to political influence through government friendly corporate interests or control by external actors such as Russia and China.⁴

The pandemic also allowed these external actors to spread disinformation. Just as governments were attempting to deceive their citizens about the facts related to the pandemic, Russia, China, and Iran were attempting to use the pandemic to their geopolitical advantage. They spread conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus, blaming the United States.⁵ Once the recovery started, they spread disinformation about their own handling of the pandemic and their supposed assistance to countries in the region.⁶ They attempted to drive wedges between the United States and its European allies and to pit member states of the European Union against each other.⁷ The United States and its European allies often found themselves woefully behind in the information space, unable to get the facts out about their response to the pandemic and responding to the narratives of these actors rather than advancing their own messages.⁸

These malign efforts were successful across parts of Eurasia because countries that lack true freedom of the press and a vibrant independent media are environments in which disinformation flourishes. The best response to these challenges is for United

⁴ This is a disturbing trend affecting many advanced democracies in the region, including in some U.S. allies.

⁵ In some cases, Russian, Chinese, and Iranian narratives overlapped and were amplified by each other. See Betsy Woodruff Swan, "State report: Russian, Chinese, and Iranian disinformation narratives echo one another," *Politico*, April 21, 2020 <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/21/russia-china-iran-disinformation-coronavirus-state-department-193107> and European External Action Service Special Report Update, "Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19/Coronavirus Pandemic" April 22, 2020 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april/>.

⁶ See Dusan Stojanovic, "China's 'mask diplomacy' wins support in Eastern Europe," *Associated Press*, April 14, 2020, <https://apnews.com/76dff4b113e82d85716262895909f151>.

⁷ For one example of a campaign in Poland that was repeated in other countries across the continent, see Stanislaw Zaryn, "The Coronavirus Disinformation Campaign Against Poland," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2020 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coronavirus-disinformation-campaign-against-poland-11585509765>.

⁸ See Hans von der Burchard, Jillian Deutsch and Maïa de La Baume, "Berlin pushes back in coronavirus propaganda war," *Politico Europe*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-propaganda-war-germany-solidarity/>.

States and Europe to continue to expose these efforts but also to redouble their support for independent media in countries across the region so that citizens can get the facts for themselves and draw their own conclusions.

Policy Recommendations

Pushing Back Against Authoritarian Restrictions on Media

Given these threats to the information space across Eurasia, it is essential that the United States and its European allies commit to forcefully condemn efforts by authoritarians or external actors to control or manipulate the information environment and to prioritizing this issue in their bilateral engagements with governments across the region. The transatlantic community has leverage if it chooses to use it. Attacks on journalists should be condemned and use of accreditation restrictions and other common tools of information repression should lead to punitive measures by the United States and Europe. Countries such as Russia that are designating journalists as “foreign agents” should face punishment for such actions, including through human rights sanctions imposed on government officials involved in such decisions. Countries that receive U.S. and European assistance, such as the Central Asian states, should have some assistance made conditional on progress in this area.⁹

U.S. International Broadcasting

Among the greatest tools that the United States possesses to ensure the free flow of information is the \$800 million it spends annually on international broadcasting. In the wake of the peaceful revolutions of 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the work of entities like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America were cited by dissident leaders as key to their victory over oppression.

The reach of these networks is vast. Combined, they reach a worldwide audience of more than 350 million people.¹⁰ RFE/RL produces content in 27 languages, reaching more than 38 million people across Eurasia.¹¹ This audience comes to RFE/RL for news and information that is independent, objective and truthful. RFE/RL viewers and listeners trust its journalists to provide unbiased information about their governments and their societies that they cannot get elsewhere. I witnessed the loyalty of this audience during my time as the President of RFE/RL as I traveled throughout the region and talked to local viewers and readers of our content. It is this trust and respect for the work of these journalists that even led a group of protesters in Minsk, Belarus in August to spontaneously chant their support for Radio Svaboda, (RFE/RL’s Belarus service which has been providing news and information to the people of Belarus since 1954).¹²

⁹ Central Asia is an important market for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty but one where journalists are increasingly under pressure. See Jamie Fly, “Press freedom challenges continue in Central Asia,” <https://www.usagm.gov/2019/10/02/press-freedom-challenges-continue-in-central-asia/>.

¹⁰ See <https://www.usagm.gov/news-and-information/press-room/>.

¹¹ See <https://pressroom.rferl.org/about-us>.

¹² Information about Radio Svaboda’s work is available at <https://pressroom.rferl.org/rferl-belarusian-service-radio-svaboda>. See <https://twitter.com/franakiacorka/status/1294908760880816129?s=21> for scene from Minsk protests.

USAGM networks – all funded by Congress – have played a particularly critical role during the pandemic. They have held governments accountable for their handling of the crisis, in countries where no other independent media were able or willing to. They provided basic health information and guidance from respected international authorities to their audiences. In some instances, they revealed the first cases of infection in their broadcast countries and covered the lack of vital medical equipment and government attempts to mask deaths. Some journalists working for these broadcasters even used their own struggles with COVID to highlight the difficulties in obtaining tests or quality medical assistance and treatment. They also played a key role in exposing efforts by external geopolitical actors like Russia and China to manipulate the local information environment to their advantage by spreading conspiracy theories about the virus' origins and propaganda about their assistance to other countries.¹³

USAGM's Current Challenges

Due to the recent ascendance of new leadership, USAGM and its networks are in turmoil on many fronts. On June 15, 2020, I along with my counterparts at other networks were simultaneously fired without cause and with no prior consultation. Moreover, USAGM grant recipients – such as the Open Technology Fund whose mission to preserve and enhance internet freedom is more critical than ever – have been targeted. The broadcasters are suffering from poor morale and programs are being compromised. This all comes at a time when the United States is falling behind in this vital area. Even prior to recent developments, the networks have been continuously buffeted by debates about the appropriate role of the broadcast networks, torn between those who advocate for a greater focus on explaining American policy to the world versus the core work of journalism in societies where independent media does not otherwise exist.

USAGM and its networks have significant systemic problems which must be addressed. They have often been adversely affected by frequent changes in leadership in Washington and intermittent congressional oversight. Congress has frequently modified the International Broadcasting Act of 1994, which governs their operations. Their funding – while remaining steady because of broad bipartisan support from the Congress – is falling significantly behind the resources of other state actors. Notably, the Kremlin is outspending RFE/RL by several orders of magnitude across Eurasia. China, with even greater resources, is beginning to engage in this region, cultivating connections to local media outlets and possibly pursuing corporate ownership of some networks. If the United States wishes to remain competitive in efforts to counter disinformation, support independent media and strengthen nascent democracies across this region, it will need to increase funding for these tools of American soft power and ensure responsible, nonpartisan oversight of their work.

¹³ For an overview of RFE/RL's coverage of the pandemic, see the RFE/RL video "From the Balkans to Bishkek," June 9, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUjDsY6A30Q>.

Areas for Reform

When the International Broadcasting Act was signed into law by President Clinton, much of U.S. international broadcasting was still carried out via radio. Since then, these networks have gone through a television transformation and now are in the midst of a digital transformation. We live in a world vastly different from 1994.

It is time for Congress to fundamentally overhaul the International Broadcasting Act. Repeated attempts to modify its provisions, carried out through amendments to the National Defense Authorization Act and other bills, have left the broadcasters with an outdated and contradictory set of instructions for their work. An updated Act should clarify the role of the Federal broadcasters, such as Voice of America, to ensure that the mission of “telling America’s story” does not fluctuate from one administration to the next based on political concerns. It should also review whether a Federal agency like the U.S. Agency for Global Media is even needed in the twenty-first century and whether the mission of translating U.S. policies to foreign audiences might be more effectively carried out through the State Department’s own public diplomacy apparatus rather than through federally employed journalists at entities like the Voice of America.

As part of these reforms, I would urge Congress to make the private grantees RFE/RL, Radio Free Asia (RFA), and Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN) even more independent of the U.S. government. Their independence is essential to their credibility with their audiences. It is what attracts listeners, readers, and viewers to their content on a daily basis. The politicization of their oversight agency, the U.S. Agency for Global Media, and the undermining of their corporate boards through the actions of the new CEO of the Agency will only serve to raise questions about their independence and their ability to continue to speak truth to power. The defacto federalization of their corporate boards has also put their journalists at greater risk of being targeted for their work.

To address these issues and ensure their independence, the private grantees should be funded in a manner similar to the congressional appropriation for the National Endowment for Democracy and governed by individual bipartisan boards that are accountable for all strategic and personnel decisions. The firewall that protects these networks from the influence of U.S. government officials should be strengthened in the revised International Broadcasting Act.

Reciprocity with Adversary-funded and directed media

As Congress reforms U.S. international broadcasting, it should also work with the Executive Branch to demand greater reciprocity for state-controlled media operating within the United States. Russia, China, and other actors have learned from the U.S. successes of the Cold War era and developed their own international networks catering to American and foreign audiences. Russian state sponsored outlets are spending significant resources across Eurasia. They gain a following through slick production values that under-resourced U.S.-funded media outlets often struggle to compete with. They also use covert tactics and dispense with the norms of objective journalism. Unlike U.S.-funded media, they are not just state-funded, but also state-directed, not

maintaining the strict controls in place in the U.S. broadcasters that ensure editorial independence from the U.S. government. They also enjoy significant access to Western societies. Outlets such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik are widely available across the United States and Europe. They are available on satellite packages and in hotel rooms and have partnerships with local radio stations that beam their content throughout the democratic world.

Yet western-funded outlets face significant challenges to operating inside Russia. Journalists are harassed and they face onerous legal and administrative requirements, including most recently the possibility of being designated as “foreign agents” for their work inside Russia. Russia’s media regulator, Roskomnadzor, has increased the demands on media operating inside Russia, with a clear goal of making it impractical for truly independent media to reach their audiences.¹⁴ Looming over all of these actions are the ongoing threats by Russian authorities to create a Russian “sovereign internet” to wall off Russia from the international information space.

Democratic societies like the United States and its European allies are based on openness and transparency. Yet the tactics of Kremlin-directed media like RT and Sputnik demand greater reciprocity. U.S. officials should be more forceful in demanding greater openness from Russian officials. Why should satellite providers in the United States be allowed to offer RT when U.S.-funded media are prevented from reaching Russian citizens on satellite packages in the Russian Federation? Why should Sputnik be allowed to air its content unhindered to audiences in the Midwest when U.S.-funded outlets were long ago stripped of their broadcast licenses in Russia?¹⁵ Russian officials like to proclaim “reciprocal” treatment for Western media outlets operating inside Russia, but when it comes to audience access, there is no reciprocity. A serious conversation with Russian officials, backed up by a willingness to hold Russian broadcasters to the same operating conditions that Western outlets face inside Russia will go a long way to towards a more balanced information environment in Russia.

Obligations of Social Media Platforms

Congress and the Executive Branch need to continue to closely monitor actions by the major social media platforms that are now the gatekeepers for much of the information being consumed around the world. Their algorithms are the modern equivalent of editorial staff, in many cases immune to considerations of the public good. They have consistently been found to be amplifying the most extreme or salacious content. These platforms have also been used by authoritarians to their advantage. Content is at times restricted due to the demands of host governments and actors like Russia and China have determined how to manipulate the platforms to their advantage. These platforms have played a role in the decline of traditional media and thus should face some responsibility for the current fractious truth-free media landscape. The platforms

¹⁴ See “Russia’s Media Regulator Seeks to Tighten Restrictions on ‘Foreign Agent’ Outlets,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 23, 2020 <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-s-media-watchdog-seeks-to-tighten-restrictions-on-foreign-agent-outlets/30743951.html>.

¹⁵ See Neil MacFarquhar, “Playing on Kansas City Radio: Russian Propaganda,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/us/russian-propaganda-radio.html>.

should be encouraged to work with public broadcasters just as they are engaging traditional media in the United States and Europe to ensure that the content of these broadcasters is not drowned out by hostile actions by authoritarian regimes.¹⁶

Need for Transatlantic Cooperation

Despite the broader challenges in transatlantic relations, the shared U.S. and European interest in seeing a Europe, including the countries of Eurasia, whole, free and at peace should provide an opportunity for greater cooperation. Despite the criticisms one often hears in Europe about supposed U.S. disengagement from the region, the United States has continued to devote significant resources to civil society organizations and independent media as well as U.S.-funded media. In some areas, particularly within the European Union (EU), the United States is much more engaged than its European partners, who have shied away from issues of press freedom affecting member states due to political sensitivities. Ensuring the viability of the media sector in EU member states such as Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania should not be a task for Washington alone. These initiatives, like the newly launched RFE/RL Hungarian Service could have a significant long-term impact on the future of the EU, not just on U.S. interests.¹⁷ Joint partnerships between government-funded media in the United States and Europe should be explored and Brussels should be more willing to make the viability of the media space in EU member states an agenda item for EU deliberations before it is exploited further by Russia and China as well as anti-democratic leaders.

The Stakes

The importance of the information space and the stakes for the advance of freedom are perhaps nowhere as apparent currently as on the streets of Belarus. After denying for months the existence of a pandemic and taking little action to protect the Belarusian people, Alexander Lukashenko lost an election that he attempted to steal. After 26 years, the Belarusian people are taking their future into their hands. Yet the Lukashenko regime is responding with arrests, torture, and an information crackdown. Internet access has been sporadically shut down and journalists have been stripped of accreditation. Russia has responded by "surging" support in the information domain, flying Russian state TV technicians and journalists to Belarus to man Belarusian state outlets weakened by walkouts and staff protests.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the United States and Europe seem to be bystanders to this key aspect of the Belarusian revolution of 2020.

¹⁶ One recent positive action by the platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, has been to draw a distinction between state-funded and state-controlled media, labeling the latter as such to provide greater transparency to audiences interacting with state-controlled content online. See Facebook post on "Labeling State-Controlled Media on Facebook," June 4, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/labeling-state-controlled-media/> and "Twitter to label state-controlled news accounts," *BBC News*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53681021>.

¹⁷ RFE/RL returned to Romania and Bulgaria in 2019 and returned to Hungary on September 8, 2020. All three of these relaunched services are digital platforms. See "RFE/RL Relaunched Operations in Hungary Amid Drop in Media Freedom," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/rfe-rl-relaunched-operations-in-hungary-amid-drop-in-media-freedom/30826537.html>.

¹⁸ See Matthew Luxmoore, "After Belarusian Journalists Quit State TV, Russians Fill the Void," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 24, 2020 <https://www.rferl.org/a/after-belarusian-journalists-quit-state-tv-russians-fill-the-void/30800576.html>.

Brave journalists from congressionally funded outlets such as RFE/RL's Radio Svaboda continue to produce amazing and critical reporting, but there has been no commensurate "surge" in Western support to help assist the people of Belarus get access to information they need to engage with each other and to understand what is happening in their country.

The pandemic has revealed certain universal truths about governance, about the fragility of brittle authoritarian systems, about the impact of the secrecy in countries like China that can lead to devastating consequences for the entire world. As events in Belarus and the growing unease in Russia about Vladimir Putin's rule have shown, the authoritarian moment may finally be threatened due to frustrations with the inability of governments to deliver for their people. We should do more to ensure that these publics have access to basic information about their governments and the policies affecting their lives. Redoubling our support for freedom of speech and freedom of the press is key.

Our greatest allies are the people across this region. Even when they have been deprived of the right to freely choose their leaders, they have voted time and again through their actions, through their use of all means necessary to get access to objective journalism about what is happening in their societies, and their demands for greater freedom and transparency. We should be increasing our support for journalists who are risking their lives to provide facts to their fellow citizens. Armed with the truth, it is the people of this region, not the sclerotic regimes that currently maintain their grip on control, that will determine the future of their countries. From my observations of the audience that RFE/RL reaches every day on multiple platforms across 23 countries, they are hungry for independent news and information and ultimately share the same desire for freedom that has united Americans and Europeans over the last seventy years.

We must do more to support their cause because it is ultimately the same as ours.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Fly.

I will now recognize members for 5 minutes, and pursuant to House rules all time yielded is for the purposes of questioning our witnesses.

Because of the virtual format of this hearing, I will recognize members by committee seniority, alternating between Democrats and Republicans. If you missed your turn, please let our staff know and we will circle back to you right away. If you seek recognition, you must unmute your microphone and address the chair verbally.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes. We have heard that all democracies should critically self-examine and that is true of our own country and what we are going through.

We had hearings earlier this year. We have had a series of hearings. But we had one where Ambassador Fried made it clear that the way to approach the intervention in our elections and the interference in our elections and the attack on our elections is to be unambiguous and call people out who are doing it.

We just passed in our full committee a resolution that, indeed, did this, pointing out that Russia, not Ukraine, was responsible for attacks on our 2016 elections.

Now, we also had a whistleblower come forward in our country from the Department of Homeland Security who raised the issue that Russian interference in our election as it was an attack on candidate Biden and his mental health was suppressed. He was ordered to suppress that.

So we do this knowing that we have a responsibility here in our own country. But looking at Belarus, it is clear all of the press has been taken off the board except RT and Sputnik. They are left with that as their main source of press and they are encrypting other information.

What can we do to help countries like Belarus, you know, deal with this from the outside? How can we deal with from a democracy perspective calling out Russia for their interference in Belarus and what they are doing and have been doing in Europe and Eurasia as well?

Maybe, Ms. Pearce Laanela, if you want to start.

Ms. LAANELA. I think I am the wrong person to start because I think my colleagues know—I have been so impressed by my colleagues.

But let me just—let me tell my perspective and I think theirs will be even more important. We do not track interference as such, but what we try to do or what we believe to be true is to strengthen the institutions that need to safeguard.

So let me explain what I mean. We create institutions for a reason in our societies and that is to protect public good, something that we value, something that we treasure very, very much.

And so in the case of disinformation, for example, if we have institutions that can protect the public good of information that is correct or that is part of good and strong elections so—I am not articulating this well.

But if—institutions that are strong, what we are seeing, those that are able to safeguard against disinformation, for example, they are working in innovative ways because this isn't a challenge that existed, really, as much before social media, and one of the things

that we are seeing is a kind of interagency cooperation, a partnership between private and public that is really—has not been seen before.

Let me just take Australia as a case. But the working together with social media companies and government agencies and security agencies and election officials for rapid reaction to anything that comes in, and that kind of seamless communication between agencies, that is one of the ways in which we can protect—

Mr. KEATING. If I could interrupt and take your suggestion and allowing someone else to come in there. The idea of the rapid response to this is critical, and that came through in our other hearing.

Would any of our other witnesses like to just amplify their comments? Mr. Fly, perhaps?

Mr. FLY. Yes. Mr. Chairman, I think the challenge we face, we have tools. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has a Belarusian language service, Radio Svaboda, which has significant followers inside Belarus.

The problem is that Lukashenko, like many other authoritarians, have realized that when they face significant pressure, they should take the country offline, and Belarusian authorities have done that on a regular basis, which makes it much more difficult to communicate and allow information to spread freely.

So what they really need, outlets like Svaboda and other independent media or access to internet circumvention tools, which are also funded by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for Global Media.

But I have not seen yet from this administration a surge in financial support. There has, obviously, been moral support expressed, but you really need those sorts of tools that help media reach their audience and counteract the Russian surge that I mentioned during my testimony.

Mr. KEATING. Good. I think this theme will be continued with some of the other questions from our members. But I will now recognize Mr. Yoho from Florida, the ranking member, for his questions.

Mr. YOH0. Thank you, everybody, for doing this and for the great testimony.

I think this goes to Jamie Fly. Thank you for being here. My question to you, are we getting equal access in broadcast coverage to Belarus and Russia with organizations like VOA and RFERL as we give RT and Sputnik in this country? Are we getting the same coverage?

You said there was 38 million people we reach, and that seems, on a world basis of 7 point some billion people, a very small percentage, and I just heard you say that we need more funding.

So the first question is, are we getting the same access to those countries, Belarus and Russia? I would like to hear your thoughts on that.

Mr. FLY. In Belarus, as I have mentioned just to the chairman now, the main problem, I think, has been recently with the internet shutdowns. The issue of reciprocity is a major challenge in our dealings with Russia. RFERL has a bureau in Moscow, some very brave Russian reporters who are trying to cover what is going on

in their country. They do a great job reaching the Russian audience online.

But for years RFERL has been restricted to only digital content. It is not allowed to get licenses to go on radio. It is not allowed to provide our 24/7 Russian language network current time on satellite packages and these are because of regulatory decisions made by the Russian government to block U.S. government-funded outlets from reaching the Russian people.

Mr. YOHO. Let me interrupt you there and ask you, I mean, isn't that something we can do diplomatically and say, you know, we'll allow this, for Russia to come into our country with RT but you got to have the same reciprocity. Are we not fighting on that front? Is that what I am hearing from you?

Mr. FLY. I have had these conversations when I was president of RFE with the State Department and others and encouraged them to have that diplomatic conversation.

I visited Moscow in January as president of RFE and told Russian officials directly that my goal as president was to expand our access to the Russian audience and set up more bureaus for RFERL and to make sure that we got more Russian eyeballs on our content.

But, ultimately, I do think it is going to need to be a government-to-government conversation rather than the networks making these arguments to Russian officials and, ultimately, right now, the Russian government is moving toward driving RFERL and other U.S.-funded outlets out of the country by tightening the restrictions on their journalists.

Mr. YOHO. All right. Let me go ahead and interrupt there because I think this is a good moment for Chairman Keating, with Adam Kinzinger, and I know I would be willing to sign on to this that we need to put pressure on the State Department, and I know we cannot use that word *quid pro quo* but it really is.

If we are going to allow them to broadcast in this country because we do have a First Amendment, there has to be a certain amount of reciprocity whether you do it on a head count or views or on like media, and I think that is something Chairman Keating and I would love to followup with you.

And, Chairman Keating, you brought up something and I really appreciate you bringing it up, and it is the challenge of media. At some point, there has to be a metric where what the media is reporting is true, and I know this is going to rattle some people.

If you have false news going out there intentionally by a nefarious organization, there has to be a way to rein that in and I have not found a good way to do that. And, I value our First Amendment and we have to fight to preserve that.

But at the same time, there has to be a responsibility in media to report accurately so that we do not have this chaos, because I know there is organizations that are fomenting chaos whether it is coming from Russia or China.

And one of the questions that I think I had for Mr. Rutzer—is that right? Rutner? China's influence you were showing in Serbia—is China providing the technology, i.e., the cameras, the drones, the facial recognition programs, to authoritarian regimes like Lukashenko's to control their populace?

Real quickly. I have got 30 seconds.

Mr. RUTZEN. The short answer is China is providing surveillance technology to countries including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Serbia. They also provided a \$2 billion loan to Hungary to construct a railway, which Hungary then classified as a State secret in terms of the construction contracts.

Mr. YOHO. Wow.

Mr. RUTZEN. Suspicious. It should be looked into.

Mr. YOHO. Yes. What about—well, that is not the scope of this, but I think that is something, really, we need to look at because we know they are doing this. They are doing it in Iran and Russia. They are doing it in Venezuela, offering this technology, and that is subverting democratic platforms and the rule of law.

And I yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Meeks from New York.

Mr. Meeks, are you there?

[No response.]

Mr. KEATING. And we might be having some technical difficulties. We might have to circle back to Mr. Meeks.

Mr. Sires of New Jersey? And we can circle back to Mr. Meeks. Okay.

Mr. SIRES. Good morning, everyone. Can you hear me?

Mr. KEATING. Yes.

Mr. SIRES. Can you hear me?

Well, first of all, I want to thank everyone for this wonderful testimony, that this is something I have been fighting for for many, many years—freedom of press, freedom of expressing yourself in the press—and I see this as a game plan by these countries.

It is a game plan that they implement in the Western Hemisphere as well. Some of these dictators now in Venezuela, in Nicaragua, are doing the same thing. They choke the free press. The independent press they choke. They do the same thing in Cuba.

So when we talk about Belarus, and I will be following this whole thing—this whole election very closely, to me, I think that was going to happen all along. I think this election, even though it took place, they were going to do it anyway because, first of all, I do not think everybody has spoken loud enough about it.

You have Europe speaking up. The United States has been kind of wishy washy in some of the comments. What we need is the entire world, basically, of the free world with one voice, and some of the voices are not as loud as they could be.

And so, you know, we can do all—we can—

VOICE. Mr. Sires, if you could turn your video back on.

Mr. KEATING. Yes.

Mr. SIRES. Oh, it is not on. I am sorry.

Mr. KEATING. Mr. Sires, it had been going in and out, so if you could just turn your video back on.

Mr. SIRES. How is that? You see that red face there? That is me.

Mr. KEATING. Great. You look great.

[Laughter.]

Mr. SIRES. Too much sun.

Anyway, but, you know, over the years I have had, you know, many resolutions, bipartisan resolutions, on the Western Hemi-

sphere Subcommittee—because I know Ted Yoho is also a supporter and many of the others—about the abuses in Nicaragua regarding the press.

But this is the same thing that has happened in Eurasia. All these places, they are just, basically, shutting down the press and doing whatever they want.

And, obviously, I think behind all this is Putin. I really think that if anybody was to get out of line he would do the same thing he did in the Ukraine, because I think he still has this idea that—of the Soviet Union. Bring some of these States together.

So where do we go from here when the world, basically, just says, says, says, says, but they still do whatever they want? There were no—there does not seem to be consequences to some of these people that murder and—I mean, you have got Putin killing people in other countries, poisoning people. Anybody who is in opposition they get rid of. So I really do not know.

I mean, we can talk and, you know, do all these things. But I really do not know what exactly is effective that we could do. You can say yes, we can speak up. Yes, we impose sanctions. These people are going to do it anyway.

Look, I was born in Cuba. I came here when I was 11 years old. I saw it when I was there how little by little they started shutting down the free press, and it got worse and worse and worse.

So anybody have any comment after my tirade?

[Laughter.]

Mr. SIRE. And, believe me, I am not giving up on the free press. I think the free press, it is the only thing that we have in this world to save democracies and give people a voice, and I am not about to give it up.

So, Mr. Rutzen, I know you spoke about three things that we needed to do. Even if we do those three things, I think these people are going to do anything they want.

I am sorry, but that is just the way I feel. Can you just comment on what I just said?

Mr. RUTZEN. Yes, thank you.

I think your general point is well taken. This is a global phenomenon. With the ICNL COVID-19 civic freedom tracker we have identified over 90 countries that have amassed emergency measures under the pretext of COVID. Many measures overreach.

What can be done? I am reminded of “Alice in Wonderland” and that famous passage about six impossible things before breakfast, and I am an unrepentant idealist in that sense. I think there are things that can be done.

I think that sanctions are something we should leave on the table. I think we need the State Department and AID to have a strategy to address democracy in the aftermath of COVID.

I think we need to work multilaterally and engage like-minded countries. We need to provide support for the courageous activists including through visas. I have additional recommendations in my written testimony.

Mr. SIRE. You know, quite frankly, I think in Belarus, COVID or no COVID this guy was going to do what he is doing, because they have this—they just—they want to hold onto power.

I am sorry, Joanna is it? You know, I cannot tell.

Ms. ROHOZIŃSKA. Sorry, if I can—if I could just jump in and add something a little bit.

I have been following Belarus for over 20 years and I kind of liken it that it is, like, it is a pot of milk that just boiled over. There has been things that have been happening under the surface for years. You just cannot see it.

But when it goes, they can do all they want to oppress but, ultimately, sooner or later, the will of the people does come through. I mean, it might be a romantic notion. But, frankly, we have seen it over and over again.

I know. You come from Cuba. I come from Poland. So, eventually, things do—things do come. It is slow and you have to be patient, and I think that will echo what Mr. Rutzen said.

It has a long-term dedication to programs both working with political dissidents but also supporting local media, not just international media. There are lots of local journalists on the ground. The game changer this time has also been telegrams.

So it has been new technology. It is not traditional media anymore. Everybody was communicating over their phones and that got through the internet blockades as well. So it was effective and is an effective organizational tool. Moreover, civic activists—probably the most striking thing that I saw in the footage from the protests was striking gas workers who said that they were absolutely furious because the police was beating them using their own money—that their tax dollars were being paid to authorities that were abusing them.

The sense of accountability, the sense of that the authorities actually have a responsibility to the citizens, I have never seen that before and I think that that is probably the most hopeful thing for the future because you cannot walk that back. You cannot let that—you cannot put that genie back in the bottle.

So I would just urge patience and continued support on the side of supporting the countries themselves. This is not talking about bilateral or diplomatic ties.

Mr. SIRE. Thank you. I am sorry my time is up. But we could be talking here hours about this.

[Laughter.]

Mr. SIRE. Good job, Jim.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you both for relaying your personal experiences here.

The chair would like to recognize Mr. Fitzpatrick from Pennsylvania, and Mr. Fitzpatrick, if you could turn your video back on prior to your question.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for all of you for participating today.

In 2013 and 2015, you saw large-scale protests in Ukraine following what many believed to be a falsification of elections by their Federal officials.

So my first question for the entire panel, do you believe that Belarus protests could lead to a revolution similar to the one we saw in Ukraine?

And secondarily, on Tuesday President Lukashenko refused to rule out the idea of holding new elections and acknowledged that he may have overstayed his time in office.

Whether or not you see a revolution similar to Ukraine, do you think that these protests could lead to an actual change in leadership?

Ms. ROHOZIŃSKA. So I take it it was a question to me.

I mean, I think that things have been building up and I would say that the similarity to Ukraine was this, was that there was also a deep-seated frustration with corruption.

Here, it is less about corruption but it still meets where you have the accountability and transparency aspect of it that I was mentioning in my testimony, and I think that the frustration with the lack of responsive government and being treated like animals, frankly, is what they say, is what finally boiled over.

But there has been—there has been an uptick in protests in Belarus if you watch these kinds of things over the past 2 years, over the parasite tax, for example, which was also—it was a special tax that was put on unemployment and to penalize people who were unemployed. It was trying to target civic activists but it ended up reaching far farther than that.

So you could see things percolating below the surface for quite a long time now. You never know when it is going to blow. Here, I think that there was just the COVID underlay everything and it mobilized such a broad swath of society that the—that the trigger event was finally the elections which, again, you know, demonstrating a degree of hubris they decided not to put off, right.

They figured that holding the elections at the beginning of August was the best thing to do because there is always a low turnout in August, frankly, because people tend to go out to the countryside.

So they simply miscalculated. They did not understand how the people were feeling, and here you do have a similarity with Ukraine, I think.

In terms of—in terms of the other questions to going forward, you know, you have to appreciate that this is a country that has never experienced democracy, ever, which means that even the democratic opposition leaders, basically, know it from textbooks. They do not know it from firsthand practice.

You know, Lukashenko himself, ironically, has been supporting the notion of sovereignty and independence in the face of the Russian State for the past couple of years and he only changed his tune a couple of weeks ago when he started getting backed into a corner.

In terms of, you know, his promises of holding new elections, I would be wary. He does not have a particularly good track record of following through on promises, and so I would probably take that as a lesson learned and be extremely cautious.

I, personally, think he is just buying time because he also said that he would consider holding new elections after introducing constitutional changes, and the constitutional changes that he is proposing is to introduce term limits.

So, I mean, he is still looking at the succession. He understands that this is the end of his time in office. I do not know if he wants to do that right exactly now.

However, understanding that this would have been his last term anyway he is probably preparing for an exit strategy. I think that

that is a little bit of a long answer but, I mean, again, I think you have to be patient. Probably we will see how this plays out.

I would certainly invest in looking at calling early parliamentary elections as being much more significant, because once you turn the House, once you turn the Parliament, then at least you start building up a degree of political capital that can start carrying forward into the governance.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Thank you. And with my remaining time, Mr. Fly, President Lukashenko is often called Europe's last dictator, and in recent weeks I am aware that you have used your social media platform to amplify some of the little footage that we have seen from the Belarus protests.

What has been your biggest takeaway from everything that you have seen online and heard with regard to human rights violations?

Mr. FLY. Well, I think it is had—I was in Belarus when I was president of RFERL last fall. You could sense something was going on beneath the surface, I think, as was just noted.

But it has just been incredibly impressive to watch people take their future into their own hands in this massive way for the first time ever, really, in Belarus.

And so, you know, I think, as freedom-loving people who live in a republic that was founded on the notion that all men are created equal with God-given rights, I think it is in our interest to do everything we can to support them, and I do think we do need to realize it is going to be rocky and uncertain even if there is a transformation post-Lukashenko.

As Ukraine has shown us, it is very difficult. And so we should also be starting, I think, to work with our European partners to think through what might come next and how do we help an opposition that might actually be put in the role of having to try to govern this country, especially given Putin's penchant for turning to subterfuge and covert tactics to undermine democracies immediately around Russia.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you. Following a Pennsylvania tradition, the chair recognizes Ms. Wild of Pennsylvania.

I do not know. People have been coming in and out.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate it. Really appreciate having this hearing.

I wanted to ask of Ms. Laanela about the effect on elections. We know that democracy experts have expressed concerns over the potential effects of COVID-19 on the fairness and legitimacy of elections.

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, at least 70 countries and territories around the globe have postponed national or subnational elections because of COVID-19.

Given the need to both protect the public health but to also continue holding democratic elections, what are some of the electoral best practices that governments have been implementing or have implemented to hold elections during the pandemic while keeping their citizens safe?

And if you could include what has the republic's reaction been to those new or changed election techniques?

Ms. LAANELA. Thank you, and thank you for quoting—that is our organization that you just quoted. So thanks for that and I am glad to see that our work tracking the information has been used.

Yes. So as I mentioned in my—in my opening intervention, there isn't, like, one silver bullet that fixes everything. But here is what we are seeing is that the measures come in two clusters for holding elections safely, and that is special voting arrangements so that at-risk people can somehow be participating, but also health and safety measures in whatever it is that they do.

So those are the two broad categories. That is not so simple, though, because each of those comes with the—especially the special voting arrangements comes with vulnerabilities, and so I am going to give you the biggest lesson learned, which is political consensus about what needs to be done.

When you introduce things, you know, quickly, the chances of going wrong—something going wrong are absolutely there. It is really not optimal conditions to introduce new types of ways of voting.

So a political consensus or a sense of this is what needs to happen, whether it is going ahead with special measures or whether it is postponing for a distinct period of time.

This is the time for deliberation, for coming together, for agreeing, but also the time to communicate to the public why these decisions have been taken and what safeguards are in place to ensure that things get back on track as soon as the pandemic is over.

This isn't the time to put in permanent measures. This is a time to put in temporary measures to get through this crisis and temporary measures that kind of everybody agrees makes sense and a kind of acceptance that they may not be perfect.

Ms. WILD. All right. Thank you.

Thank you. That is helpful. I wish I had more time to explore that but I wanted to ask Mr. Fly about journalists' ability to continue their work during the pandemic.

We know that social distancing guidelines and policies have been applied in various forms across Europe and Eurasia, and journalists and reporters as essential workers have often been allowed to continue with their work because their function is deemed necessary for a healthy and democratic society.

But what we are seeing, unfortunately, in some cases is that increasingly authoritarian governments have used social distancing policies to target journalists and restrict citizens' access to information.

What are some examples of countries that have exemplified best practices in terms of effectively implementing pandemic response measures that have not impeded the vital work of journalists and the free media?

That is for Mr. Fly.

Mr. FLY. Thanks. That is—yes, that is an important question. When I was at RFERL this was a major challenge. RFERL has 20 bureaus across Eurasia, and some of the coverage in countries that were in denial about the existence or the arrival of COVID in their countries involves going to hospitals to talk to doctors and assess

what is happening in medical facilities and seeing is there a rise in cases that the government is forcing medical professionals to call pneumonia rather than diagnosing them as COVID.

And so it puts journalists at risk. So we had to balance the need for transparency, providing information to our audience, with the desire to keep our people safe.

When I was there, we had to actually close several bureaus during that time because the situation in some of those countries got so bad. Governments also used regulations and lockdowns to sometimes limit journalists' ability to move around.

I would say—you asked about best practices. In the United States and in Europe, it is common practice to exempt journalists from even a national lockdown, recognizing the important role they play in society.

And so I would like to see more measures like that by governments to allow people to—citizens to keep themselves safe but also to allow journalists to do their jobs and to report on what is actually going on because, ultimately, that helps create a broader safe space within society if people have information about what is actually going on with the pandemic and know the facts about what is happening in their country.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Fly. I agree with you completely and I think that they serve a very essential role, especially in times like these.

Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Trone from Maryland.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let us go right back to Mr. Fly, if we could. On August 29th, over 40,000 protestors gathered in Berlin and many called it an anti-corona protest. Hundreds, many from the far right, tried to storm the Reichstag, Germany's Parliament.

These demonstrators say the pandemic-related restrictions have infringed on their fundamental human rights. Although the demonstration violated social distancing, it was allowed to take place. The only folks arrested were those that tried to storm the Reichstag itself and they were arrested.

How would you assess Germany's ability to balance this pandemic response versus the protection of fundamental rights and freedom, and the same thing that could be instructive to us. We have had exactly the same challenges.

Mr. FLY. Thanks. I am sitting, I do not know, probably less than a mile from the Reichstag right now.

I was not at the protests here in Berlin but, obviously, read about them and followed them in the local media. And I have only been here in Germany for the last several weeks since moving here from Prague after my time at RFERL.

My sense is the German government, like many of the European governments, has handled the crisis quite remarkably. There was a significant lockdown imposed very early on in the pandemic including in places like the Czech Republic, where RFERL is based, and that prevented a significant surge of cases.

What we are now seeing, though, is, obviously, things opened up during the summer here in Europe. People took their vacations and

travelled, although not to the extent that is normal here, and I think people got used to that return to normal life.

And so it has been difficult as the cases have begun to tick up in many countries in Europe to convince citizens to go and take the sort of measures that were necessary in the spring.

And so that is some of the tension that played out here with the protests and, obviously, the economic impacts of the original lockdown are having a significant impact on that as well and my understanding is that those economic rationale were a significant part of the protests here in Germany where, like in the United States and many other countries, people are out of work.

Their restaurants have closed. Small businesses have closed or they have been laid off by their companies, and even though the State is trying to do more to support them with unemployment, it is still not enough.

And so that, obviously, is creating a lot of anger about the continuance of some of these restrictions, and I assume that is going to continue.

That frustration will grow as we move into the fall and the cases continue to increase. And so I think this is going to be a struggle throughout modern democracies until we see a vaccine.

Mr. RUTZEN. Congressman, may I jump in as well? This is Doug Rutzen.

Mr. TRONE. Go ahead.

Mr. RUTZEN. Thank you.

I think that there is also a broader point here. If you look at the sort of responses in places like Finland, Taiwan, and South Korea, you find that there is a high level of public trust in governmental institutions and I think we cannot overlook the issue of trust in the governmental response, which goes back to truth and accuracy in conveying information about the pandemic and so forth.

And second, and maybe even more importantly, trust not only between citizens and institutions but between citizens. So if you look at why we have reasonable responses and voluntary compliance in places like Sweden or Denmark, we see very high levels of social trust.

In the U.S. you find quite the opposite. You see a run on ammunition and weapons. It is not about the Second Amendment. It is a fundamentally different approach toward trusting one another that we see in certain countries than the United States.

Mr. TRONE. That was my question. We have a severe lack of trust in what we are hearing.

Quickly, Ms. Rohozińska, in 2018, the Turkish Parliament passed counterterrorism legislation granting the government extraordinary powers that it wielded during the state of emergency following the July 2016 coup.

How has the government used those powers during the pandemic and to what extent has there been a focus on domestic political dissent rather than on health and safety?

Ms. ROHOZIŃSKA. Sorry. The question was on Turkey?

Mr. TRONE. Turkey.

Ms. ROHOZIŃSKA. So Turkey, I would probably ask for—I would either direct the question to somebody else or I would ask for time to consult my colleagues who actually work on Turkey for a re-

sponse to that because, unfortunately, it is not a country that I cover.

Mr. TRONE. Anybody else have any knowledge about what is going on in Turkey? Have they used the pandemic to extend their powers?

Mr. RUTZEN. Yes. Turkey has arrested several hundred people for allegedly posting provocative things on social media. They are also using the pandemic as an excuse to constrain dissent.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Trone, and thank you for bringing up Turkey where journalists are being detained and where you are seeing the free press truly inhibited in trying to speak out.

The chair recognizes Mr. Costa from California. Thank you for participating again.

I think you have to unmute yourself, Mr. Costa.

Mr. COSTA. How about that?

Mr. KEATING. That is great.

Mr. COSTA. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and members of the subcommittee. We have been challenged here like every other part of the country and the world with the pandemic but, in addition to that, we have had some horrific fires that are throughout the West coast, Washington, Oregon, and California, and I got a very big fire that is right adjoining my district that has no containment. So I have been a bit preoccupied with that and other zone areas.

I would like to focus, and Chairman Keating and a number of members of this subcommittee have been very involved with myself as the chair of the Trans-Atlantic Legislators Dialogue and working with our counterparts with the European Union and the Parliament.

And I have two questions to our counterparts or experts in Europe in looking at, one, how do we do a better job together, working with the European Parliament in terms of the challenges in Belarus right now and coming together with a united effort?

I know the chairman is very focused on that we are working on some resolutions to that degree. But in addition to that, it is my hope—I smiled when we talked about one of the witnesses' lack of confidence in institutions in our country. My gosh, they have really been on the attack for several years now.

But I think there is an opportunity if the elections turn out in a way in November that we hope that we will have opportunity to re-establish the bond among the European democratic countries that today, with individual conversations that we have, I think there is big question marks.

I saw this morning our colleague, Zarkovsky, interviewed on a morning U.S. show and, you know, they are wondering where the American leadership is as it relates to our ability to deal not only with Russia but the most recent issues with Belarus. And, of course, we also have other challenges that we face.

So who would care to opine in terms of both those efforts?

Ms. ROHOZIŃSKA. I mean, I would probably speak to the first. I mean, the European Parliament is preparing also—they have come out with quite strong resolutions and statements on Belarus and I so I think that there is, judging on the—what I have been hearing

from this committee there is a degree of consensus in terms of censuring the Belarusian State.

I think that it becomes a little bit trickier when you are looking—when you are looking at the national levels, that within the national parliaments there is more diversity of views, I would say, depending on country to country.

But if you are talking about cooperation with the European Parliament, I think that is actually a wonderful idea and it is a wonderful opportunity to come together over this because I do not think that there is an awful lot of dissenting voices thinking that Lukashenko is doing a good thing and that is somehow respecting the rights of his citizens. And so there is an awful lot of common ground on those terms.

I will—I will leave the other question to somebody else, I think.

Mr. FLY. I would just add from where I sit, in Europe, following some of the European conversation, you know, I think the administration has done some good things in this area.

Deputy Secretary of State Biegun's visit to Lithuania, I think, was appreciated. There is a question about whether that U.S. engagement should have happened earlier. But I do think that there have been some attempts by the administration to engage with the Europeans. I do think there is—

Mr. COSTA. How about—how about the movement of troops?

Mr. FLY. The movement in terms of responding to Russian exercises and things like that?

Mr. COSTA. Right.

Mr. FLY. Yes. No, I think the broader sense in Europe is, unfortunately, they feel that the administration and the U.S. are letting them lead and on this issue—there may be other issues where the Europeans are quite happy to lead.

But they want the U.S. to be involved and they want the U.S. by their side, and it should also be noted that some of the strongest allies of the U.S. in Europe, like the Baltic States, like the Central Europeans, have really been on the leading edge of the European response.

And so I think they would like this to be a joint approach and right now they kind of feel that the U.S. has been much more hesitant than many European capitals to engage directly in supporting the opposition and their demands.

Ms. LAANELA. I wonder if I could just—quickly, just mention the role of the OSCE as something that both Europeans and the United States are members of and where this particular—the issues that we are discussing now is a big part of their work. So I just wanted to mention the role of the OSCE.

Mr. COSTA. Well, thank you. My time has expired. I also would be interested in the current situation with Ukraine but maybe someone else will ask that question.

Mr. KEATING. Yes. Thank you, Mr. Costa, and our heart goes out to the people of California who are just—

Mr. COSTA. Thank you.

Mr. KEATING [continuing]. Trying to get through these just tragic, tragic wildfires that has just encompassed so much of the State and affected lives. But we are—when we get back I hope we can work on that. Our hearts go out to you and California.

The chair now recognizes a leader on the human rights issues in Congress as well as a strong member of our committee, Mr. Cicilline from Rhode Island.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for convening this hearing and thank you to our witnesses for your excellent testimony.

I would like to focus my first question on this area of data privacy in the digital space. Obviously, tracking and tracing measures are a really critical part of responding to a public health pandemic.

But at the same time, of course, there is deep concern about the collection of an enormous amount of very personal medical data by governments, particularly governments that are run by authoritarian leaders.

And so I am wondering, you know, as, I think, governments and your guys' organizations are sort of struggling with this, are there some example that you have seen in Europe or Eurasia that you think should be models for how you can balance both this public health requirement and protecting governments from accessing this information long term with all kinds of potentially devastating consequences?

Mr. RUTZEN. This is Doug Rutzen, if I could jump in.

I think that there are two examples I would note, also in my written testimony. One is Norway, where the authorities have worked with a private company to develop an app, and use of the app is voluntary.

Users receive clear information about the purpose, storage, and nature of the data. There are clear limits on cross purposes and users can delete their data at any time.

Another interesting example is the Dutch draft COVID-19 app law, which extensively regulates the use of a COVID-19 app and it says that use, again, must be voluntary and, in fact, it is illegal for anyone to directly or indirectly require a Dutch person to actually use the app.

So there are actually a number of good example in Europe that I think we can build on.

Mr. CICILLINE. Great.

The next thing I want to ask you about is, obviously, the dissemination of false information has been a real problem in terms of response to this pandemic and using it both as ways to suppress the public and dissent but also to promote bad public health policies.

And, you know, there is tremendous concern about that in our own country and the role that these platforms have in terms of preventing or at least reducing the likelihood that, you know, inaccurate or dangerous public health information is disseminated.

And, you know, are there some examples where you think the European Union or other countries that have done a better job than the United States in helping prevent the dissemination of false information that is resulting in the deaths of thousands of Americans that we ought to look at in terms of protocols or standards?

Ms. ROHOZIŃSKA. So I will probably—I will probably take this.

I mean, I think that the first thing was that they got on top of it really quickly, that it was very quickly recognized as being a problem that was not limited to a single country.

And so whether on a single country basis or on an EU wide basis, they quite quickly started tracking and trying to debunk it. I think that there is a couple of good examples, country by country, in which they actually did engage the groups that have been, on the civil society side, either fact checking or debunking or raising awareness or doing media literacy programs.

And we actually reached out to this community and engaged them, on one hand, to help try and track and to nip in the bud the disinformation that was flowing through and, on other hand, to actually—and Slovakia was a good example, that the ministry of health actually paired up with civil society organizations to help disseminate good information, right, understanding that they had a farther reach and they had a legitimacy that the government was shortfall on.

So it definitely has come back to being that all of this is public trust, frankly—that the countries in which there is high levels of public trust just simply did a better job extending this.

The other thing that was important to note with the infodemic is, again, you know, times of crisis and times of uncertainty breeds conspiracies and disinformation, I mean, and it does not matter when we are in history.

We will always find this happening. It is human nature, if you want. And so, in a way, the more information—

Mr. CICILLINE. And I just want to—Joanna, if I can jump in real quick because my time has run out—

Ms. ROHOZIŃSKA. Yes. Yes.

Mr. CICILLINE [continuing]. To ask one more question to relate to that. You know, we have seen in our own country the exploitation of the pandemic, the dissemination by our president of misinformation to voters, the degrading of voting from home, the undermining of the Postal Service, the calling in question the legitimacy of our elections, the suppressing of peaceful dissent by gasping peaceful protesters, attacks on our independent media.

And I am just wondering whether the behavior of our own president here in the United States, what kind of impact does that have in terms of our global leadership to talk about democracy and elections in the face of that.

Kind of what has been the impact of that? Who wants to—and I think we have to acknowledge that reality.

[No response.]

Mr. CICILLINE. Does anyone have thoughts?

[No response.]

Mr. CICILLINE. No?

Mr. RUTZEN. You know, I cannot resist.

[Laughter.]

Mr. RUTZEN. So yes, the short answer is that we need to lead by example and we find that bad practices in the United States are regularly replicated overseas.

Whether it is our outdated and no longer fit for purpose Foreign Agents Registration Act, which was copied by the Russians and misused against even congressionally funded nonprofits, whether it is the epidemic of calling legitimate journalism—fake news, criticizing independent media and so forth.—

We see that, in fact, our bad practices are replicated overseas as well.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.

The chair recognizes Ms. Titus from Nevada. If you could turn your video on and join us. Thank you for taking part in this.

Ms. TITUS. Good morning.

Mr. KEATING. Good morning.

Ms. TITUS. Has he called on me?

Mr. KEATING. Yes.

Ms. TITUS. Oh. Well, thank you—thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am still a little not so good with this technology.

Thank you for holding this hearing. I really appreciate it. You know, I serve on the House Democracy Partnership and these issues are of great concern to me, and we see so much backsliding all around the world and the U.S. is not setting a very good example like we have in the past.

I would just ask if there would be a little more elaboration on the whole situation of elections. Public trust in elections is so important to securing democracy. The U.S. used to send observers to elections in other countries. Now some of those other countries probably need to send observers to us.

But I wonder if the panellists could address what are best practices, how do we reestablish trust in elections, what is happening to election processes in some of these countries where we see this regression, I guess?

Ms. LAANELA. This sounds like one for me so I will pick a few of the things that you mentioned.

Observation—thanks for mentioning that, and there are two organizations, very, very reputable, and they are on their way or so to be observing the American elections in November.

One is the Organization of American States and the other is—both of which you are members of so—and the other is the OSCE and their unit which works on democracy and human rights called ODIHR.

So that is—you will see international observers at the November elections, and this is excellent practice for building trust so we are really—it is a very good thing that you are doing allowing observers to your own elections.

So domestic observation and international election observation, key aspects for building trust—that kind of external verification that things are Okay.

But trust is super, super hard to build. I tried to say it quickly before. But one thing about trust is its—the predictability.

So it is the ability to do something again and again well. So when elections have been held consistently well over time, people get a sense that, OK, these people know that they are doing. So that is part of it and that is really hard to do if you are not well resourced.

So resourcing those organized elections is kind of—you know, even though it is about money but that ties into trust because when they—it takes a lot to make them happen and when they fail,

which they easily can do because the logistics are so tough, then that is hard.

But because the stakes are so high elections are really relational, and what many countries have who do it well who come from post-conflict, for example, is they discovered they have to do the hard relational work to make sure that potential spoilers are kept inside the tent.

So remembering that elections are both operational and relational is one way of seeing it. I do not want to use up all the time, if somebody else wants to step in. But I am, of course, happy to continue with this issue.

Ms. TITUS. And I appreciate that, and you talk about building up those resources. I know USAID does a lot of election training, candidate training, NGO training about corruption in elections. Do we need to reassess how we are doing that now or just continue?

Ms. LAANELA. Your people are excellent. I really want to say that. I am calling in from Sweden. I am not American myself.

But I have worked in this business for 28 years working in different countries in really tough situations, and some of the best experts out there are from organizations that are very close to those of you when you are normally working in Washington.

So the United Nations as well, based in New York, but also organizations like IFES, NDI, our colleagues from IRI, they are doing excellent work supported by USAID. So and they have kind of got it figured out how to support institutions for the long term. So you can trust the people that you are supporting.

Ms. TITUS. So you see that as a good investment?

Ms. LAANELA. Yes. Unequivocally, yes.

Ms. TITUS. They do a lot with very little. So thank you for that. Thank you—

Mr. RUTZEN. May I contribute one thought?

So one concrete proposal, I think in terms of trust in elections the key issue will be what happens on election night and shortly thereafter. Americans are used to getting the results on election night.

Now that we have postal ballots it is improbable that we will have definitive and accurate results that evening. We need to inform—this is not a partisan issue—we need to inform the American public that if they do not have definitive answers on election night it is not that the election is being stolen.

It is that the process is working well and we may need more time to ensure that every vote is counted.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Representative. I would just remind Mr. Rutzen too that I think maybe with your last remark it is a good idea that we look a little back, you know, into history.

And my district is the Kennedy compound in Hyannisport, and we did have a Presidential election where the candidate, John F. Kennedy, went to bed not knowing the results and that we did not know those results until the next morning.

So it might be good to make people aware of that history. It is part of our history. It is not that unusual. The most important

thing is to get it right. So a good point and maybe that is worth remembering during that period.

You know, I would like to just followup on a couple of your comments with some last questions.

Mr. Rutzen, in your remarks you said that what is needed is a State Department strategy. So implicit in that, if we have one at all, that it needs work. So could you expand on that, your statement that we need a State Department strategy?

Mr. RUTZEN. I have enormous respect for colleagues at DRL and also at AID that are beginning to address this issue, and they do have folks who are working on it. And I think we need to elevate it to the level of strategy and we need to look at policy and programming in a comprehensive fashion from both the State Department and AID to look at the aftermath of the pandemic.

We must also build some sort of resiliency because, sadly, this will not be our last pandemic. We will likely face more in the future.

So I think this is also an opportunity for information sharing perhaps by the Legislative Branch, maybe through the Executive Branch, to share lessons learned on how democracies can both safeguard democracy and protect public health.

Mr. KEATING. And to Mr. Fly, some of your comments revolved around the necessity of U.S. taking more of a leadership role than our allies who are hoping for us to take that role more so.

We have seen Germany step up. Whether it is reacting to the poisoning by Putin of Navalny, we have seen them take an increasing leadership role.

Yet, that isn't—you know, I know from my conversations as well that there is a great desire with our allies to have the U.S. take a stronger leadership role in this regard.

If you want to comment on that, that would be great, as a followup to your comments.

Mr. FLY. Yes. I think one positive note about U.S. policy, even under this administration, I would just start with is that in the area of international broadcasting I think we should be very proud of what we do across Eurasia because while there are European-funded networks like Deutsche Welle, France Medias Monde, and BBC, the reach of American and congressional-funded broadcasting is much broader across the region and I think in some of these countries much more impactful than our European colleagues.

I think there are areas there that we should work more together, like I mentioned in my written testimony, in EU members States like Romania and Bulgaria and Hungary.

But, in general, when it comes to democracy across Eurasia, I think what we hear from our European partners is they have good contacts at the working level. They have a sense of what those individuals they are dealing with are trying to advance.

But across the administration they do not—there is often question whether democracy is still a key part of American strategy toward the region because of the varying messages you hear, especially from the president himself.

And so that gives some of our partners pause and causes them to question should we really put our own equities on the line when it comes to the economic relationship we have with countries like

Russia or further afield with China, or is the U.S. going to change its position 6 months from now because of a whim at the top.

And so that is, I think, frustrating many of our partners and making it more difficult to cooperate on some of these issues.

Mr. KEATING. Yes. Without partners, again, and this is open to anyone, but you brought it up, Mr. Fly, as well. The issue of working with our allies on sharing intelligence which we do in so many other respects so well through our NATO allies. It is seamless. It is strong.

But on these issues of democracy it is not as strong, frankly, in my opinion, and when, you know, our allies see that in our own country we are suppressing our own domestic intelligence, the homeland security intelligence about Russian interference directly in our election as it affects one of the candidates running for office, what is the reaction there when they see this in our own country and are we sharing enough of that intelligence with them in this sphere, in the sphere of—the democracy sphere when we are not doing it at home the way we should?

Mr. FLY. I think that—I did some work on foreign interference in American elections prior to going to RFERL and I think there have been significant institutional gains since 2016.

But this issue of sharing information is key because the actors like Russia, China, Iran that are trying to interfere in American democracy are also trying to interfere in European democracy.

And so I think you raise a valid point where the Europeans do need to have access to information to protect their own democracies. They want to discuss best practices and lessons learned, and if there is not trust that information sharing is not going to happen.

Mr. KEATING. Yes. And I think also that intelligence needs calling out the people that are attacking our democracy in a very clear and unambiguous way, particularly Russia which, you know, given what is public what is public knowledge, now clearly is in a realm of their own in terms of their attacks on the democratic process in Europe, Eurasia, and in the United States itself.

And the other common theme I will mention is this, and so related, and that is the idea of public trust as fundamental to democracy and that is where transparency, that is where suppression of our intelligence information, perhaps with our allied but even at home, is such a disturbing development.

And I must say this. This hearing dealt with democracies, the fragile nature of democracies, the backsliding, and COVID-19 pandemic being used as a tool not just by Russia but by authoritarian regimes to cling to greater power and to usurp democracy and the democratic process.

So I am pleased that we had this hearing. I think we were able, sadly, to look at the day-to-day actions in Belarus as to what has happened and to let Russia know in a bipartisan sense, as was indicated by today's testimony from members and comments by members that the U.S. is strongly concerned about what is going on in Belarus but also the Russian intervention in that respect.

Our goal as a country is to have Belarus be sovereign, not to put our influence over them but to have them be sovereign and be able to make their own decisions.

And putting the whole issue together in terms of the COVID-19 virus, without public trust, we are not going to be successful in dealing with this virus. We are making great efforts at trying to deal with it, many other countries having much greater success including our allies in Europe dealing with this issue than we are here in the United States.

One of the comments—I forget which one of our witnesses said there is maybe a different way of viewing things there which, to me, sounded an awful lot like there is greater public trust around these health issues in some of these other countries than there is in the U.S.

But let me say this. Even if we are successful moving forward with a vaccine, without that public trust the public is not going to embrace taking that vaccine and dealing with it.

So it is so critical even when we have breakthroughs, going forward, to have that trust there. So this is an expansive hearing, covered a great deal of ground, that put the microscope on Belarus but also put the mirror on what is happening here in our own country and what we are doing with our allies.

So thank you so much for being a part of this. It is a continuing dialog. It is an important one. Democracy is fragile and we are naive to think it is not under attack right now in a very systemic way.

So thank you, and with that, I declare the hearing adjourned.

Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:52 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

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

Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment

William R. Keating (D-MA), Chairman

September 10, 2020

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, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment via Cisco Webex (and available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

DATE: Thursday, September 10, 2020

TIME: 11:00 a.m., EDT

SUBJECT: Protecting Democracy During COVID-19 in Europe and Eurasia and the Democratic Awakening in Belarus

WITNESSES: Mr. Douglas Rutzen
President and CEO
International Center for Not-for-Profit Law

Ms. Therese Pearce Laanela
Head of Electoral Processes
International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

Ms. Joanna Rohozińska
Resident Program Director
Europe
International Republican Institute

Mr. Jamie Fly
Senior Fellow
Senior Advisor to the President
German Marshall Fund of the United States
(Former President of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

By Direction of the Chairman

To fill out this form online: Either use the tab key to travel through each field or mouse click each line or within blue box. Type in information.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Note: Red boxes with red type will NOT print.

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment HEARING

Day Thursday Date 09/10/2020 Room Cisco Webex

Starting Time 11:00 Ending Time 12:52

Recesses ☐ (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

William R. Keating

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

To select a box, mouse click it, or tab to it and use the enter key to select. Another click on the same box will deselect it.

TITLE OF HEARING:

Protecting Democracy During COVID-19 in Europe and Eurasia and the Democratic Awakening in Belarus

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

See Attached

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

Representative Ted Yoho

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.)

Mr. Douglas Rutzen's Testimony

Ms. Therese Pearce Laaneta's Testimony

Ms. Joanna Rohozinska's Testimony

Mr. Jamie Fly's Testimony

Representative William R. Keating's Photographs for the Record

Representative William R. Keating's Addition to the Record

Representative Ann Wagner's QFR for Mr. Douglas Rutzen

Representative Ann Wagner's QFR for Ms. Therese Pearce Laaneta

Representative Ann Wagner's QFR for Ms. Joanna Rohozinska

Representative Ann Wagner's QFR for Mr. Jamie Fly

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 12:52



Subcommittee Staff Associate

Clear Form

Note: If listing additional witnesses not included on hearing notice, be sure to include title, agency, etc.

WHEN COMPLETED: Please print for subcommittee staff director's signature and make at least one copy of the signed form. A signed copy is to be included with the hearing/markup transcript when ready for printing along with a copy of the final meeting notice (both will go into the appendix). The signed original, with a copy of the final meeting notice attached, goes to full committee. An electronic copy of this PDF file may be saved to your hearing folder, if desired.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
EUROPE, EURASIA, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

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	Ron Wright, TX
X	Michael Guest, MS
X	Tim Burchett, TN

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Translator's Certificate

I, Iryna Bandaryk Kharkovsky, residing at 27601 Edenfield Drive, Wesley Chapel, FL 33544, hereby certify that I have translated/verified the following documents:

- Statement to the Moscovski District Investigative Committee from Anastasia Sergeevna Baklanova dated August 17, 2020, enclosed herein as Exhibit A;
- Report to the Head of Investigative Committee of Moscovski District from Anastasia Sergeevna Baklanova dated August 18, 2020, enclosed herein as Exhibit B;
- Disability Card of Anastasia Sergeevna Rozhko dated March 15, 2016, enclosed herein as Exhibit C;
- Complaint to the Head of the Court of the City of Minsk from Anastasia Sergeevna Baklanova dated August 20, 2020 enclosed herein as Exhibit D;
- Medical Certificate of Health no 11360 from the Hospital No 6 of the City of Minsk dated August 15, 2020, enclosed here in as Exhibit E;
- Marriage Certificate issued on August 30, 2018, enclosed herein as Exhibit F.

I FURTHER CERTIFY THAT under the penalty of perjury under the laws of the United States of America, to the best of my knowledge, the foregoing documents were presented to me in Russian and Exhibit hereto are true and accurate translations of the documents herein in English. Executed on September 4, 2020



Iryna Bandaryk Kharkovsky

EXHIBIT A

Mosowski district Investigative Committee (City of Minsk)
 Republic of Belarus
 220116, Minsk, Alibegova Street, 19
Msk_mn@sledcom.by

Applicant:
 Baklanova Anastasia Sergeevna
 220051, Minsk, Rafieva Street 93/5 – 173
 +37529 5133772

I was advised about criminal prosecution for knowingly making false statements under Article 400 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus

Signature of Anastasia

Article 400. Making false statement

1. *Making false statement about a crime is punishable by fine or arrest or limitation of freedom for 3 years or imprisonment for the same term.*
2. *The same act, coupled with the accusation of a serious or extremely crime or with fake creation of evidence, or committed with ulterior motive is punishable by limitation of freedom for up to 5 years or imprisonment for the same term.*

STATEMENT

I urge you to you to investigate and hold accountable by law unknown to me people who during the period of 19:00 on August 9, 2020, through 12:00 on August 12 committed crimes against me, Baklanova Anastasia Sergeevna.

On August 9th, 2020 I was at the polling station Number 33 located at Dolgobrodskaya street 41, Minsk, where I voted in the Presidential Elections of the Republic of Belarus. After casting my vote, I exited the building and was waiting for my husband Baklanov Denis Dmitrievich, who was supposed to pick me up. During this time I was listening to the concert, sometimes chatted with people, and did not disturb the order and did not shout any slogans.

Around 18:00 a blue bus arrived at the building, and a few police officers came out of the bus. I realized that those were police officers because they had a "police" sign on their uniforms, there were no other signs of differentiation and their faces were covered by cloth masks "balaklavi". Police officers asked me to follow them into the bus and they took all my belongings. During my arrest no physical or special force was used.

Along with other detainees I was taken by this bus to, what I understood, the Court of Partizanki District of City of Minsk. After that they moved me and 4 other detainees to a special police vehicle and around 19:00 we arrived at the detention facility located at 1st Okrestina lane, 36

Upon arrival, a personal search was carried out. Several detention officers dressed in police uniform were present during the search, they all had black face masks, but a personal search was performed by a woman. I don't remember any of those people's faces but I may be able to recognize some of them if I see them.

After that I was taken to the second floor and was placed in a cell No. 7. They kept bringing more girls and women, there were a total of 12 of us even though the cell is intended only for 6 people.

Later, late at night, all of us were transferred to a cell No 18 on the third floor. This cell is intended for 4 people, the square footage of that cell is 11-12 square meters, at that time there were already 24 people in that cell, and with us the total was 36.

The cell was stuffy, there was no ventilation. Many detained women started having panic attacks, vomiting, diarrhea. We were very scared, we were knocking on the door, saying that women were sick. In response, detention officers in the hallway either ignored us or opened the door and poured a bucket of cold water on us. Because of this water the cell became very damp which made it even harder to breathe. Only on occasion they would open the small window used for delivery of food so that we could breathe a little bit. We also heard how they beat people in other cells, how they took men in the hallway, stripped them naked, and forced them to run around calling it a "Project Beach". I can provide more information about all these facts.

I am a person with disability of a third category. I told detention officers about it and they knew about my condition. However, they did not let me use my medications, the light in the cell was on the whole time. Also during the entire time of my detention (almost 3 days) they didn't give us any food, we could only drink tap water from the sink using our hands. Because of these conditions I lost consciousness twice and fell on the ground. As a result of these falls I have physical injuries.

Accordingly, during my stay at the detention center I was deprived of food, air, medications and medical help, I could not sleep for a few days, I was constantly insulted and humiliated.

Thus, I believe that executives of the office of the internal affairs and other government agencies committed a crime against me.

In accordance with Part 1 Article 426 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus the abuse of power or official authority takes place when an executive knowingly and intentionally performs actions that go beyond his powers and official authority and that result in large-scale damage or substantial harm to rights and liberties of citizens or government or other civil matters.

In accordance with Part 3 Article 426 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, if the actions under part 1 or 2 of Article 426 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, are committed by a person holding an official position or if they cause large-scale damages, they will be considered as deliberate performance of actions going beyond his powers and official authority, coupled with torture, torment, or humiliation of a person or with the use of weapon or special tools.

Besides this, during my detentions police officers did inform me of their names, they never explain to me the reason I was arrested, never explained to me my rights, did not give me an opportunity to hire a lawyer, all of which resulted in violation of my rights. My relatives, members of my family were not informed that I was arrested.

In accordance with Part 1 Article 397 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus it is a crime when a knowingly unlawful arrest or detention takes place. In accordance with Part 2 Article 397 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus qualified corpus delicti provides for responsibility for unlawful arrest that cause large-scale damages.

I was not provided any documents about my arrest and detention. Furthermore, I was not able to find in either court of the City of Minsk any documents related to my conviction of committing administrative offenses, which brings me to a conclusion that I was deprived of freedom and liberties and was detained at the detention center of Mingorispolkoma unlawfully.

All these facts can be corroborated by Kapnik Ksenia Aleksandrovna, phone +37544 7454744, Kashnikova Inna Vasiljevna, phone +37544 7799456, Kravetz Irina Anatoljevna, tel +37529 8780966, and other people.

Based on the above fact,

I AM REQUESTING

1. To investigate the above facts in order to find perpetrators who committed these crimes of physical force and psychological violence against me by the members of law enforcement agencies and punish them and initiate criminal proceeding against them;
2. I ask to issue a referral to a forensic-medical examination in order to document my physical injuries.

Attachments:

1. Copy of the Disability ID card;
2. Copies of pictures of physical injuries;
3. Statement from the health care office from August 15, 2020

Date: August 17, 2020

/Signature

A.C. Baknanova

EXHIBIT B

To the Head of Investigative Committee of Moscovski District
City of Minsk, Republic of Belarus
Lieutenant Colonel of Justice Emelyanov M.A.

From
Anastasia Sergeevna Baklanova
93-5 Rafieva St., apt. 73
Minsk
T.: +375 (29) 513-37-72

I was advised about criminal prosecution for knowingly making false statements under Article 400 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus

Signature of Anastasia

REPORT

I urge you to investigate and prosecute my illegal arrest by unknown to me police officers that took place at the address of Dolgobrodskaya Street 41, Minsk, and my subsequent detention for the period of 18:00 on August 9, 2020 through 13:00 on August 12, 2020, and also prosecute the actions of detention officers of the Detention Center of Minsk Council District Office of Internal Affairs who did not take into consideration that I was a person with disabilities of a third category and did not provide me my own medications and as a result my health condition declined and I suffered physical injuries.

Date: August 18, 2020. *Signature*

Baklanova A.S.

Report accepted:

Signature

Lapkin V.S.

EXHIBIT C

REPUBLIC OF BELARUS
DISABILITY IDENTIFICATION CARD
SERIAL NUMBER 9 No 0504206
ROZHKO ANASTASIA SERGEEVNA

The holder of this card is entitled to all benefits and guarantees established by the law of the Republic of Belarus for persons with disabilities.

Issued by: Soligorsk iterdistrict expert commission.

Date of issuance: March 15, 2016.

Signature of the head of the expert commission.

EXHIBIT D

To the Head of the Court of the City of Minsk

From Baklanova Anastasia Sergeevna.

RE: investigation of unlawful actions of the officers of the court.

On August 9th, 2020 around 18:00 I was waiting for my husband at the porch of the Medical College at Dolgobrodskaya street 41, Minsk, which was used as a polling station.

At that time a blue bus arrived, four people came out of the bus, one of which told me to follow him to the bus. My request to explain the reason for this demand was met with silence and I was subsequently arrested. I mentioned to the officer that I had disability of a third category due to polio but my statements were ignored.

After that around 19:00 I was taken to the detention center and was placed in a cell.

I have already filed appropriate complaints against unlawful and illegal actions by the police officers and conditions of the detention center, however, the actions of the judges of regional courts who review administrative offences do not comply with law and should be considered unacceptable exercise of their official powers.

In the morning of August 11, 2020 the judge of Moscovski district of the city of Minsk Motil T.Y. reviewed administrative offenses against women who were detained in the same cell with me (total of 36 people). All those administrative offenses were reviewed by Judge Motil T.Y., majority in abstentia, without in-court hearings, and the administrative penalties in the form of administrative arrest were announced to all detainees by the officer of the detention center. All detainees received the same administrative arrest for the period of 10 days each.

I was called by Judge Motil T.Y. who asked me "What do you want to tell me?". I told her that everything that was mentioned in the protocol was a lie, and that all the facts listed in the protocol were false, I also told her that I was disabled and needed specific medications and treatment. The Judge did not react to my statements. After that Judge Motil T.Y. requested that I be taken away. Two hours later the officer of the detention center walked into our cell and announced that the Judge imposed administrative arrests against all detainees, mine was for the period of 10 days.

At the same time, on the same day on August 11, 2020, after the announcement of the sentences issued by Judge Motil T.Y., another administrative case against me was reviewed by the court of Frunzenkiy district of city of Minsk with respect to the same actions. The decision was issued against me for the administrative offense of participation in unauthorized protest and I was fined in the amount of 20 base points.

So during the same day I was held accountable for the same offense twice, which goes against the laws of the Republic of Belarus.

In accordance with part 4 Article 6.3 of the Administrative Code of the Republic of Belarus with respect to the same administrative offense you can receive either a primary or a primary and an additional administrative penalty.

After my release on August 14, 2020 from the detention center in Zhodino, on August 17 2020 I went to the court of Moscovski district in Minsk and to the court of Frunzenki district in Minsk with a request to receive details of my administrative cases reviewed by Judges. However, I was told that neither the court of Moscovski district nor the court of Frunzenki district issued administrative penalties against me.

At the same time, the following people can attest to the events that took place from August 9, 2020 until August 14, 2020, specifically my stay at the detention center in Zhodino, imposition of the fine and administrative arrest and charging me with administrative offense by Judge of Moscovski District Motil T.Y., and also by the Judge of Frunzenski district in Minsk: Kanashnikova Inna Vasiljevna, Kravec Irina Anatoljevna, Vcherashnaya Inessa, Pavlova Olga Aleksandrovna, Aksuchits Maria Nikolaevna, who were with me during that period of time.

In accordance with Article 37 of the Code of Republic of Belarus on the Judiciary and the Status of Judges, Minsk city court is overseeing judicial actions of the lower courts.

In connection with the fact that I was unlawfully accused of 2 administrative offenses by different judges from different courts in Minsk I urge you to investigate these facts and hold any officers of the court accountable and also to evaluate the actions of the judge for violation of the administrative procedures.

Moral and ethical actions of the judges while serving justice can't be discussed due to their special powers, however, predisposition of guilt by Judge Motil with respect to those who were detained and lost their rights to participate in a judicial proceeding, the right to see evidence, and to schedule court hearings, can't be left without attention and given any sort of evaluation of such actions by the officers of the court.

Based on the above, I am requesting to investigate the above facts and bring perpetrators to justice.

Attachment: copy of the disability ID card, copy of the marriage certificate.

Date: August 20, 2020. *Signature/ A.S. Baklanova*

EXHIBIT E

The stamp of the hospital number 6 of the city of Minsk, trauma department.

Medical Certificate of Health No. 11360

Issued to Baklanova Anastasia Sergeevna

Date of birth: January 9, 1996 (24 years old); Gender: Female

Place of Residency: Bydennogo street 25-21

The purpose of the Certificate: to present at the local clinic

Additional medical facts: I was checked into the trauma department on August 15, 2020 at 8.10 p.m. and left on August 15, 2020 at 9.06 p.m.

Evaluation: x-ray of the skull in 2 projections (0,1 mZb), surgeon's examination.

Treatment: injection of sodium diclophenate 2.5% - 3.0ml

Conclusion: injury of soft tissues of the back area of the head, injuries and hematoma of both shins.

Recommendation: follow up with the traumatologist and surgeon at the clinic at the place of residence. Next appointment is scheduled for August 17, 2020. Apply cold locally for 3 days, physiotherapy, outpatient follow up treatment of purulent-septic and thromboembolic complications at the clinic at the place of residence. Ketonop 10mg 1 table 2 times/day. For moderate pain – Melbek 7,5 mg or 15 mg 1 tablet once a day for 5-7 days. For intense pain Etodin Fort 400 mg, 1 tablet 2 times a day for 5-7 days; Fastum-gel/gel "DIP RILIF"/"Dolgit"-cream/Ketonal gel/gel "Voltaren-Emulgel"/"Indovazin"/"Ketorol" gel 2%/"Aertal" gel 2%/"Aertal" cream 2-3 times a day locally.

Date of issuance: August 15, 2020 9:09 p.m.

Validity – 1 year

Signature of the doctor – Tihon Valeriy Vasilievich

EXHIBIT F

MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE

Translation from Russian on the second page

Mr. Baklanov Denis Dmmitrievich

Date of Birth: July 19, 1992

Place of Birth: Republic of Belarus, Minsk

Ms. Rozhko Anastasia Sergeevna

Date of Birth: January 9, 1996

Place of Birth: Republic of Belarus, Minsk Region, Soligorsk

Date of Marriage: August 30, 2018

Which was registered under registration number 815 in the book of marriage registrations.

After the marriage the last names will be the following:

Husband: Baklanov

Wife: Baklanova

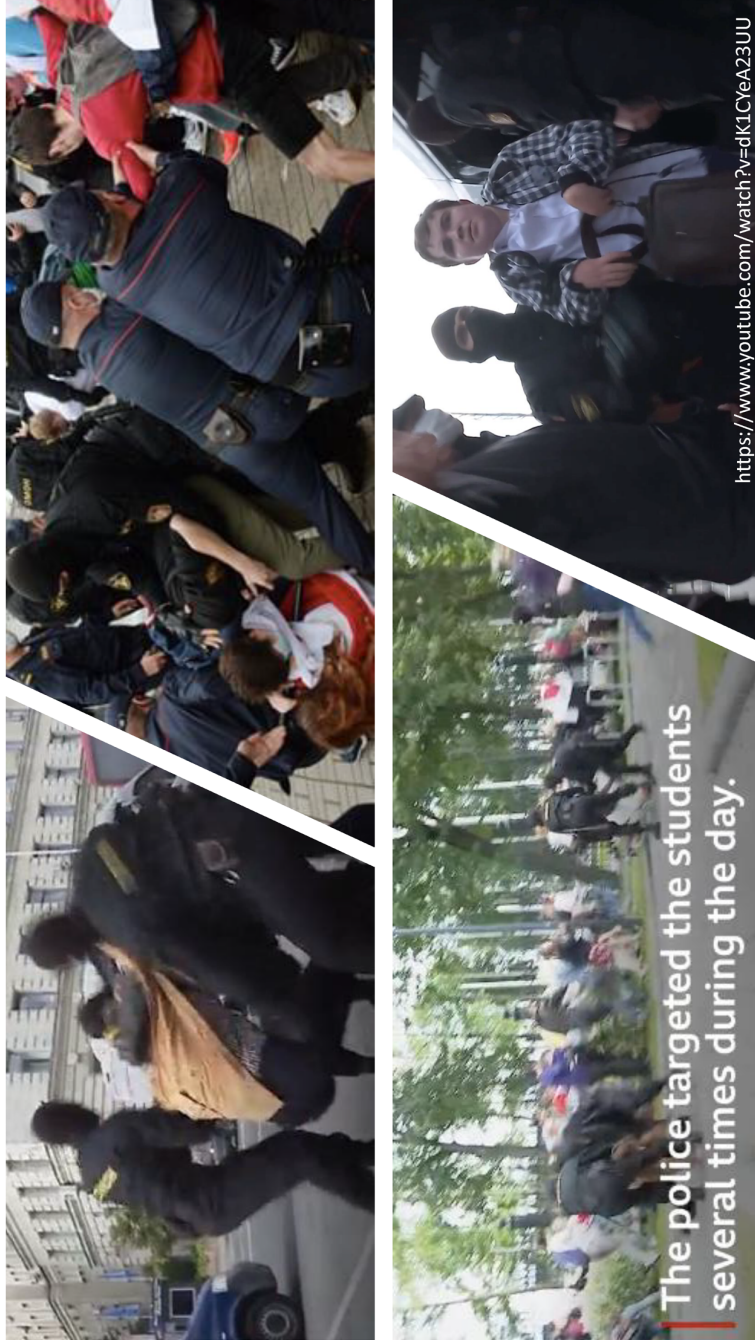
The place of registration of the wedding: Civil Registry Office, administration of Partizanskij District, Minsk.

Issue Date: August 30, 2018

The head of the Civil Registry Office Garshkova A.Y.

Certificate number: I-BN No. 0672681

First page – the same information but in Belarussian







RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Europe, Eurasia, Energy and Environment (E4) Subcommittee
Question for the Record from Congresswoman Wagner for Mr. Fly
September 10, 2020**

Question:

Mr. Fly, where in the region are you seeing the most worrying threats to freedom of the press and freedom of information? How will these restrictions impact the United States' ability to push back on Chinese or Russian propaganda campaigns?

Answer:

Mr. Fly: There are significant threats to freedom of the press and freedom of information across Eurasia. In Russia, independent journalists, including those that work for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, are targeted for harassment. Across Central Asia, journalists often face physical attacks and threats against them and their families. The Belarusian government has stripped RFE/RL journalists of their accreditations. Despite these restrictions, congressionally-funded broadcasters like RFE/RL have continued to report and provide objective news and information to their audiences. But they need more support to circumvent government attempts to control access to audiences through the internet and on other platforms and they need the United States and other democratic governments to speak out and apply diplomatic pressure when journalists are detained or threatened.

Question:

Mr. Fly, you mention in your testimony that China is beginning to cultivate connections with European and Eurasian media outlets. How can the U.S. support independent media in the region to counter CCP malign influence in the information domain?

Answer

Mr. Fly: China is beginning to enter the media space in countries across Eurasia through engagement of local journalists and possible corporate involvement in key media companies. It will eventually likely expand its efforts to message directly to citizens across the region. The United States and European partners should increase their support for truly independent media that are willing to investigate and expose the true nature of China's actions in countries across the region. U.S. programs that provide exchanges and training for independent journalists should be expanded. The United States and the member states of the European Union need to enhance their own abilities to provide facts about their relations with and assistance to countries in the region to the general public to counter misinformation and show their continued commitment to the people of this vital region.

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Europe, Eurasia, Energy and Environment (E4) Subcommittee
Question for the Record from Congresswoman Wagner for Ms. Pearce Laanela
September 10, 2020**

Question:

Ms. Pearce Laanela, how did Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko exploit the pandemic to secure a fraudulent victory in the August 9 elections?

Answer:

Ms. Pearce Laanela: While the current political and civic crisis in Belarus is unprecedented in the country's protracted but remarkable struggle against authoritarianism, it builds on deeply rooted and long standing public discontent over President Lukashenko's authoritarian policies of repressing dissent, muzzling free speech, and amassing unlimited powers to himself. The August 2020 presidential elections were held against the backdrop of deeply flawed system of electoral management organization and unfair rules for candidate registration, lack of transparency measures and access to polls by domestic and international observers. In addition, as a continuation of past crackdowns on opposition and independent civic activists, in the run up to this election Belorussian authorities engaged in politically motivated arrests of potential and standing presidential contestants and their supporters, crackdowns on opposition gatherings and media outlets. The voting process itself was marked by numerous cases of alleged fraudulent actions by electoral officials and the absence of functioning electoral justice mechanisms,

Neither the persecution of political and civic actors nor fraudulent electoral practices are new to Belarus. However, what is new and seems to have contributed to the current situation is the emergence of several new opposition figures with significantly better public outreach and communication, and a more vibrant and engaged civil society. The two main demands that this broad group of pro-democracy actors have put forward are: fresh elections under an electoral law that guarantees free and fair elections; and the reform of the constitution in order to guarantee political freedoms and provide institutional defenses against authoritarianism.

Question:

How can we best work to improve the freeness and fairness of the Belarussian electoral process?

Answer:

Ms. Pearce Laanela: International IDEA has supported democratic actors in Belarus over the past years by providing targeted comparative knowledge and advice on the reform of the electoral process. In the current context, there is an increased need to provide a multi-dimensional support to democratic actors including democratic political parties and civic groups in order to contribute to the eventual political and governance reforms in the country. There is a broadly held agreement among democratic political forces and civic actors that if President Lukashenko is to initiate and implement his constitutional and electoral reforms, these reforms will not be done with genuine democratic reform intentions. The Opposition Coordination Council has announced that it will present its own plans for the electoral and constitutional reforms. The existing evidence and expert analysis on these issues points to the need to explore options for the return of the country to the constitutional system of government with strong parliamentary controls over the executive and robust guarantees for the independence of judiciary and other independent oversight institutions. In the field of electoral reform, reforms are needed to guarantee independence and impartiality of election management authorities, democratic and equitable rules for candidate and political party registration, unimpeded access for election observers, transparency and efficiency in counting and

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Europe, Eurasia, Energy and Environment (E4) Subcommittee
Question for the Record from Congresswoman Wagner for Ms. Pearce Laanela
September 10, 2020**

tabulation and last but not least development of independent and effective electoral justice mechanisms. These vital reforms need to be proposed based on best international practice models and have to be consulted broadly so they represent true voices of the citizens and experts in Belarus and present a strong counterweight to the disingenuous proposals likely to be presented by the current government.

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Europe, Eurasia, Energy and Environment (E4) Subcommittee
Question for the Record from Congresswoman Wagner for Ms. Rohozińska
September 10, 2020**

Question:

I strongly support the Belarussian people as they demand greater freedom and democracy from their government. Ms. Rohozińska, how can the United States affirm Belarussian sovereignty and deter any efforts by Putin, who has already demonstrated his support for the dictatorial Lukashenko regime, to control events in Belarus?

Answer:

Ms. Rohozińska: Thank you for the question. There is a long answer to your complex question., but here I attempt a short one.

The greatest deterrent to any efforts by Putin or Russia to undermine the sovereignty and independence of its neighbours, including Belarus, but also Ukraine, Moldova, etc., is increasing the cost of doing so – financial, political or reputational. While this does not preclude continued negotiations and discussion, the emphasis should be on supporting actors that are genuinely and actively engaged in pursuing democratic reforms, maintaining vocal and visible support for them internationally, while simultaneously manifestly condemning those seeking to deter democratic processes.

The stronger a state is – the more robust its civil society, effective its governance structures and cohesive its society - the more indigestible and inconvenient it will be for Russia to try and control it.

The goal is to facilitate by all means available and appropriate to external actors that the states traditionally regarded by Russia as their 'near-abroad' stand as strong independent states able to withstand the pressures coming from its dominant neighbour, and negotiate terms that are favourable and meet the needs of its citizens, not the Kremlin's.

Specifically for Belarus, continued support for civil society initiatives, independent media, democratically-oriented political parties and movement and independent business should continue, and allow for the emergence of new groups and initiatives. Long-term stable support for democracy-building efforts in Belarus have been crucial in fostering this new generation of activists that have formed the core of a new conscious citizenry.

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Europe, Eurasia, Energy and Environment (E4) Subcommittee
Question for the Record from Congresswoman Wagner for Mr. Rutzen
September 10, 2020**

Question:

With Representative McGovern, I am proud to co-lead the bipartisan Protecting Human Rights During Pandemic Act, which will ensure that the United States is taking the lead in rolling back human rights abuses carried out under the pretext of coronavirus response. Mr. Rutzen, this bill requires the United States to proactively formulate a strategy to address pandemic-related abuses through democracy assistance, freedom of information, human rights, and civil society programming. What elements should this strategy include?

Answer:

Mr. Rutzen: Congresswoman Wagner, thank you for this thoughtful question and for your leadership on the bipartisan Protecting Human Rights During Pandemic Act.

I respectfully suggest that the strategy include three elements: reporting, programming, and diplomacy.

In terms of reporting, information on the impact of emergency powers and other COVID-inspired measures should be included in the State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and considered in USAID's Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index. Additionally, within one year, the State Department should prepare a report to Congress summarizing state responses to the pandemic that either undermined or safeguarded human rights, along with lessons learned so the international community is better prepared next time we encounter a pandemic.

In terms of programming, USAID and the State Department should allocate additional funding to support democracy, rights, and governance programming in the wake of the pandemic. Programs should address the scores of COVID-inspired laws that constrain civil society, criminalize "false information," and erode democratic checks and balances through emergency powers. In developing the strategy, USAID and the State Department should also consider other programmatic priorities – for example, countering malign authoritarian influence in the pandemic response, protecting people from pervasive surveillance in the name of public health, supporting civil society and independent journalism that can act as government watchdogs, and combatting corruption in the delivery of COVID assistance.

Finally, the strategy should include a diplomatic element. Specifically, the State Department should consider issuing statements, engaging in bilateral diplomacy, and supporting multilateral initiatives when state responses to COVID-19 result in significant human rights violations.

These are three basic elements of the strategy, and I would be happy to share additional information. Thank you again for your question and for your leadership on the bipartisan Protecting Human Rights During Pandemic Act.