NOT-SO-GOOD NEIGHBORS: RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN BELARUS

HEARING

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NOT-SO-GOOD NEIGHBORS: RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN BELARUS

NOVEMBER 20, 2019

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WITNESSES

APPENDIX

NOT-SO-GOOD NEIGHBORS: RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN BELARUS

November 20, 2019

COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
WASHINGTON, DC

The hearing was held at 9:58 a.m. in Room 210, Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC, Hon. Alcee L. Hastings, Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Commissioners present: Hon. Alcee L. Hastings, Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe; and Hon. Joe Wilson, Ranking Member, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Witnesses present: Andrei Yeliseyeu, Head of Monitoring Unit, International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS); Research Director, EAST Center; Sofya Orlosky, Senior Program Manager for Eurasia, Freedom House; Franak Viačorka, Research Media Analyst (contractor), U.S. Agency for Global Media; and Brian Whitmore, Senior Fellow and Director of the Russia Program, CEPA.

HON. ALCEE L. HASTINGS, CHAIRMAN, COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Mr. HASTINGS. Good morning, everybody. It's 10, and I have a bad habit of trying to start on time and end on time.

You are welcome here to the U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing entitled "Not-So-Good Neighbors: Russian Influence in Belarus." And with that, we'll come to order and have opening statements and then turn to you all.

This is a timely hearing coming off of the Belarusian election, in addition to the fact that I know all of you know that there is an ongoing proceeding that Russia is implicated in here on the Hill that is much more popular for the moment.

We all know that the Kremlin's disinformation and political interference reaches the shores of the United States and elsewhere in the region of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Yet, it's easy to lose sight of the power that Vladimir Putin's Russia wields in his own neighborhood outside of the ongoing aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere.

In the case of Belarus, Russia's western neighbor, the grip of the Kremlin is no less pervasive but much less obvious. Russia has not

started a hot military conflict in Belarus as it has in Ukraine, but rather employs economic, social, political, and information leverage to weaken the sovereignty of Belarus and pull the country further into its orbit.

I saw this firsthand during my last trip to Minsk for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly annual session in July 2017. Unfortunately, Belarus is ripe for infiltration by external forces.

Civil society and fundamental freedoms have been stifled under the 25-year rule of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has cultivated a strong working relationship with Vladimir Putin. The two use similar tactics to crush dissent in their respective countries.

Belarus is also heavily economically dependent on Russia, with its economy propped up by discounted oil and gas from its neighbor. The shared Soviet history of the two countries makes it easy for Russia to appeal to the hearts and mind[s] of many Belarusians, and the Lukashenko regime is feeling the squeeze. And with little linguistic or cultural barriers, the Kremlin and its partners easily operate in the media and information sphere in Belarus, spreading pro-Russia propaganda in an effort to keep Belarus from turning toward the West.

In this context, Lukashenko has sought to vector West for fear of his regime. He has sought to engage with leaders of the European Union through Eastern Partnership, and when possible has sought meetings with U.S. leaders—although he wouldn't meet with me when I was there, but I did meet with the then-foreign minister—including the delegation that I told you that I traveled with. I found that he, like other autocrats, was not interested in the dreams of his people, but made standard stability appeals to defend his regime.

I remember that there were three people in jail, and we talked with them about trying to get them out. They were his opponents in the election. And one man was very brave, as was his wife. I wish I could remember their names.

Despite Lukashenko's lack of imagination and decades of oppressing his people, we must not forget that Belarus is an independent country whose sovereignty is under attack. And as another target of Russian malign influence in the OSCE area, proper scrutiny will prevent active conflict and empower those oppressed voices who have waited so long for justice.

Today we will explore the complexities of the Russia-Belarus relationship and what the United States can do to defend Belarus, this important crossroads between Russia and the West, against Russian attacks.

At this time I would like to acknowledge my ranking member and good friend. We just came off of an interesting election to Tunisia and Morocco and Israel. We learned a lot, and expect to learn a lot here this morning.

Joe?

HON. JOE WILSON, RANKING MEMBER, COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I appreciate your leadership and insight. And indeed, it was an extraordinary

CODEL to Tunisia, to Israel, and ending up in Marrakesh, Morocco, with the OSCE conference, and very enlightening. And we look forward today to the expert witnesses and your input.

As we monitor Putin's malign influence on its neighbors, as well as far and abroad, it seems we pay too little attention to what's going on with the talented people of Belarus. Perhaps this is because we have so much more evidence and headline-grabbing news available when discussing the Kremlin's attempts to meddle in our own elections and society. But just as dramatic and concerning is Russian adventurism, whether it be in Syria, Moldova, Ukraine—resulting in 13,000 deaths—in the Republic of Georgia, and even in places as far-flung as the Central African Republic.

Vladimir Putin tramples on international norms and attempts to erode liberal democratic norms where they are just beginning to grow, or even where they're already well-established.

Though not a military conquest, Putin's designs on Belarus should be just as concerning to us as the above-mentioned examples.

As the chains to the old Iron Curtain have been broken, and democracy and the rule of law has moved steadily forward, Belarus remains a stubborn outlier. Why is this? We know that part of the reason is lack of sufficient and significant structural reforms after the fall of the Soviet Union. Still known for its collective farms, Belarus has an economy stuck in the past. Another part of the reason is the dictatorship of President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled the country for most of the post-Soviet existence by falsifying elections and marginalizing, even violently punishing dissenters. And finally, Putin's tight grip on its old Soviet republic is unrelenting, taking advantage of Belarus' weakness to create a vassal state subject to its whims.

We know that, as longtime authoritarian leaders, Putin and Lukashenko sadly have many things in common and many incentives to work together. As we work—as we hope we will learn over the course of this hearing, there are questions about how long this cozy relationship can last. Lukashenko is a tyrant, but not a fool. He knows that engagement with Europe and the West is not optional in this day and age. He sees Putin's greedy fingers have reached into Ukraine. He has been forced to make some difficult decisions about the direction the country should take. We can only hope that these decisions give greater freedom to the deserving people of Belarus, who have for too long lived without the opportunity to express themselves without fear or repression.

The younger, globally connected generation in particular can easily see the opportunities and freedom available in the West. They, along with all Belarusians, deserve the opportunity to determine their own future. A Belarus tied down by Putin is a Belarus stuck in the failed Soviet past and subservient [to] Moscow.

I look forward to hearing our witnesses comment on the prospect for the Belarus future and the ways to combat Putin's pernicious influence.

Thank you, and I yield back my time.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you, Representative Wilson.

We have assembled here an expert panel to discuss Belarus in the context of Russia's malign influence.

First we have Andrei Yeliseyeu, who serves as head of the Monitoring Unit for iSANS, which is the International Strategic Action Network for Security, based in Warsaw, Poland. ISANS is an international expert initiative established in 2018 and aimed at detecting, analyzing, and countering hybrid threats against democracy, rule of law, and the sovereignty of states in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

Our next witness is Sofya Orlosky, the senior program manager for Eurasia of Freedom House here in Washington, where she heads the development of engagement and advocacy strategies for its Europe and Eurasia portfolio. And, Sofya, thank you so much for the work you do with the Helsinki Commission.

Then we will hear from Franak Viačorka. I'm not going to try to do that again. [Laughs.] Franak is the research media analyst at the U.S. Agency for Global Media, where he's focused on the digital markets of Eurasia.

And finally we have Mr. Brian Whitmore, the senior fellow and director of the Russia Program at the Center for European Policy Analysis here in Washington. He's also the author of the Power Vertical Blog and host of the Power Vertical Podcast, both of which focus on Russian affairs. Must have been real busy here lately.

Please note that the full biographies of our witnesses can be found in the provided materials. And I thank you to our assembled witnesses, and I thank all of you in the audience for being here as well. And I call on Mr. Yeliseyeu to begin his testimony.

ANDREI YELISEYEU, HEAD OF MONITORING UNIT, INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ACTION NETWORK FOR SECURITY (iSANS); RESEARCH DIRECTOR, EAST CENTER

Mr. YELISEYEU. Dear Mr. Chairman, Co-Chairman, thank you for organizing this Belarus-related hearing, particularly in this peacetime in Washington, DC, and for the opportunity to join this distinguished panel on the threats to Belarusian sovereignty.

Kremlin aims at putting Belarus under its complete influence, essentially turning Belarus into a part of Soviet Union. To achieve this goal, Kremlin applies political, economic, and propagandistic pressure on the Belarusian authorities and the Belarusian society. It sees Belarus as an integral part of the so-called Russian world.

Russia wants Belarus to cede a large part of its sovereignty toward Moscow in exchange for further economic support. Kremlin conditions future oil and gas deals and loan assistance to Minsk with deeper integration within the so-called Union State. Belarus is very vulnerable to malign Kremlin influence due to deep institutional, economic, social, and cultural connections between the two countries' elites, and because of short-sighted repressive policies of the Belarusian authorities against the Belarusian language, independent media, and civil society.

The threat is that even deeper integration, in the form promoted by Russia, will leave Belarus with only nominal sovereignty, when in reality Minsk will have to agree to virtually any domestic or foreign policy with Moscow. You all must be aware that Ukraine remains the top target of Kremlin propaganda. Belarus is not far behind Ukraine in terms of scale and scope of propaganda and disinformation in the online space.

In the last 2 years, many propaganda websites, which previously had Ukraine or Syria as their primary topics, added Belarus as additional regular target. A dozen of new active outlets of disinformation, which are entirely devoted to events in Belarus, have appeared online. Their publications use aggressive chauvinistic rhetoric, sometimes openly questioning the existence of an independent Belarusian ethnic group or language, discrediting and distorting the history of Belarus. Anti-Belarusian propaganda says the Belarusians are part of a Russian people, and that the Belarusian language was artificially created by the hostile West.

As a disinformation researcher, I have studied thousands of disinformation cases. Yet, occasional claims come as a surprise even to me, as someone who's seen a lot. For example, Schengen visa fees for Belarusians are high because the number of homosexuals per capita in Belarus is very low, one propaganda outlet claimed not long ago. They allege that the hostile EU wants to give Belarusians cheaper visas only in exchange for undermining the institution of family. Due to irresponsible state policies and the media field, a large part of the Belarusian population literally believes in the Russian media space. Oddly enough, Western media corporations, such as Google and Apple, unwittingly make Russian online media presence in Belarus even larger.

This happens because of the absence of fully functioning geotargeting for Belarus in their automatically generated news services. As a result, internet users who select Belarus as their location are still offered a lot of Russian media content in their newsfeeds. A recent declaration by the largest Belarus media community members calls upon all interested actors to make Belarus an independent country on the global internet map by recognizing the Belarusian segment of the internet as a distinct market.

Ladies and gentlemen, a loss of Belarusian sovereignty would be a catastrophe not only for the people of Belarus who dreamed of a sovereign and independent country for many generations. This tragic turn would also encourage further Russian aggressive behavior toward its immediate neighbors and instigate new Russian attempts to destabilize regional security. Great attention of the international community to developments in Belarus and urgent efforts are needed to help promote the sovereignty of Belarus, despite the very complicated relationship with its nondemocratic government.

On behalf of the whole iSANS team, I want to thank the U.S. Helsinki Commission once again for holding this hearing and placing your focus on Belarus and threats to its sovereignty. And I look forward to answering your questions.

Mr. HASTINGS. Right. Ms. Orlosky.

SOFYA ORLOSKY, SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER FOR EURASIA, FREEDOM HOUSE

Ms. ORLOSKY. Thank you. Chairman Hastings, Ranking Member Wilson, it is an honor to testify in front of you today. I ask that my full written testimony be entered into the record.

I'll start with a vital contributing factor to Belarus' resilience to external influence, that is strong democratic governance. Pluralistic and fair elections, transparent and accountable government, thriving civil society, businesses, and independent media are key inter-

nal safeguards against economic, political, and sociocultural encroachment on a nation's sovereignty. Sadly, we've seen little progress in strengthening these institutions in Belarus.

Last Sunday's elections again fell short of the OSCE standards. The OSCE election monitoring mission summarized it bluntly: Fundamental freedoms were disregarded, and the integrity of the election process was not adequately safeguarded. The resulting lower chamber of the parliament is uniformly loyal to the incumbent government, the electoral reform proposals offering no meaningful change.

Yes, we see fewer arrests and prison terms, which makes the Government of Belarus look good in the eyes of the West. But make no mistakes, this "liberalization," quote/unquote, has happened before in 2006, 2010, and 2015. And each time a thaw was followed by a new cycle of repression. Except now, instead of political trials, the Belarusian authorities are using a swifter and less tractable tactic of debilitating fines.

To make things worse, Belarus now appears to be borrowing from the Kremlin's authoritarian playbook. The 2018 amendments to the law on mass media largely mimic those of the notorious Russian law on bloggers by expanding the government authority to censor the web, curtailing anonymous internet use, and fining freelance journalists. Existing antiextremism measures are starting to be used against ordinary internet users as well, much like in Russia. The first prison sentence for a social media post was handed down this year.

Moreover, the proposed amendments to the law on countering extremism open the possibility of subjective application that endangers initiatives promoting Belarusian cultural and historical independence. Belarus has finally abolished the deplorable criminal code article that prohibited working on behalf of unregistered civic groups. However, criminal penalties were replaced with administrative fines, and civic groups continue having difficulty openly receiving foreign funding, including from the U.S. embassy.

Meanwhile, Belarus appears to be effectively bullied into a hasty implementation of the Russia-Belarus Union State agreement. Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko are slated to sign the updated integration plan and a series of industry-specific roadmap documents on December 8th. Why should we be concerned? The preparations for the integration process were expedited last December as a condition for relief measures for Belarus' oil industry and have been shrouded in secrecy.

Less than 3 weeks out, neither the Belarusian nor Russian officials have presented the updated documents, only reassuring the public that the first stage of the integration will cover just economic policies. Moreover, the Belarusian Ministry of Economy refused to release the initial drafts to the public, citing concerns for national security and public order. The alacrity around the integration process has caused concern among Belarusian citizens, as well as political opposition, spurring divisive rumors of impending absorption or annexation by Russia.

The Russian Government is already using Belarus' partnership to persecute political dissent. In the past 3 years at least six Russian nationals were detained or deported by the Belarusian officials

at the request of the Russian authorities. Among them, an activist, a journalist, a blogger, an elections expert, and even a world champion in mixed martial arts. The most recent case resulted in the activist's arrest for his participation in this summer's protests in Moscow. Belarus also aided the Russian authorities in arresting a Ukrainian national, who has now been sentenced to 6 years on charges of promoting terrorism in Russia.

Belarus will never be truly independent if its government continues to play by the Kremlin's rules that disregard the human dimension of our mutual security and put the premium on the rent-seeking, law-bending behavior of the corrupt elites. If the United States wants to help Belarus become more resilient, it should do so, first of all, by strongly encouraging genuine democratic reform. For example, condition any next steps in the U.S.-Belarus engagement on the comprehensive electoral reform and the removal of restrictions on peaceful civic activity.

The U.S. could provide experts, technical assistance, and conditional funding to help advance change, ensure consistent and meaningful participation of the Belarusian civil society as an equal party in the Belarus-U.S. human rights and democracy dialog, such as providing a critical stakeholder assessment on progress and achievements, continue to support U.S. public media programming in the languages spoken in Belarus, including through the U.S. agency for global media, the RFE/RL [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty], as well as through independent media initiatives.

Finally, expand foreign assistance for pro-democracy civic initiatives while at the same time ensuring that Belarusian Government removes regulatory obstacles for receiving such funding.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering your questions.

Mr. HASTINGS. Franak, if you would go forward.

FRANAK VIAČORKA, RESEARCH MEDIA ANALYST (CONTRACTOR), U.S. AGENCY FOR GLOBAL MEDIA

Mr. VIAČORKA. Mr. Chairman, members of the commission, today I speak in my personal capacity, not as a U.S. Agency for Global Media representative.

So the process of Russification is interdependent with the tightening of the antidemocratic regime in Belarus. While trying to intensify the relationship with the West and playing geopolitical seesaw, the Belarus authorities do not make any visible measures to prevent Russian dominance in information and cultural space. I couldn't describe better what is Russian soft power than Russian General Governor Muravyov from 19th century, nicknamed "Hangman" for cracking down the 1863 anti-Russian uprising in Belarus. He said: The Russian bureaucrat, the Russian school, and the Russian priest will complete what the Russian bayonet could not finish.

For example, endorsed by Lukashenko, Sputnik propaganda network reached unprecedented growth in Belarus. Now it is in the top 10 news websites, primarily due to massive support from Russian Yandex news and many news aggregators. Russian social media services like VK [VKontakte], Odnoklassniki, and Moi.mir all belonging to Kremlin-tied Mail.ru, have more than 3 million users and prevailed over Facebook and Instagram in Belarus.

These networks censor critical content about Vladimir Putin policies, and predominantly serve as an extension of Russian soft power and disinformation machine.

Unfortunately, there is no resilience to Russian disinformation in this society. It targets multiple groups, especially young people under 25 years old, born under the current regime and raised in the Russian media space, as well as seniors nostalgic about the Soviet past without critical thinking. They're often targets of weaponized information, including entertainment TV shows and explicit anti-Western content in social media. Major TV shows from Russia Today network are included in their obligatory social package. But more critical, Kremlin has established many local news websites networks like Vitbich, Sochinfo, and hundreds, hundreds of communities, groups, and channels on social media. They are not pro-Putin explicitly, rather anti-Western, anti-Polish, anti-liberal, and, of course, anti-Belarusian.

In your folders you can find my analysis of Russian social media groups, pages, networks, as well as narratives and examples of the posts they do in order to change and manipulate Belarusian national identity. Many of those pages belong to neo-Nazi, pan-Slavic, or ultra-orthodox organizations. Some are tied to the Russian Orthodox Church and so-called Cossacks. Toxic and aggressive, Cossacks oppose Belarusian liberal and pro-Western aspirations, organize provocations, harass pro-democracy activists on social media, and in real life. Cossacks are often referred as Orthodox Taliban.

It's not a secret that Russian Orthodoxy and Russian language are major instruments of Russian universe expansion and geopolitical revanchism. Kremlin uses them for political pressure too. Although 67 percent of the population declared Belarusian their native language, it was eliminated from significant parts of public life. In the army, I was punished by arrest for speaking in Belarusian language not in Russian. Earlier, I was forced to study in the underground because my lyceum with instruction in Belarusian was liquidated by authorities.

On the other hand, the viability of the Belarusian language is demonstrated by its presence on Wikipedia, digital influencers, news media, a vibrant music scene. Still, there is a lack of content in Belarusian language, especially for kids. Ensuring translation and distribution of films and TV shows in Belarusian language, like Netflix content, would be crucial for change of its status. It is necessary to overcome the monopoly of Russian and local nondemocratic narratives, ensure the sustainable presence of the Russian surrogate media—such as Radio Free Europe, Belsat TV, European Radio for Belarus, Radio Racyja broadcasting from Poland.

This is the right moment to relaunch Voice of America Belarus service, discontinued in 1956. Reopening the U.S. embassy could help in building a direct dialog with Belarusian people, not authorities, intensify projects on media literacy, and digital journalism, as well as exchanges such as digital communication network. Russian influence imposes a threat to Belarus independence, but hopefully not immediate at the moment. It rather facilitates long-term goals to Russify the national identity of Belarusians and to prevent any potential pro-Western and pro-democracy aspirations.

Thank you.

Mr. HASTINGS. Mr. Williams.

BRIAN WHITMORE, SENIOR FELLOW AND DIRECTOR OF THE RUSSIA PROGRAM, CEPA

Mr. WHITMORE. Chairman Hastings, Ranking Member Wilson, thank you for the opportunity to join this distinguished panel to discuss Russian influence in Belarus, the broader relationship between Moscow and Minsk, and the strategic implications——

Mr. HASTINGS. Is your mic on, Mr. Williams?

Mr. WHITMORE. It should be—ah, there we go. I'll start all over again. [Laughs.]

Chairman Hastings, Ranking Member Wilson, thank you for the opportunity to join this distinguished panel to discuss Russian influence in Belarus, the broader relationship between Moscow and Minsk, and the strategic implications for the United States and its allies. It is truly an honor to be here.

I'd like to use my time before you today to broaden the aperture a bit, and to take a look at the importance of Belarus for the security of our allies and at the complex and very nuanced relationship between Russia and Belarus, and how it is changing. And I'd like to begin by stating something that is obvious, but which nevertheless merits stressing: Strategically speaking, Belarus matters a lot, and it is likely to matter a lot more in the very near future.

Position and behavior of Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian regime, as distasteful as we may find that regime, is a key factor in the security balance on NATO's eastern flank. Bordering NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, Belarus looms large in any Russian war plan with the West. It would be an essential asset should Moscow seek to seal the Suwalki Corridor and cut off the Baltic States from the Atlantic alliance. And it could also provide a platform from which Russia could threaten Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.

Far from being a sideshow, Belarus needs to occupy a central place in Western strategic thinking. Now, of course, due to his abysmal record on human rights and democracy, it would be highly problematic for Lukashenko to be an ally of the United States. But at the same time, it is in the interest of the United States and its allies that Belarus maintain its independence and sovereignty, and that its economic and military dependence on Russia be minimized. And therein lies the paradox.

But the relationship between Moscow and Minsk is actually much more nuanced than the stereotype suggests. This ostensibly close partnership is actually among one of the most dysfunctional relationships in the former Soviet space. Belarus occupies a central space in Russian strategic thinking and an essential part of what Moscow calls its "strategic depth"—that is, the existence of dependent satellite buffer states on Russia's western border. Vladimir Putin therefore views the relationship with Minsk as primarily imperial. He doesn't view Belarus as a fully sovereign state, and he seeks to turn Belarus into a de facto extension of Russia's western military district, at the very least.

Lukashenko on the other hand, for all his faults, is not interested in sacrificing Belarus' sovereignty. And he has little to gain from a military standoff with the West in which his country would be

on the front line. Lukashenko, in contrast, views the relationship between Moscow and Minsk as purely transactional. He's happy to go through the motions of being Russia's ally, as long as Russia pays him for the trouble. Belarus' economy is effectively propped up by importing heavily subsidized Russian oil and exporting refined petroleum products.

Russia and Belarus are stuck in a strained marriage of convenience between two wary partners whose leaders can barely hide their disdain for each other. And this is important to know: Lukashenko and Putin do not like each other personally. On the one hand you have Putin, the would-be emperor. On the other hand, you have Lukashenko, the crafty and manipulative gamer.

Now, the founding document of the Belarusian-Russian relationship is the 1999 union treaty, which is effectively a grand bargain that has defined the relationship ever since. The essence of the deal was really simple: Belarus would renounce its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, make integration with Russia its main foreign policy priority, and act as a buffer state as NATO and the European Union enlarged eastward. In exchange, Russia would provide subsidized energy, financial assistance, and grant privileged access for Belarusian goods on the Russian market. It was effectively an exchange of economic assistance for geopolitical loyalty.

But since Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2014, the grand bargain between Moscow and Minsk began to break down. Russia's aggression in Ukraine have led to fears on the part of Lukashenko that much—and much of the Belarusian elite that the country's fragile sovereignty could be in jeopardy.

And Russia, meanwhile, facing sanctions and a flailing economy, has scaled back its subsidies and economic assistance to Belarus. Moscow has also in this period sought to pressure Belarus into hosting a new Russian military base on its territory, integrating the country's armed forces more deeply and accepting a revived integration project that would effectively end Belarus' sovereignty.

As Lukashenko resisted these efforts—and he has resisted these efforts—Moscow began sending not-so-subtle hints. In 2016, for example, Russia began deploying mechanized military units near the Belarusian border. Now, Lukashenko's reacted by flirting with the West, seeking closer ties, courting a relationship with China, and by attempting to develop a high-tech sector to decrease economic dependence on Russia. At the same time, he has remained nominally open to Moscow's proposals for deeper economic integration and the Belarusian ruling elite remains divided between pro-Russian and pro-independence wings. And there's more on that in my written testimony.

Lukashenko and Putin are scheduled to discuss a Russian-supported plan for deeper integration in December, and Belarus is planning to hold Presidential elections next August, which could open the door for greater Russian meddling. There's also indications that Russia's military intelligence, the GRU, and its foreign intelligence service, the SVR, are alarmed by Lukashenko's efforts to preserve Belarus' independence by attempting to move it closer to the West, as tentative as these moves may be.

Now, given the centrality of Belarus to Russia's perceived security interest, and nobody more than—except for Ukraine looms as

large in Russia's security interest as Belarus—Moscow will likely view Belarus as a zero-sum game and will be willing to take risks to maintain it as a client state. Russia will most likely continue to pressure the Lukashenko regime into deeper economic and military integration. But if that fails, we cannot rule out that the Kremlin could attempt regime change or even a military solution to keep Belarus in its sphere of influence.

Given the high priority that Moscow places on keeping Minsk as a client, Russia clearly has escalation dominance in Belarus. But this does not mean that the United States and its allies are helpless. We can take steps to make sure Belarus—to assure that Belarus becomes less dependent on Russia economically, such as helping it develop its fledgling high-tech sector. This would have the added benefit of changing the political environment and changing the political economy in Belarus, and potentially laying the groundwork for a more pluralistic political system in the future.

We can also, as my colleague said, intensify our work with civil society and media, which would shore up Belarus' sense of nationhood in the face of a Russian disinformation campaign that Belarus is not an actual nation, and make the country more indigestible in the event of eventual Russian aggression.

And finally, we could send a clear and unambiguous signal to Moscow that any forceful effort to violate Belarus' sovereignty would incur costs, including but not limited to additional sanctions. As distasteful as we may find Lukashenko, we do regard Belarus' sovereignty as sacrosanct, and that message needs to be sent to Moscow.

Thank you very much for your attention and I'll be happy to answer your questions.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you, Mr. Williams. What we will do is alternate between Mr. Wilson and myself. And rather than specify when we put questions, any of you or all of you dive in. It will be appreciated.

What we've heard from you today is both sobering and all too familiar. The Kremlin, which has engaged in hybrid warfare to promote its disruptive agenda, in a number of sovereign states along the borders, now has its sights on Belarus and has had for a protracted period of time. We know that Kremlin playbook when it comes to disinformation and malign influence. But it would be helpful to understand more specifically the tactics Russia is using to promote its agenda of a Russia-Belarus union. Is Belarusian society able to resist these efforts? And to the extent that you can, identify who is winning this struggle for the hearts and minds of the Belarusian people.

Mr. YELISEYEU. For the two last decades Lukashenko essentially traded geopolitical loyalty and military cooperation with Russia for Russian generosity—lower gas prices, beneficial oil processing schemes, an open market for Belarusian goods, and other tools of financial assistance allowed Lukashenko to keep largely unreformed Belarusian economy afloat. Now Russia uses this economic leverage, you know, to condition further economic assistance with deeper integration. It uses propagandistic pressure too, with the aim to create an illusion that a large part of Belarusian population actually support this radically deep integration with Russia.

I will give you one example. Representative sociological surveys show that just a few percent of the Belarusian population, you know, support joining Russia. But what Russian propaganda actors do in social media, they organize polls that show, you know, a much higher figure, like over 30 percent for instance. Of course, these polls are not representative. Anyone, you know, can launch this poll in a given social media page and everyone can vote, and trolls and bots, you know, can contribute to the poll results. So but later on these results, published by a range of websites, you know, creating this illusion of big, you know, numbers of population in favor of losing sovereignty or radical deep integration with Russia. So this is an important tactic that is used by propaganda actors in the media sphere.

When it comes to civil society, well, it does its best but, of course, the conditions are very uneven. I mean, a centralized state machine versus civil society under domestic pressure and with a lack of external support. So a younger generation of media activists, since independent media, they need a larger arena for action. They need a less oppressive environment inside the country, and larger support to continue what they're doing nowadays.

Mr. HASTINGS. Is there a fear among Belarusians that their country may suffer the similar fate of Ukraine if Putin chooses to—or, Lukashenko chooses to pursue closer ties with either the U.S., or the EU, or Western countries? Is that fear pervasive in Belarus?

Mr. VIAČORKA. I can begin answering this question, because it's very—it's very difficult. So first of all, Ukraine was very inspirational to all of us. Many Belarusians—young Belarusians came to Kyiv to protest for democracy and freedom. Some of them died, were shot at the Maidan in the downtown Kyiv. And these protests, and even this war now in Ukraine, it's also war for Belarus—for its identity, for its future, for its democratic aspirations as well.

So after 2014, Belarusians are following Ukrainian events very closely. All the political changes, all the events in the southeastern Ukraine, occupation of Crimea. Sometimes inspired people, sometimes scared people. Of course, nobody wants war. But Belarus is not Ukraine. There is a very different historical background. Belarus is much more unified in sense of ethnicity than Ukraine. We have only 8.2 percent of Russian ethnic populations, so compared to Ukraine, where Russians were predominant ethnic group in southeastern part of Ukraine. So for Russians it's very difficult to say that you have to join Russia because you are Russians. They are not Russians. Yes, they speak Russian, but it doesn't mean they are Russians.

So I think this is why Russia is trying to build another story, another tactic and strategy toward Belarus. They are trying to play with its Orthodoxy and Russian language. And they say: Since you are Russian Orthodox, you are Russians. Since you are Russian speakers, you are Russian. And we will come to protect you. Lukashenko is always playing seesaw. So he's trying to be with the West—we would joke that in summer Lukashenko is pro-Western, in winter he is pro-Russian. And I think even Belarusians understand this game, so nobody really believes what he says because usually it's more the show, it's more the comedy. So it's more—Lukashenko became a meme for a young generation.

More important is to see what's happening. And we see that Lukashenko and authorities are closing their eyes on the developments inside of the society, on the development of this pro-Russian network, of this Russian party. It's not the party, as we used to know political parties. It's like a deep state. It's like a hidden organization. It's something which exists in practically all spheres of life, in every region, in every city. It unifies officials, military people, activists. And neither Lukashenko nor civil society today cannot resist, cannot counter efficiently this Russian increasing dominance.

Mr. HASTINGS. Mr. Williams.

Mr. WHITMORE. Yes, in answer to your question I recall a conversation I had with a Belarusian opposition figure back in 2014. And he said: Look at the conundrum we're in right now. Imagine we pull off the impossible. Imagine we overthrow this dictator. Imagine we overcome this police state. What do you think's going to be happening next? Well, then we're going to have to face another dictator. And this kind of changed the political dynamic. And correct me if I'm wrong, this is the impression I was getting from Belarusians I was talking to, this kind of changed the dynamic within the country where the opposition began to make peace with Lukashenko because we want our sovereignty today. We can fight for democracy tomorrow. I think this was kind of a calculation that was made in the minds of a lot of people.

There was also suspicion that some people who claim to be opposition are actually Russian agents that are—that would be used to increase Kremlin influence. So the dynamic changed dramatically after 2014. And it makes it a lot more complicated right now. Again, we have this paradox, where Lukashenko has positioned himself as the last, greatest defender of Belarusian sovereignty, while we in the West find this regime distasteful. And what can we do in this situation? It's—I don't have an easy answer. I wish I did.

Mr. HASTINGS. Ms. Orlosky, you were getting ready to say something?

Ms. ORLOSKY. I think it's important to note that even though citizens are concerned, we haven't seen much visible action to counteract these attempts. There is a civic initiative that was started this year called Svezhii Veter that attempts to assemble a critical mass of citizens who are concerned about specifically the expedited Union State negotiations. Several political candidates ahead of the parliamentary elections have put the item on their agenda and have voiced it out during the public gatherings.

Mr. HASTINGS. But nobody in the opposition won, did they?

Ms. ORLOSKY. But, exactly.

Mr. HASTINGS. I didn't mean to cut you off, but I just——

Ms. ORLOSKY. But you made my point.

Mr. HASTINGS. Oh, okay. [Laughter.]

Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much Mr. Chairman. And Mr. Yeliseyeu, your being here, your existence, is a dream come true to me. I supported a person of Polish heritage, Barry Goldwater, to run for president. My first visit to Washington was for the national "Draft Goldwater" rally July the 4th, 1963. And so my whole

life was really focused, as a teenager on, to hopefully the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe. I have a book behind my desk by Barry Goldwater, it cost all of 75 cents, and it was, "Why Not Victory?" What it meant was the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe, you. And so I'm just so excited to be here with you.

And what a wonderful model—our family went a step further. My oldest son married a person of Polish heritage, Jennifer Miskowitz, obviously Polish. And she was the newscaster of the largest television station in South Carolina. And so he's done quite well because of her and her association with Poland. And what a message to Belarus. Poland can point out that they've had twenty-five years of positive economic growth. The only country in Europe that had had—that can point to that. So what an example.

And then, Ms. Orlosky, you and I share the heritage of working with sister organizations, okay? National Democrat[ic] Institute, International Republican Institute. And I had the opportunity to be an election observer June the 10th, 1990, in Bulgaria. And it was startling, the comparison. Before I went, everything I read, the people in Bulgaria through pan-Slavism were just really enthusiastic about being part of the Soviet empire that they didn't want to be just a Soviet satellite, they really wanted to be a Soviet Republic. I got there, nobody felt that way. Also when I got there, I felt like I was stepping back in the 1930s. It was pathetic. And the lifestyle was just so anemic. And now I've gone back every 2 or 3 years, and how exciting to see the progress of that country. And now a member of NATO, the European Union, a very dynamic country.

I was honored to be with Prime Minister Boyko Borissov for my birthday 2 years ago. And I found out that, Mr. Chairman, Bulgarian wines are very good. So I——

Mr. HASTINGS. Yes, I know Solomon Passy, and so that speaks for itself.

Mr. WILSON. That's right. Hey, we have shared friends in Bulgaria, the former foreign minister. And so many—but, again, great examples for Belarus of success, as opposed to what apparently is going on. So again, I'm just grateful to be here with you.

And, Ms. Orlosky, given the current authoritarian regime in Minsk, what can the U.S. hopefully do to bolster a civil society in Belarus and to preserve its—the Belarus sovereignty? How can the Congress help in this effort?

Ms. ORLOSKY. Thank you for your question. Over the last decade we have seen certain efforts put in place to support civil society initiatives. And there is foreign assistance available for civic groups, but unfortunately we can't say that it's sufficient. Your counterparts in the European Union are doing everything they can to provide foreign funding as well.

However, for as long as Belarusian civic groups continue to operate in the environment where they have to register their foreign funding and essentially apply for permission to receive a grant, where they have to register as an organization where they are placed under so many restrictions that compliance, so to speak, becomes a time-consuming endeavor as opposed to implementing the necessary initiatives to build a stronger awareness, to support youth, to support independent media, the efforts to provide funding are going to be met with challenges.

And most recent example, just a week ago we learned that a civic initiative in Belarus that was hoping to develop a program that encourages people to participate in public discussions of laws and bills received a small grant from the U.S. embassy—or, was awarded a small grant, which is under $25,000. And they received denials from three different ministries to register that grant, which usually means that any other attempts will be met with the same fate. So what kind of assistance can we be talking about if these restrictions continue to exist? I think it's important to pair assistance efforts with bilateral engagement with the government to remove the obstacles for civil society to receive that assistance. I think this is absolutely crucial.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you. And in fact, again, lighting does strike, bipartisan cooperation here, all right? So we'll be working together to back that up.

And Mr. Whitmore, I'm really grateful of your lecturing. You've lectured in Odessa, Ukraine, and St. Petersburg, Russia, and my hometown of Columbia, South Carolina. So we like the association with St. Petersburg and Odessa. So thank you for your lecturing.

And with that, it's been spoken there's a generational change potential in Belarus. And how do you identify this? And would the young people of that country want to associate with the world of Vladimir Putin or Western civilization?

Mr. WHITMORE. Well, we're witnessing the first generation that only knows life in an independent Belarus is now coming of age. And I think we have to capitalize on that opportunity. They're not going to be as susceptible to the appeals to Soviet nostalgia. And I think there are concrete things we can do. And as my colleagues have noted, working with civil society and seizing this moment. But I really think we need to invest in this high-tech sector to facilitate the development of Belarus' high-tech sector. Because in a lot of ways Russia's given us a wonderful opportunity right now.

Between 2000 and 2015 Russian subsidies accounted for, on average, 15 percent of Belarus' GDP. They've been cut since 2015. And now they account for approximately 5 percent, according to IMF data. Now, this means that Russia is leaving this gap that needs to be filled in the Belarusian economy. And it can only be filled by the private sector—or, we would hope that it would be filled by the private sector. And that would change the entire political economy, entire political dynamic.

Mr. HASTINGS. How inviting is investing in the high tech——

Mr. WHITMORE. Well, the authorities are saying they want investment in high tech. They are sending delegations to Silicon Valley. They are giving nominal tax relief and tax incentives for this. So they're acting like they want this.

Now, I don't know if they understand the full political implications of this, because if you develop a vibrant Belarusian high-tech sector, that is going to change the political economy of Belarus and change the political dynamics and I would argue, over the long term, lay the foundation for a more pluralist political system. So I think this is one of the ways that we can engage this new generation.

Mr. WILSON. And I'm hopeful like you. I had the opportunity to meet with a delegation of business leaders from Belarus in North

Augusta, South Carolina, where they were meeting with industry leaders. And so I'm hopeful. I now yield back.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you. And I—this is an unusual question—but I like children. And I have two granddaughters, nine and eight. And quite frankly, they are about the most important thing to me going at this point, to keep me going. But what is the status of primary education, elementary education, high school? How does that look in Belarus?

Mr. VIAČORKA. Thank you for this question. So education is also the field of battle, I would say, between Russian or imperialist ideology. But it doesn't start, of course, in kindergarten, but in the high school and during all the history lessons we really see the change of the narrative. When the schoolbooks printed in 1990s, before Lukashenko came to power and Russia built strong presence in Belarusian information space, kids were taught true Belarusian history about our great past, about our good times and bad times, about our unions and our wars, about our connections with Lithuania and Poland and Ukraine.

Now we see that the new schoolbooks are printed with the support of Rossotrudnichestvo and other Russian-funded foundations. And they already push another narrative. So we see different types of heroes for these young people. And this clash of two narratives, it happens in the school classrooms. We also lack schoolbooks and content for kids in Belarusian language. Basically we all discussed, like, last year Masha and the Bear role. You know that Masha and the Bear is the third-most popular video on YouTube ever after Gangnam Style and Despacito. [Laughter.]

Ms. ORLOSKY. It's on Netflix.

Mr. VIAČORKA. And it's on Netflix too.

Ms. ORLOSKY. In English.

Mr. VIAČORKA. In English. No, but Masha and the Bear is in every school, and every university, and every kindergarten, and every embassy, on every office of Russian cultural center. And kids are getting used to Russian content. They don't have Belarusian content. They don't have Western content translated into Belarusian language. So they exposed and they are connected to these heroes, to these cartoony personages from the very, very young age. So my proposal is also to intensify not just investment in the tech sector, but also investments in the exporting mass culture, entertainment content, infotainment, education content from the U.S. to Belarus, and translate it into Belarusian language.

Mr. HASTINGS. I thank you for that. Also a few years back, maybe 3 or 4 years, one of the United States big networks, it was either ABC or CBS, tracked the military exercise that Russia conducted. And it was huge. Mr. Whitmore, I apologize for calling you Mr. Williams. But these eyes without glasses aren't the best in the world. [Laughter.] But do they conduct—meaning Russia—do they conduct this military exercise annually or is this an anomaly that I saw on television?

Mr. WHITMORE. Well, the Zapad military exercises are conducted regularly, not annually. But the regional exercises rotate. You have Yug, which is the southern. You have Kavkaz, which is the Caucasus. You have Zapad which is the west. But they're conducted regularly. But the last Zapad military exercises between

Russia and Belarus were notable for, I thought, how much discord there was between the Belarusian and the Russian authorities. The Belarus in the runup to those exercises was going out of its way to assure Belarus' neighbors that nothing aggressive was going to happen toward them. I was in Lithuania at the time of these exercises, and the Lithuanian foreign minister told me that Belarus has reached out and has, you know, been bending over backward to assure this.

Russia, on the other hand, wanted to use those exercises as a massive PSYOP, that they might be used as some pretext for an attack. So there was this discord between the Belarusian and the Russian authorities. I heard information at the time, which I have not been able to confirm but that I heard, that Lukashenko was being iced out of the military decisionmaking and had convened an emergency meeting with his closest advisors because he was worried about what might happen. And I thought it was telling that at the end of the exercises the Russian officers did not stay for the ceremonial dinner, and instead went back to Moscow.

So there was—those exercises, I thought, pointed out as much of the discord in the Russian-Belarusian relationship as the—as the unity. I would point out there are currently no Russian bases on Belarusian territory. There are military facilities, but not full-fledged bases.

Not full-fledged bases. And that Russia is pressuring Belarus now into effectively integrating the Belarusian command with the Russian command, along the lines of what they did in the Russian-occupied areas of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Again, Belarus is resisting this.

And, again this puts us in this conundrum that I spoke of earlier, this paradox, of this regime we find distasteful, that will never be our ally, but yet we want to preserve Belarusian sovereignty and we want to assure that Belarus is not militarily integrated with Russia, because that I think is a security nightmare. It brings Russian power right up to the border of our allies.

Mr. HASTINGS. Okay. Mr. Wilson.

Mr. VIAČORKA. I would say that——

Mr. HASTINGS. Go right ahead.

Mr. VIAČORKA. Let me add a few words. So perhaps there are not traditional military bases, but unfortunately our air defense system is part of the union defense system. I used to be a soldier in compulsory military service in Belarus. And I was reporting about all the flights flying from the west and from the south, from everywhere, because we had enemies everywhere. And we reported both to Minsk, to Baranovichi, and to Russian side. So I think the same scheme, the same operation is working now. So basically we don't have sovereign air defense in Belarus.

And within the Army there is no Belarusian narrative, there is no Belarusian ideology. It's still very Soviet, very Russian. We still were taught in military units that our main enemy is NATO. And we were trained, and we can be waken up in the middle of the night and asked the parameters of F–15 warplane, because we were taught that every day, perhaps tomorrow morning, NATO is going to attack us. And this is the way how soldiers, 40,000 sol-

diers in Belarus, are trained now. They are trained to fight against the West. And this is my concern.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And Mr. Yeliseyeu, with your Belarusian background, to what extent is Belarusian cultural identity, including language, being promoted in Belarus? And are there any successful movements within Belarus to reclaim a pre-Soviet Belarusian heritage?

Mr. YELISEYEU. Well, as Franak already said, Belarusian language is under pressure. In Belarus, if we look at the numbers of the pupils who are taught in Belarusian, who study at schools with Belarusian language as the language of instruction, then we see that in 1994 the figure was over 40 percent. Last year, it was about just 10 percent. So we can see a fundamental, you know, decrease in the number of pupils who are taught in Belarusian.

Nevertheless, recently we can see that there's a number of civic initiatives which do their best to promote Belarusian language and culture because, you know, Belarusian history and culture are under attack of massive Russian propaganda. They even attempt to create some sort of common history textbook. This is of course a big threat, because already nowadays, as Franak said, pupils are taught some conflicting narratives which do not fully correspond to the Belarusian history.

So there's a concern that if this anti-Belarusian language state policy continues then this will weaken the Belarusian identity, and hence the resilience of Belarusian society will be weakened. So it's very important, you know, to bear in mind that these initiatives which promote Belarusian language and culture are very important. They are a cornerstone of the Belarusian and resilient society.

Mr. WILSON. Well, thank you for your efforts. And Mr. Viačorka, you've identified that there's different levels of tension between the Putin regime and Belarus. What more are there? And are they growing? Or what's the status of tension and disagreement?

Mr. VIAČORKA. Thank you for that question, Mr. Wilson.

I think Putin honestly doesn't like Lukashenko. They always have problems and communicate in messages. So they don't trust each other, as often happens between dictators and authoritarian leaders. This week we see the preparation of the meeting on December 8th, when a wide range of treaties and agreements must be signed by Belarus and Russian authorities. And we see that we—and one document about this meeting was leaked yesterday to social media, to Telegram channels. And in these documents we can see that Russia is forcing Belarus authorities to sign all the documents and all the treaties according to the rules and in favor of Russian interest. So what Russia is trying to do—they are trying to use their political power, their military dominance, their economical dominance in Belarus, in order to force Lukashenko authorities to accept all the conditions they want.

So in more metaphorical sense I would say they have the leash, and they always play with the size of the leash. So they know that Lukashenko is under control. They know that Belarusian economy and politics and military sphere is under control of Kremlin. And what they do sometimes is they give more space to Lukashenko to play his own card, sometimes lesser. But I hope that it will not be forever like this. I also hope that there is a new generation of offi-

cials within Lukashenko's regime who see Belarus as independent, free, and pro-European, and these people also influence Lukashenko's policy in the direction of opening the country to the West.

Mr. WILSON. Yes, Mr. Whitmore.

Mr. WHITMORE. I mean, you'll see things—you'll see incidents of tension rising to the surface kind of in a very open way, and then you see what the Russians call the battle under the carpet, right? Lukashenko gave a very famous interview back in 2015, I believe it was, where he was ridiculing Russia's historic claims to Crimea, saying by using the same logic Mongolia could claim Russia. [Laughs.] And so this—I mean, this is a very kind of manifest example of this. Lukashenko's comments that Belarus does not want to be part of the Russian world, his very insincere efforts to promote the Belarusian efforts right now—because he is making verbal commitments to the Belarusian language although I don't see a lot of action.

But then you see a lot of stuff below the surface going on. The Belarusian Interior Minister Ihar Shunevich was recently dismissed. Now, there are different interpretations of why this happened. Mr. Shunevich was the most pro-Moscow figure in the Belarusian elite. And dismissing him I think was a—did have kind of political overtones, although there were rumors he was sick. I don't know if that was true or not, or if he wanted to spend more time with his family, although he is rumored to be in Moscow now.

You'll see other things, such as the former Russian ambassador Mikhail Babich, who was appointed in August 2018 but resigned abruptly in April 2019. Now, he was meeting regularly with Belarusian security officials, and he was seen as kind of one of Putin's enforcers, if you will. He was used in Chechnya, in Tatarstan, in Bashkortostan, and other Russian regions.

Now, his removal coincided with the arrest of a security official named Andrei Vtyurin, who officially was arrested for bribery but there were rumors he was meeting with Babich and was suspected of being party to a coup—a potential coup. We don't know if this is true. Again, this is what I'm told by my sources in Minsk.

You see a Russian campaign against the sitting Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei, who is by far the most pro-independence-minded official in Lukashenko's inner circle. So there's all of these little manifestations of this around in terms of personnel moves, in terms of ambassadorial appointments. And then you can see them as well in Lukashenko's statements. This doesn't mean a break is about to happen. It means there's tension and there's turbulence in the relationship. And it's something we should keep our eye on and potentially exploit, if we can.

Mr. WILSON. Well, hey, as I conclude, I want to thank each of you for your efforts on behalf of the Belarusian people, and their freedom, and their continued independence. And then I actually—I've never visited Minsk, but I look forward to going with the chairman sometime and we'll visit. But I have been across Russia. And I'm still hopeful for that country. I've been from St. Petersburg to Novosibirsk. And the Russian people, to me, were extraordinary. It's sad to me authoritarianism has taken over. But we need to be

encouraging the people of Russia too to follow the Polish example, and Bulgarian.

I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. HASTINGS. All right. Mr. Yeliseyeu, you mentioned a media group earlier. What impact has that had? Is it negative or positive? And how were they received? You held up a piece of paper that——

Mr. YELISEYEU. Thank you. You mean the declaration I had mentioned, right?

Mr. HASTINGS. Yes.

Mr. YELISEYEU. Right. so all the major Belarus media actors acknowledge this problem that I mentioned, that's—you know, this automatically generated news services are increasingly popular among the people. So people do not go to specific websites. They usually just use these systems to get news. And because there's no functional geotargeting for Belarus in, say, Google News, in Apple services, then people instead of getting media products done by Belarusian media, they get most of the media content from Russian media. So this is a big problem. It's—you know, it plays in favor of Russian media rather than Belarusian state and independent media, because this way they lose their audience plus Belarusian population gets the information not from the national media outlets, but from Russian ones.

So this declaration was met with a big interest and enthusiasm by Belarus media actors. And they, and the expat community, and the state authorities, I believe, we all hope that soon these Western global corporations, they turn their eye on this problem, and they recognize Belarus as a distinct media market. And this way, we'll solve this problem and put Belarus media community in the same conditions that Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian media communities are.

Mr. HASTINGS. I want to ask you, what is the likelihood that an 18- or 19-year-old, or someone between 17 and 25 will see the demonstrations that are going on elsewhere in the world, through media? Do they get to see what's happening in Hong Kong, and Chile, and Iran, and Venezuela? What's the likelihood of them seeing that, with the clamp that seems to be exercised against the media?

Mr. VIAČORKA. Mr. Chairman, that's a wonderful question because actually protests around the world—in Venezuela, in Hong Kong, earlier in Turkey, even events in Iran, when the internet shutdown happened just a few days ago—actually these events are very inspiring and inspirational to Belarusian youth, and Belarusian civil society, and regional organizations. We have several very popular communities and channels on social media, especially on Telegram, talking and informing only about protests worldwide. And I am very happy to see how this young, nonviolent activists, protestors learn from each other.

For example, the Hong Kong protests, they started to use P2P technology. When the internet is shut down, which is often happening in all authoritarian countries and sometimes happens in Belarus too, they manage to organize thanks to mobile phones the connectivity without being connected to the internet. They exchange files, videos, and texts. And I hope that in case the internet will be shut down in Belarus or in Russia, that these activists will

use the experience of the Iranian and Hong Kong activists in order to keep going and to keep their aspirations on the very high level.

So regarding young people, young people today in Belarus, they're exposed to Russian disinformation, propaganda. You know, as I mentioned in the beginning, this very, very crazy messages. For example, in the first I saw this picture on almost, like, 1,000 pages on VKontakte. That's world map 2020—2030. And we see big Russia. We'll see European Union map, which is called "LGBT Caliphate." We see United States and Canada together as one country. It's the "Great Desert of Tolerance." All of South America is Venezuela. And Australia is this—the "Space Station Yuzhny [Southern]." [Laughter.]

So this is actually new exaggerated Russian vision of the world. And this is what they want, you know. And of course, for young people who became a consumer and user of such crazy propaganda, this new Russian revanchism becomes very attractive because they begin believing that you can change that map, you can conquer enemies, you can unify America, United States, Mexico, and Canada, in one state and make the desert of all those three countries. So unfortunately, it works. But what we have to do, we have to build positive alternative.

It's impossible to counter fake news. It's a big mistake to believe that only factchecking and the traditional journalism can win alone. No. It's a digital space. New rules. New competition. Instead of large and powerful, Russia used small and many. In 2013/14 they created Russia Today and Sputnik. Now they created thousands of small Facebook, Instagram, VKontakte-based pages and channels because it's much more efficient. It targets smaller groups separately, but if we will see the whole picture all together they target, and they reach much more people aggregated.

So this is the way. And we have to realize it, to admit this fact, and to be smarter, to be faster, to be more efficient, and to embrace technology. Because technology is the instrument. Technology is the solution, how to prevent Russia from dominance in Belarus and in the region.

Mr. HASTINGS. Go ahead, Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. One final comment from me. I have had the opportunity to visit Latvia and Lithuania. While they're next-door neighbors, what extraordinary societies they've developed so quickly right next door. So what a great example to have right next door, and particularly for the young people but for everyone in the country.

Thank you very much.

Mr. HASTINGS. Thank you, Joe.

Ms. Orlosky, you spoke about leveraging, to the extent that we can. The United States and Belarus have not exchanged ambassadors for decades. And yet in 2019 Lukashenko kind of sent a signal that maybe they would be ready to do that. Do you, any of you, support that effort? Or how best might it be implemented? And what can we get for that kind of recognition?

Ms. ORLOSKY. Thank you. In my view the withdrawal of ambassadors back in the day primarily impacted the people of Belarus and of the United States, because it removed a very important cultural diplomatic link between the two nations. And, you know, the

easiest manifestation was the difficulty with which Belarusian citizens had to receive U.S. visas, the length of wait for appointments, the lack of cultural exchange opportunities, and things like that.

So I think that the return of ambassadors to both countries is a good step. But I think the first priority should be a reinstating cultural diplomacy relations. The peer-to-peer relations, the programs that show that it is not about necessarily the governments and the states but it is about the people of two countries and the goodwill of the people from the United States and Belarus toward each other.

Mr. HASTINGS. Mr. Whitmore, you were going to say something.

Mr. WHITMORE. Yes, no, I would concur with what Sofya said. And I would say, I mean, we got to be there. But I also think we got to send our "A" team there to engage with the Belarusian people. And I would also concur that I would step it up with track two diplomacy, because that's what's really going to make the difference in a long run in developing a more pluralistic society. And I wanted to just add a little bit to what Franak was saying about the narratives, because I think it is crucial that we help Belarus develop positive narratives, whether we're talking about language, or whether we're talking about history.

Belarus was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This was the largest state in Europe. And it links Belarus to Europe and not to Russia. And I think there's a usable history here. And I think we have to help the Belarusian civil society. And I think they're doing a good job of it themselves, but I think we need to help them amplify these positive narratives to counter the Russian disinformation.

Mr. HASTINGS. So let me give you all the last word, and anything that you want as a takeaway for us, starting with you, Franak, since you were about to say something regarding what Mr. Whitmore was saying.

Mr. VIAČORKA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity and for the hearing today.

So about the narrative. You know, I wanted to show you two Belarusian heroes. So one is Tadeusz Kosciuszko, who is also the hero of the United States and Poland, who actually contributed a lot in building United States military forces. But Kosciuszko is also the person who organized the first big uprising against Russian power in 1794. And now these pro-Russian narratives in Belarus on social media, they try to destroy and to say that he's Polish, that he's anti-Belarusian, he's anti-Orthodox.

And another person is very important. And he's perhaps the hero Number 1 in Belarus, Kastus Kalinouski. He's a common hero for Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland. And 1 year ago his remains—his bones were found in Vilnius, capital of Lithuania. And in 2 days, there will be a ceremony of reburial of his bones. And thousands of Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians will come to Vilnius.

And that's a very good sign that still we have symbols, we have common values that can unify our countries in Central and Eastern Europe. And I think building coalition between Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, also Czech Republic, Slovakia, that's essential in order to prevent Russian influence. Because they are winning when we are separated, when we are divided. It will be together,

it will be working together in politics, in economy, in military, in culture, in media space, then we will be winning.

And I also would like to say and to answer the question how the U.S. can else help. So it's very important to include Belarus into all programs related to Russian disinformation, to monitoring of Russian influences in the region. Some programs are managed and coordinated by Global Engagement Center, but USAID. Projects like iSANS and their report, that's a fantastic tool and amazing data that can help not only Belarus but all the countries in the region to prevent potential Russian interference.

Also, I believe that the projects and the initiatives, like Belarus Democracy Act, was one of the most successful of its time. And perhaps it can be updated somehow, because the main idea of Belarus Democracy Act was to help Belarusian society. And we need it as never before. So now we have a bit more space for Belarusian civil society. The government do not arrest us on daily basis. But let's use this moment, this window of opportunity so much as possible.

Thank you.

Mr. HASTINGS. All right. Mr. Wilson had something else.

Mr. WILSON. And, Mr. Viačorka, thank you for referencing Slovakia. That's another example for the people of Belarus. I have been to Bratislava. I've been across the heart of Europe. That's what Slovakia claims. A brand-new country, one that was never imagined to exist. But it does. And it's a dynamic democracy. And there's so many positive examples for the people of Belarus. And I want to thank you for, again, working and promoting freedom and democracy in Belarus.

Thank you.

Mr. HASTINGS. Mr. Yeliseyeu.

Mr. YELISEYEU. Thank you. I'd like to give a couple of interesting figures to conclude. Two days ago there was a sociological survey in the six Eastern Partnership countries commissioned by the EU. So the survey showed that the share of positively disposed people to the EU is the lowest among Belarusians, 35 percent. But the situation is not as gloomy as it may seem because, in fact, merely 6 percent of the Belarusians have negative feeling to the EU. So more than half—over 50 percent of the population—have a neutral feeling to the EU, which shows us there's a big potential to enhance the EU image.

But at the same time, almost 80 percent of Belarusians, the same survey shows, declare that the information that they reach, watch, or access online do not help them to have a better understanding of the EU. Compare this with just 20 percent of Armenians. So we can see that there's a huge potential, you know, to enhance the image of the West among the Belarusians. But at the same time, because of the constrained environment for the media, people are just not aware. And they acknowledge that they do not have sufficient information.

Mr. HASTINGS. It brings up the point that you all raised about Voice of America. I have been, as a person and a congressperson, a major supporter of that effort. But there have been cutbacks that cause them not to expand the way that they should. The Belarus program would be the prime example. But, Ms. Orlosky, what's your takeaway from it?

Ms. ORLOSKY. I think the potential to reinstate diplomatic relationships, it opens the door for the United States to really work with the Belarusian Government on its democracy and human rights record. And no matter how strategic Belarus can be in the fight against sprawling influence from the Russian Government, I believe the United States cannot afford to have another dictator friend. And the Belarusian people cannot afford to have United States support a dictatorship in their own country after the U.S. for decades has championed the rule of law, democratic governance, and respect for fundamental freedoms. So this would be my concluding remark.

Mr. HASTINGS. Mr. Whitmore.

Mr. WHITMORE. I keep forgetting to do that. When I meet my Belarusian contacts I meet them not in Minsk but in Vilnius or in Warsaw. And I think that this is actually largely symbolic. I know it's necessary right now, but I think it's also symbolic, because Belarus is effectively a European nation that has been artificially separated from Europe by Russia. As I stated earlier, Belarus was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which included not just Poland and Lithuania but all of what is today Belarus, all of what is today Ukraine, and a big chunk of what is today southern Russia. This was the superpower of Russia in its time, when Moscow was a backwater. Just like Kyiv was a booming metropolis when Moscow was an empty forest. So I think this is something we have to remember. We're talking about a European nation that has been artificially cut off from Europe.

The second thing I'd want to say is that we have a window of opportunity right now. I agree with Sofya. We do not want to be an ally with a dictator. But we do have a window of opportunity right now because that dictator is desperate. He understands that his days may be numbered. It's clear that Russia is not happy with the current arrangement with Belarus and would like to change it, and would like to turn Belarus into, as I said, an extension of Russia's western military district or annex it entirely.

There are leaks on Telegram channels that are known for Kremlin information—not disinformation, but actual information—[laughs]—that suggest that the plans are on the table in the Kremlin to annex Belarus. So this dictator is desperate. And this gives us a wonderful—it's a time of danger, but it also gives us a wonderful window of opportunity to work with the Belarusian people, to bring them where they belong, in Europe.

Thank you.

Mr. HASTINGS. I thank you all. You—in addition to being well-informed people, you're very courageous to take on these responsibilities, as well as others. Be assured, just by virtue of the fact that we scheduled this hearing, there is interest. And don't be dissuaded because of our lack of numbers. We have other commissioners. And this is perhaps the busiest season for us. So they will get the word. And we will brief them. And I thank you all so much.

We're adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:28 a.m., the hearing ended.]

APPENDIX

PREPARED STATEMENTS

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. ALCEE L. HASTINGS, CHAIRMAN, COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Good morning and welcome. This U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing entitled "Not-So-Good Neighbors: Russian Influence in Belarus" will come to order.

We all know that the Kremlin's disinformation and political interference reaches the shores of the United States and elsewhere in the region of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Yet it is easy to lose sight of the power that Putin's Russia wields in its own neighborhood, outside of its ongoing aggression in Ukraine. In the case of Belarus, Russia's western neighbor, the grip of the Kremlin is no less pervasive, but much less obvious. Russia has not started a hot military conflict in Belarus as it has in Ukraine, but rather employs economic, social, political, and information leverage to weaken the sovereignty of Belarus and pull the country further into its orbit. I saw this firsthand during my last trip to Minsk for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Annual Session in July 2017.

Unfortunately, Belarus is ripe for infiltration by external forces. Civil society and fundamental freedoms have been stifled under the 25-year rule of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has cultivated a strong working relationship with Vladimir Putin. The two use similar tactics to crush dissent in their respective countries. Belarus is also heavily economically dependent on Russia, with its economy propped up by discounted oil and gas from its neighbor. The shared Soviet history of the two countries makes it easy for Russia to appeal to the hearts and minds of many Belarusians, and the Lukashenko regime is feeling the squeeze. And with little linguistic or cultural barriers, the Kremlin and its partners easily operate in the media and information sphere in Belarus, spreading pro-Russian propaganda in an effort to keep Belarus from turning toward the West.

In this context, Lukashenko has sought to vector West for fear of his regime. He has sought to engage with leaders of the European Union through the Eastern Partnership and, when possible, has sought meetings with U.S. leaders, including the Congressional Delegation I traveled with in 2017. I found that he, like other autocrats, was not interested in the dreams of his people, but made standard stability appeals to defend his regime.

Despite Lukashenko's lack of imagination and decades of oppressing his people, we must not forget that Belarus is an independent country whose sovereignty is under attack. And as another target of Russian malign influence in the OSCE area, proper scrutiny will prevent active conflict and empower those oppressed voices who have waited so long for justice. Today we'll explore the complexities of the Russia-Belarus relationship and what the United States can do to defend Belarus, this important crossroads between Russia and the West, against Russian attacks.

At this time, I would like to acknowledge my fellow Commissioners in attendance for any opening remarks they wish to make.

* * * * * * *

We have assembled here an expert panel to discuss Belarus in the context of Russia's malign influence:

First, we have Andrei Yeliseyeu, who serves as Head of the Monitoring Unit for iSANS, the International Strategic Action Network for Security, based in Warsaw, Poland. iSANS is an international expert initiative established in 2018 and aimed at detecting, analyzing and countering hybrid threats against democracy, rule of law, and the sovereignty of states in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

Our next witness is Sofya Orlosky, the Senior Program Manager for Eurasia at Freedom House here in Washington, where she leads the development of engagement and advocacy strategies for its Europe and Eurasia portfolio.

Then we will hear from Franak Viačorka, who is a Research Media Analyst at the US Agency for Global Media, where he focuses on the digital markets of Eurasia.

Finally, we have Brian Whitmore, a Senior Fellow and Director of the Russia Program at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) here in Washington. He is also the author of The Power Vertical Blog and host of The Power Vertical Podcast, both of which focus on Russian affairs.

Please note that the full biographies of our witnesses can be found in the provided materials. Thank you to our assembled witnesses, and I call on Andrei Yeliseyeu to begin his testimony.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. JOE WILSON, RANKING MEMBER, COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

It is curious that as we monitor Russia's malign influence on its neighbors as well as far abroad, we pay so little attention to what is going on in Belarus. Perhaps this is because we have much more evident and headline-grabbing news available when discussing the Kremlin's attempts to meddle in our own elections and society. Just as dramatic and concerning is Russian military adventurism—whether it be in Syria, Ukraine, Georgia, and even places as far-flung as the Central African Republic. Vladimir Putin tramples on international law and attempts to erode liberal, democratic norms where they are just beginning to grow, or even where they are already well-established.

Though not a military conquest, Putin's designs on Belarus should be just as concerning to us as the above-mentioned examples. As the chains of the old Iron Curtain have been broken, and as democracy and the rule of law have moved steadily eastward, Belarus remains a stubborn outlier. Why is this? We know that part of the reason is lack of significant structural reforms after the fall of the Soviet Union. Still known for its collective farms and state-owned enterprises, Belarus has an economy stuck in the past. Another part of the reason is the dictatorship of President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled the country for most of its post-Soviet existence, by falsifying elections and marginalizing, even violently punishing, dissenters. And finally, Russia's tight grip on its old Soviet friend is unrelenting, taking advantage of Belarus' weaknesses to create a vassal state subject to its whims.

We know that as longtime authoritarian leaders, Putin and Lukashenko have many things in common and many incentives to work together. But, as I hope we will learn over the course of this hearing, there are questions about how long this cozy relationship can last. Lukashenko is a tyrant but not a fool—he knows that engagement with Europe and the West is not optional in this day and age, and he sees how Putin's greedy fingers have reached into Ukraine. He is being forced to make some difficult decisions about the direction the country should take.

We can only hope that these decisions bring greater freedom to the people of Belarus, who for too long have lived without the opportunity to express themselves without fear of repression. The younger, globally-connected generations in particular can easily see the opportunities and freedoms available in the West. They, along with all Belarusians, deserve the opportunity to determine their own futures. A Belarus tied down by Putin's Russia is a Belarus stuck in the Soviet past and subservient to Moscow. I look forward to hearing our witnesses comment on the prospects for Belarus' future and ways to combat Russia's pernicious influence.

Thank you.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. BENJAMIN L. CARDIN, RANKING MEMBER, COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

As much as the toxic relationship between Belarus and Russia presents a challenge to liberal democracy in Eastern Europe, it also provides opportunities for exploiting existing fractures in the Russia-Belarus relationship. We have lately seen that all is not well between Presidents Putin and Lukashenko. Disputes over oil and how deep the level of integration between the two countries should be have made cracks in what was once a strong partnership. The strong relationship between Belarus and Russia still exists, but Russia's adventurism abroad over the past few years may have planted doubts in Lukashenko's mind that the peace can last. His need for control in his own country and his reliance on Moscow for legitimacy place him in a precarious position.

It is in this position that the opportunity arises for Western engagement with Belarus. In the past few years, Lukashenko has expressed an unprecedented openness to the West that may be a protective response to Putin's designs on Belarusian sovereignty. After over a decade of a constricted U.S. diplomatic presence in Belarus, and no ambassador, Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei and U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale met and announced that ambassadors would be exchanged once again. The executive branch, in this administration and the previous, has sent high-level representation to Belarus that has not been seen for quite some time. Belarus has also sought to reach out to the rest of the world by instituting visa-free regimes for more countries than ever. It is clear that Russia's adventurism in the past few years has softened Belarusian policy toward the US and the EU.

It is important to remember, however, that Belarus is an authoritarian state, and we must not lose sight of the human elements when attempting to build a better working relationship. Civil society and fundamental freedoms are regularly repressed in the country, and its last truly free and fair election was held 25 years ago. When it comes to human rights, Belarus is in a post-Soviet rut that has not abated, as it has in many of its neighbors. Lukashenko will have to consider serious reforms, at the expense of his own personal power, if he truly wishes for better cooperation with the West. It is not clear he is willing to do that.

So, are friendly gestures on the part of Lukashenko sincere or a false front? Can he navigate a foreign policy somewhere between Russia and the West, or will Belarus find itself pulled to one side? Our witnesses will no doubt share their expert opinions on Lukashenko's thought processes and the prospects for Belarus' relationship with Russia and with the West.

Thank you.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ANDREI YELISEYEU, HEAD OF MONITORING UNIT, INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ACTION NETWORK FOR SECURITY (ISANS); RESEARCH DIRECTOR, EAST CENTER

Dear Chairman and Members of the Commission,

Thank you for organizing this Belarus-related hearing, particularly in this busy time in Washington DC, and for the opportunity to join this distinguished panel on the threats to Belarusian sovereignty.

Malign Kremlin influence on Belarus pursues a goal of pulling Belarus even deeper into the Kremlin orb, essentially turning it into a part of USSR 2.0. Kremlin sees Belarus as an integral part of the Russian World with Russia's legitimate right to constrain Belarusian sovereignty.

To achieve its goals regarding Belarus, Kremlin, either directly or through its proxies, applies political, economic and propagandistic pressure on the Belarusian authorities and the Belarusian society. Largely the same mix of governmental, semi-governmental and non-governmental actors stand behind the 'coercion to integration' project towards Belarus, which meddles in the affairs of many other countries, including the US, the CEE, Balkan, and Baltic states.

Belarus appears to be the most vulnerable to malign Kremlin influence though, due to deep institutional, economic, social and cultural connections between the two countries' elites and short-sighted repressive policies of the current ruling regime against Belarusian language, independent media and civil society.

Anti-Belarusian propaganda and disinformation

You all must be aware that Ukraine remains top target of Kremlin propaganda. Unlike Ukraine, Belarus is rather rarely covered by Russian federal TV channels. However, when it comes to online space, Belarus is already not far behind Ukraine in terms of scale and scope of pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation. In the last two years, a dozen of pro-Kremlin websites which previously had Ukraine and/or Syria as their primary targets, added Belarus as additional regular topic. At least three generations of pro-Kremlin propagandistic websites can be discerned, the third being the most aggressive and numerous.

In the last two years, several new active outlets of disinformation and hate speech which are entirely devoted to events in Belarus have appeared online. Their number currently stands at about 15. The number of online resources which regularly publish items related to Belarus and contain disinformation, propaganda narratives and hate speech has increased several-fold—to about 40 fairly active sites in and around Belarus.

A fully-fledged coordinated network of regional online portals with regular publications containing hate speech against various social, political, religious, and professional groups of the Belarusian population began its activity in 2018. Publications use aggressive, chauvinistic rhetoric, sometimes openly questioning the existence of an independent Belarusian ethnic group and language, discrediting and distorting the history of Belarus, using derogatory claims

about national symbols and generally about Belarus-minded people.

Anti-Belarusian propaganda includes such preposterous claims as:

- Belarusian people are a part of Russian people, Belarusians are Russians;
- The Belarusian language was artificially created by the hostile West a hundred years ago;
- The West's objective is to turn Belarusians into cannon fodder by creating an "artificial language" and religion for them.

Furthermore, this range of websites purposefully discredits the West and all Belarus' neighboring countries but Russia. They regularly present Ukraine as a puppet country, which is governed by external actors and/or by fascists/Nazis, Poland as a country with imperialistic dreams of taking over Belarus, and the Baltic countries as pro-Nazi, depopulated, economically devastated countries. On the contrary, Russia is presented as a country morally superior to the West and as the only real Belarus' ally which guarantees Belarus sovereignty and protection from malign Western influences.

Belarus' localization of automatically generated news services

Due to sustainably irresponsible state policies in the media field, a large part of the country population literally lives in the Russian media space. Oddly enough, Western media corporations such as Google and Apple unwillingly make Russian online media presence in Belarus even larger. This happens because of the absence of fully functional geotargeting for Belarus in the automatically generated news services. At present a growing number of news consumers use such services on their mobile phones without visiting any certain websites.

The launch of news aggregators based on recommendation algorithms has had a significant impact on the Belarusian media market. The absence of fully functional geotargeting for the country puts Belarusian journalists in unequal position compared to their colleagues in neighboring countries. By placing Belarusian users into a larger Russian-speaking segment and localizing the news content only partially, internet corporations make the Belarusian media market weaker and hinder its development.

Recently a declaration by the largest Belarus media community members on this very issue was produced. It calls the national and foreign government institutions, representatives of global corporations to make Belarus a fully independent and sovereign country on the global internet map by recognizing the Belarusian segment of the internet as a distinct market. Belarusian media should be prioritized in the ranking of information sources proposed by automatically generated news recommendation systems for users who choose Belarus as their primary region.

Energy deals with Russia and economic pressure

Over the last two decades Belarus traded geopolitical loyalty and military cooperation for Russia's generosity. Low prices for Russian gas, beneficial schemes for Russian oil processing, an open market for Belarusian goods, and other forms of Russian financial assistance allowed Alexander Lukashenko to keep the largely unreformed economy afloat. The terms of oil supplies to Belarus was the most important bargaining issue for Lukashenko in exchange to deepening Eurasian integration in 2010–2011 and 2014.

Due to Russian reform in the oil sphere, export duties on oil and oil products will be reduced to zero by 2024 and excise taxes for the oil industry are gradually increased starting from 2019. Belarus expects to lose around $300 million in 2019 and the total cost in the next five years is estimated at USD 10 billion from Russia's new tax policy.

Whereas oil-processing industry is one of the most profitable sectors of Belarusian economy, the main energy source for Belarusian enterprises and residents is Russian natural gas. Belarus' national strategy of energy sector development, which was adopted in 2010, set an objective to reduce gas consumption by 6 million cubic meters and to lower the Russia's share in Belarus' energy consumption to 57% by 2020. These objectives largely remained on paper. Belarus consumed around 20 billion cubic meters of Russian gas in 2018, which places Belarus in the top Russian gas importers.

The Belarus' energy security concept adopted in 2015 aims to reduce the share of Russian energy in the total energy import from 90% to 70% by 2035. Thanks to the launch of Belarusian nuclear power plant (NPP) and a wider use of renewable energy Minks plans to decrease the share of gas in the total energy consumption from 90% to less than 50% by that time.

The Belarusian NPP is being built with Russian technology and money. Belarus will be dependent on the Russian import of nuclear fuel. Hence, Belarus will hardly become less energy dependent on Russia thanks to the launch of the NPP. Export of electricity produced by the NPP given the current Lithuania and Poland's positions and the lack of sufficient domestic infrastructure to consume that big surplus of electricity will be a serious challenge for Belarus.

Minsk has already asked Moscow to ease the payment terms of Russian loan for NPP. However, this and many other loan items in Belarus-Russia relations are conditioned with a deeper integration by Kremlin. Without political will and coherent practical steps the objectives defined by the Belarus' energy security concept will largely remain on paper, just as it earlier happened to previous national energy strategy.

The risks of the Union State between Belarus and Russia

Belarus expects to get Russian compensations for the losses associated with Russia's new tax policy in oil sphere. However, Kremlin conditions this with deepened integration within the so called Union State. Other economic issues that Kremlin explicitly made dependent on Belarus' further integration with Russia include the terms for loans and gas prices for the years to come.

In early September 2019 a bilateral action plan on deepening integration was initialed by the two countries' prime ministers. The plan has not been made public despite its great importance for the country, high public interest, and requests by parliamentarians. The whole negotiating process between the two countries' working groups on integration is secretive. Nevertheless it is obvious that the action plan and 31 roadmaps to accompany it are based on the 1999 Treaty on the Union State between Belarus and Russia. The action plan on deeper integration likely envisages the creation of common Tax and Civil Codes, a largely unified banking supervision, legal approximation in virtually all spheres, etc.

Kremlin's aim is to tightly tie Belarus to Russia in various spheres and to extract additional chunks of Belarusian sovereignty in exchange of further economic and political support of Lukashenko. The threat is that, in case Belarusian authorities follow this road, Belarus can end up preserving only nominal sovereignty, in reality finding itself completely dependent on Moscow in virtually any Belarusian domestic or foreign policy.

A loss of Belarusian sovereignty would be a catastrophe not only for the people of Belarus who dreamed of a sovereign and independent country for many generations. This tragic turn would also encourage further Russia's aggressive behavior towards its immediate neighbors and global democratic community and instigate further attempts to destabilize regional security.

Conclusions

Greater attention of the international community to developments in Belarus and urgent efforts are needed to preserve Belarusian sovereignty, despite very complicated relationship with its non-democratic government. We need the international community to promote positive changes in Belarus, including political, social, and economic reforms in the country, broadening of civic space and empowerment of Belarusian civic actors, and enhancing Belarusian society's resilience to external threats.

Important areas of actions to preserve Belarusian sovereignty include:

- Uncovering, countering, and deterring Russian malign influence towards Belarus;
- Support to the new generation of civil society actors and independent media;
- Strengthening Belarusian identity by supporting initiatives aimed at promotion of Belarusian language, culture, and history.
- Smart assistance and engagement with the Belarusian authorities. Belarus needs to undertake economic reforms with international assistance clearly conditioned on policy change, including liberalization in the media and civil society's spheres.

I want to thank the U.S. Helsinki Commission once again for holding this hearing and placing your focus on Belarus and threats to its sovereignty. I look forward to answering your questions.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SOFYA ORLOSKY, SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER FOR EURASIA, FREEDOM HOUSE

Freedom House
75 Years Championing Democracy

Belarus' Resilience to Russian Influence Depends Largely on Democratic Reform

Written Testimony by Sofya Orlosky

Senior Program Manager, Europe & Eurasia
Freedom House

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Not-So-Good Neighbors: Russian Influence in Belarus

November 20, 2019

Introduction

Chairman Hastings, Co-Chairman Wicker, and members of the commission, it is an honor to testify before you today. I ask that my full written testimony be admitted into the record.

Today, I will focus on the following issues:

- The hasty and nontransparent expediting of the Russia-Belarus Union State project by the Russian Federation indicates that Russia is likely to win more, while holding Belarus hostage to its economic, trade, and energy ties to Russia.
- Russia makes ample use of its bilateral agreements with Belarus to persecute political dissent, such as compelling Belarusian officials to deport Russian nationals through noncompliant procedures. Belarus becomes an instrument in the Kremlin's political game.
- Most importantly, despite promises, the Belarusian government has failed to initiate meaningful democratic transformations. An autocratic regime doesn't allow Belarus to strengthen internal defenses and makes it more vulnerable to Russia's bullying.

Russia is coercing Belarus into the Union State

As we look into the substance and effects of Russia's influence in Belarus, we must address the impending meeting between Vladimir Putin and Aliaksandr Lukashenka on December 8. They are slated to sign the updated integration action plan and a series of industry-specific roadmap documents. The plans to create the Union State were hastily revived in early 2019, at the initiative of Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

While the official reason behind the sudden expediting of this process is the 20th anniversary of the Union State Agreement, the haste with which the otherwise forgotten Union State project was resurrected suggests it may become the stage for Vladimir Putin's next political gambit. He cannot run in the 2024 Russian presidential elections without changing the Constitution but could very well become the head of the newly created supra-national structure.

The revamped preparations for the integration process have been shrouded in secrecy, prompting escalating concern from Belarusian civil society, political activists, academia, and independent media. High-level Belarusian officials, including Prime Minister Siarhei Rumas and Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei, have repeatedly dodged requests to disclose the details of policy discussions between the two states, while providing assurances that the action plan primarily involves deeper economic cooperation. Most of the information available about the preparation process comes from the Russian sources.

Less than one month out, neither the Russian, nor Belarusian officials have presented the updated integration action plan and industry-specific road maps. In September, a major Russian media outlet, *Kommersant,* released a summary review of the initialed integration action plan without publishing the original. In early November, activists of the civic movement *Svezhii Veter* received an official response from the Belarusian Ministry of Economy that the documents are classified "for government use only" and cannot be released for public review, including due to concerns for "national security" and "public order."

It is unsurprising, however, that Belarusian officials are so reluctant to publicly engage on the substance—and, most importantly, the benefits—of the accelerated integration process. After all, Belarus was effectively bullied into relaunching talks on the Union State after the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev refused to discuss the possible measures to alleviate the devastating

economic blow the Russian government dealt to Belarus by the so-called "oil tax maneuver" last year. Under the complex tax restructuring on oil mining and export, the Russian government estimates to gain around $168 billion while also incentivizing domestic oil production. Belarus, in turn, would lose the current advantage of buying reduced-price oil from Russia, to the tune of $11 billion over six years, according to official estimates.

To add insult to injury, this July the Russian government officials announced that there are no plans after all to compensate Belarus for the future losses as a result of its "oil tax maneuver."

Russia uses Belarus for the persecution of political dissent

As other witnesses further elaborate, Russia has a tight grip on Belarus's independence through economic and trade ties. I would like to focus your attention, however, on another aspect of this dependence: the exploitation of Belarus' vulnerable position in this unequal marriage to persecute political dissent in Russia.

Four years ago, Belarus and Russia ratified an agreement on exchanging information about citizens of their countries placed under travel restrictions, including due to outstanding arrest warrants. Russia has made bold use of this agreement to pursue individuals fleeing from politically motivated persecution by the Russian federal government and regional authorities.

- Most recently, in August 2019, activist **Nikita Chirtsov** was arrested in Minsk and deported to Russia following an arrest warrant for his participation in this summer's protests in Moscow. Russian authorities detained him several days later and on a felony charge of violence against a representative of authorities. His arrest was recently extended as his case is being investigated.
- In May 2019, an opposition blogger from the Russian republic of Ingushetia, **Ismail Nalgiyev**, was arrested in Minsk airport on an arrest warrant for participation in unsanctioned protests against border demarcation between Chechnya and Ingushetia. He was hastily deported to Russia without a court hearing two days later.
- In September 2017, **Imran Salamov**, who was escaping from torture at the hands of Chechen law enforcement, was detained in Belarus and placed into deportation proceedings. Belarus denied Salamov's request for asylum and deported him to Russia with procedural violations.

- In July 2017, Russian anti-corruption investigative journalist **Vladimir Yegorov** was in Belarus after a failed attempt to request political asylum in Ukraine. Following a visit by the Belarusian KGB, he disappeared and was tried in absentia by a Belarusian court on charges to petty hooliganism. Yegorov reappeared several days later in a Russian detention center. Belarusian human rights defenders suggest that trial was a step to buy time as the law enforcement agencies were trying to figure out the transfer.

- In perhaps the most known case, in June 2017, the world champion in mixed martial arts **Murad Amriyev** was apprehended in Belarus as he was trying to flee from persecution by Chechen police in the Russian Federation. Despite his request for asylum, Belarusian law enforcement authorities handed him over to the Chechen special forces.

- In May 2016, Belarusian customs officers removed **Lilia Shibanova**, the founder of the Russian elections watchdog *Golos*, from the train as she was traveling from Lithuania to Russia. She was thoroughly inspected and let go, but witnessed telephone conversations of border officials suggesting her name was flagged by an outside authority.

The bilateral arrangement has also aided Russia in its pursuit of non-Russian nationals. In at least one case, a Ukrainian citizen, Pavlo Hryb, was kidnapped on a personal trip to Belarus in August 2017, allegedly by the Russian special services. In March 2019, a Russian court sentenced him to six years on charges of "promoting terrorism." EU officials consider his prosecution in Russia politically motivated.

In all these cases, detentions were made under spurious charges and with little to no public oversight. The deportation and transfer proceedings were hasty and nontransparent; Belarusian human rights defenders and lawyers have repeatedly had difficulties accessing the detainees and demanding accountability from the Belarusian authorities for violation of procedure. It is unclear whether Belarus collaborates with the Russian FSB willingly or because it has no other choice. In a rare act of honesty, in 2017 a prosecutor's office admitted that Imran Salamov was deported with violation of process and initiated internal investigation. However, we see that the abuse of the Belarusian immigration laws and procedures to the benefit of the Russian government did not stop with that case.

Autocratic governance keeps Belarus vulnerable to external influence

Aside from the detrimental effect the Russian government influence has on Belarus, we must not forget that the government of Belarus has fallen short of its own promises and guarantees for democratic progress. Since the mid-1990s Belarus has championed repressive legislation and tactics to curb civic activity. Overregulation of civic life and violent crackdowns on dissent have not only undermined any pro-democracy and pro-reform rhetoric of its leadership, but also severely damaged productive cooperation between Belarus and the West for years. The sanctions put in place by the U.S. Congress through the Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011, and the restrictive measures previously enacted by your counterparts in the EU, have been conditional, primarily, on concrete actions Belarus must take to acknowledge and rectify its horrendous human rights record.

While the recent thawing in the U.S.-Belarus relations and preparations to fully re-establish the diplomatic missions in both countries is a welcome development that will benefit Belarusian and American people, the further rapprochement should remain tied to *bone fide*, systematic change in Belarus. Increased attention that the U.S. Administration has paid to Belarus, including through the first high-level visit in 18 years, by then-National Security Adviser John Bolton, should not only signal that the U.S. is interested in re-establishing a partnership, but also reinforce its contingency on significant improvements in governance.

The United States cannot afford to have another autocrat among its friends, even if it is an ally in its fight to contain Russia's influence in Europe. The Belarusian people cannot afford to live under a dictatorship supported by the most powerful nation in the world that has for decades declared democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as its highest values. This would be an insult to both.

Mr. Lukashenka and his government officials have paid a lot of lip service to their promises of reform. But not much has really changed in Belarus's human rights record. I would like to take a look at the concerns spelled out in the Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act and provide a brief update on the current situation.

1. Undemocratic elections and failure on OSCE obligations

A core obligation that Belarus undertook knowingly as an OSCE participating State is ensuring free and fair elections. Yet, none of the electoral contests conducted in Belarus in the last 24 years were genuinely open or competitive.

The elections to the lower chamber of the National Assembly on November 17, alas, again fell short of the OSCE standards. Although the access to the ballot was visibly expanded, with 560 contestants registered to compete for 110 seats, recognizable political opposition activists did not make it to the ballots. The façade of political competition was built by registering at least two quasi-opposition, but in effect pro-government candidates in each district. It is unsurprising that the resulting chamber is almost uniformly loyal to the incumbent government. The only candidate who could be remotely be called "opposition" is the leader of the Liberal-Democrat Party Aleh Haidukevich.

Over 77 percent of voters came out to the polling stations, including 35.77 percent in early voting – more than in previous parliamentary elections. This is a very high voter turnout, which is usually consistent with the disproportionately large support for pro-government candidates. Just around 2.5 percent of election commissions' members represented opposition parties; and dozens of those who had been registered were rejected on election day. Candidate Stanislau Shashok and observer Pyotr Markelau were detained at a polling station in Minsk after they protested the violation of the vote count procedure.

As we await the official OSCE observation mission report, multiple documented violations of the voting procedure, inconsistencies in candidate registration, and evidence of pressure on students and state budget-supported employees to vote surface online and in independent media. Both the early voting and the election day were marred by numerous reports of irregularities, such as ballot stuffing, group voting, electorate intimidation, tampering with vote counts, and attacks on opposition party observers, to name a few.

And yet, pluralistic and fair elections are the cornerstone of a healthy democracy that could strengthen Belarus's governance and, as a consequence, resilience to external pressure. A truly representative parliament that debates policy and engages with the people, instead of rubber-stamping bills from the executive branch, is still missing in Belarus.

The electoral reform is moving at a glacial pace. Removing regulatory and clearly politically motivated obstacles for political party registration is one of the fundamental changes that needs to happen in Belarus to ensure political pluralism and competition. The legislative amendments proposed this summer offer a glimpse of hope but still are full of unrealistic and superfluous requirements, such as the minimum membership levels and limits on spending.

But most importantly, the draft amendments fail to fundamentally overhaul or simplify the party registration process, providing no guarantees or recourse against prejudiced denials of registration. Individual candidates are still vulnerable under the current majoritarian system. The chair of the Central Election Commission Lidia Yermoshina acknowledged just days ago that switching from the majoritarian to the proportional or mixed electoral system cannot happen without political will and must follow the "country's development strategy."

2. Freedom of expression has a steep price

For Eurasia watchers, it has become quite customary to observe authoritarian governments in the region adopt repressive legislation a few years after Belarus had championed something similar. However, in the recent years, two legislative updates from Belarus are particularly worrisome in the contest of unrelenting Russia's political influence in the Eurasia region.

First, the 2018 **amendments to the Law on Mass Media** largely mimic those of the notorious and now defunct Russian law "on bloggers." The amendments to the Belarusian mass media law greatly expanded the government legal authority to censor the web without judicial oversight, curtailed possibility of anonymous internet use, and obliged media resources to police the content of user comments. Reporting on behalf of unregistered online outlets is now outright banned and subject to heavy fines.

Belarusian Association of Journalists documented 39 administrative fines against freelance and online journalists so far in 2019 for "illegal production and distribution of media products." Fines range from $120 to $620, a hefty burden in a country where the average monthly wages are roughly $470. In 2018, when the amendments were adopted, journalists were fined 118 times, totaling over $50,000; both numbers were the highest on the record.

Large media outlets continue to be harassed. Earlier this year, the bizarre exhibition trial of *TUT.BY* editor Maryna Zolatava on charges of criminal negligence for sharing her paid subscription to a state news agency *BelTA* with her colleagues showed just how petty the Belarusian government is in its attempt to dissuade independent media from covering alternative points of view. Also this year, the police raided the offices of the independent TV company *Belsat* for the ninth time. This attack came just a few months after *Belsat* journalist Kastus Zhukouski, who had been fined at least 16 times, detained over 20 times, beaten and threatened repeatedly, fled from Belarus.

The other reason to worry is the **amendments to the Law on Countering Extremism** that were introduced in the parliament late last year. While formally presented as an added shield to the rise of neonationalism in Europe, they open the possibility of wide and subjective interpretation that could damage any number of initiatives promoting Belarusian cultural and historical independence.

There are first signs that the existing anti-extremism measures are starting to be used against ordinary internet users, much like in Russia. In a first case that ended with a prison term, in May 2019 a Belarusian citizen was sentenced to three years of restricted freedom for allegedly inciting ethnic hatred against Russians in his social media post.

It is also worth noting that the anti-extremism legislation and the Law on Mass Media have already been used to restrict free speech online; for example the pro-opposition *Charter '97* website was blocked in Belarus for allegedly spreading "extremist" content and other information that could harm Belarusian interests.

The fear of having one's website blocked or being subjected to harassment or insurmountable fines reinforces self-censorship among editors, journalists, and website owners. This does not help in fostering strong and independent media that can provide high-quality content and a platform for civic discussion as a solid alternative to the omnipresent media outlets and online influencers backed by Russia.

3. Political repressions continue

Civil society continues to operate in a hostile legal and political environment. This year, the government has not interfered extensively with the public gatherings. The Freedom Day celebrations in March went largely undisturbed, a stark contrast with the previous years; and

political opposition movements have been able to hold rallies in two dozen cities across Belarus ahead of the parliamentary elections. But make no mistake: we've seen this "liberalization" before. Political prisoners were released before the 2015 presidential election; opposition candidates campaigned widely ahead of the notorious 2010 and 2006 elections. Each time, however, the "thaw" preceded a new cycle of repression.

These past four years can be described as the "softening" of the repressive machine. We see fewer arrests and prison terms, which makes the government of Belarus look good in the eyes of the Western counterparts that have long demanded that fundamental rights and freedoms be respected. The EU even removed its restrictive measures imposed on Belarus following the uneventful presidential elections – which is exactly what Aliaksandr Lukashenka sought, being intimidated by Russia's aggression towards Ukraine.

In reality, there has been no change of heart. The authorities have switched to a much swifter and less tractable tactic of imposing fines on protesters, journalists, activists, and internet users. Organizers of peaceful protests have been charged with paying public safety fees. Threats and physical attacks on government critics are common. **Mikhail Zhamchuzhni** remains a political prisoner; **Siarhei Petrukhin** and **Dzmitser Palienka** are undergoing highly politicized, closed trials on defamation charges.

Repressions continue, just in a less visible format.

With regards to the massive crackdown on peaceful protests in the wake of the notorious December 19, 2010 presidential elections, the government of Belarus continues to ignore the five decisions of the UN Human Rights Committee in which it found Belarusian authorities at fault for violating the rights of presidential candidates Andrei Sannikau and Uladzimir Niakliaeu and rally participants Fiodar Mirzayanau, Pavel Barkovsky, and Maya Abramchik.

Finally, the Belarusian government continues to reject and ridicule the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Belarus.

4. Nongovernmental organizations are still vulnerable

The government of Belarus has finally made a long-demanded positive step by abolishing this year the deplorable Article 193.1 of the Criminal Code, which prohibited working on behalf of

unregistered civil society organizations. However, criminal penalties were replaced with the possibility of administrative fines for the same offence, while registering a pro-democracy or human rights organization remains virtually impossible. We cannot possibly be talking of substantial progress here.

The Belarus Democracy Act of 2004, as amended, specifically authorized U.S. support to citizen efforts in Belarus that aide democratic processes. Belarusian government, however, continues to impede access of civil society organizations to such resources through restrictive and extremely bureaucratic requirements to register foreign grants. Just last week we learned that a Belarusian civic group was not able to receive a small grant from the U.S. Embassy to promote public discussion of legislative and reform proposals. Three government ministries refused to approve the grant for registration for the most bizarre reasons, including that it "is not consistent with the national interests... and international obligations of the Republic of Belarus." And this example is just one of many.

5. Enforced disappearances have not been resolved

The government of Belarus continues to stall in completing the investigation into the disappearances of **Viktar Hanchar, Anatoly Krasouski, Yuri Zakharanka,** and **Zmitser Zavadsky** in 1999 and 2000. The United States has repeatedly brought up this issue with the government of Belarus and through congressional action, but Mr. Lukashenka continues to ignore it. A year ago, the criminal investigations into Zakharenka, Hanchar, and Krasouski's disappearances were suspended. The investigation into Zavadski's disappearance has been suspended since 2006. Meanwhile, Belarusian human rights defenders have amassed voluminous evidence showing the law enforcement bodies have been long aware of who the perpetrators are and yet failed to prosecute the crimes. The government of Belarus continues to ignore the decisions of the UN Human Right Committee from 2012 and 2017 that obliged Belarus to ensure a full and transparent investigation into Krasouski and Zakharanka's cases.

Recommendations

If the United States wants to help the Belarusian people and the Belarusian state become more resilient in the face of Russia's encroachment, it should do so, first of all, by **strongly encouraging Belarus to implement genuine democratic reform and abandon authoritarian approach to**

governance that enslaves the country to the perpetual competition with other dictators. Belarus will never be truly independent if its government continues to play by the Kremlin's rules that disregard the human dimension of our mutual security and put the ultimate premium on the rent seeking, law-bending behavior of the corrupt elites. In particular, the United States should:

- **Support, facilitate, and incentivize genuine government reforms that strengthen guarantees for human rights and fundamental freedoms and follow the principles of democratic governance**, in accordance with the obligations Belarus undertook as an OSCE participating State. The U.S. could provide experts and technical assistance to help advance comprehensive electoral reform and removal of restrictions on peaceful civic activity, which remain acute priorities.

- **Encourage and support collaborative efforts that bring together and in good faith the government of Belarus, civil society groups, and businesses** to find solutions to implementing OSCE and UN recommendations on human rights and democratic reform.

- **Condition any next steps in U.S.-Belarus engagement, including the removal of restrictions and sanctions, and any future bilateral assistance, on demonstrable progress in *bona fide* reforms**. Comprehensive changes need to happen, such as a combined removal of the requirement of foreign funding registration for NGOs, of the administrative penalty for working on behalf of an unregistered organization, and of the accreditation and fines for traditional and online media. The United States should not turn a blind eye to the obvious attempts by the government of Belarus to gain favors with the West in exchange for cosmetic patching of its flawed governance structure and regulatory framework.

- **Establish clear and transparent benchmarks for assessing progress and ensure consistent and meaningful participation of the Belarusian civil society as an equal party in the bilateral Belarus-U.S. Human Rights and Democracy Dialogue** process. Engage civil society actors in providing an independent assessment of progress on reforms.

- Consistently and regularly **coordinate U.S. bilateral engagement with Belarus with European allies**, to be a united front in providing continued support to strengthening Belarus's independence, as well as a transparent process for internal reforms.

- **Stimulate strong people-to-people contacts between Belarus and the United States** through exchange and public diplomacy initiatives, such Global Undergrad, Muskie and Fulbright programs, Open World, or the International Visitors Leadership Program.
- **Continue to support U.S. public media programming in the languages spoken in Belarus**, including through the U.S. Agency for Global Media and RFE/RL, and support independent media initiatives developing and promoting local content.
- **Expand foreign assistance in support of civic initiatives** that seek to promote Belarus's cultural, social, political and economic independence, greater civic engagement and political participation, government accountability and transparency, and the rule of raw.

Conclusion

A free and democratic Belarus has not only been the aspiration of the Belarusian people but also a vision supported by the United States throughout the years. Now, when the U.S. security, and that of its allies, is primarily assessed through the prism of geopolitical gains and losses, it is especially important to **remain committed to the human dimension of our mutual security, as envisioned by the Helsinki Final Act.**

Prepared Statement of Franak Viačorka, Research Media Analyst (contractor), U.S. Agency for Global Media

NOT-SO-GOOD NEIGHBORS
Russian Influence in Belarus

Testimony of Franak Viačorka

U.S. Helsinki Commission, November 20, 2019

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak here about increasing Russification of Belarus and a lack of proper response to it.

The last U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing on Belarus took place eight years ago; it was about a brutal crackdown against peaceful protesters on the night of Presidential elections in 2010. That night put an end to the so-called «liberalization,» froze contacts with the West, and paralyzed democratic changes.

The process of Russification is interdependent with the tightening of the anti-democratic regime in Belarus after Alexander Lukashenka was elected president in 1994, more than 25 years ago. Since then, Belarus dependence on Russia increased drastically in economic, energy, military spheres. Under the term "Russification" we understand here the increase of Russian domination in information, education, and cultural sectors, which influences the identity of people and their preferable values.

The Russian dominance in Belarus has its long history since the annexation of our country by Russia at the end of the 18th century. It was resumed in the 1930ies under Stalin's rule and only regained the independence of Belarus in 1991 had stopped it. But temporarily. After Lukashenka's coming in power in 1994, the state-run Russification was resumed. This sounds strange, and it is unique for post-Soviet countries — Russification in the independent state of Belarus — nevertheless, under the current regime, it has reached its peak.

It is a key part of the preservation of Homo Sovieticus identity, which prevents restoration or forcibly replaces Belarusan and Western identity. At the same time, the cultural and linguistic policy preferring Russian identity is a loyalty message sent to the Kremlin. It is also part of general "economic and political support in exchange for pro-Russian policy" of Lukashenka's regime during its rule.

LANGUAGE

Moscow carries out a very consistent and well-financed language policy regarding Russian as one of the key pillars and instruments of "Russian Universe" expansion. The alleged presence of the Russian-speaking population in a certain region serves as a reason for Moscow's geopolitical revanchism. The step in this direction is the recent decision of Russia's Government to recognize Belarusans and Ukrainians en masse as Russian-speaking and to propose changes in the law on citizenship.

In Belarus, the Belarusan language has been discriminated against in favor of Russian. Belarusian was eliminated entirely or to a large extent from significant parts

of public life: education, mass media, government, law-enforcement sectors. For example, it is impossible to use it officially in the Army. When I was enlisted in the Army, I was punished by arrest for responding to the commands in Belarusan, not Russian.

Earlier, in 2003, I was among students defending the linguistic rights in education. Our Jakub Kolas National Lyceum with instruction in Belarusan was closed, or «optimized,» as it was explained officially, despite protests of pupils' families and teachers. This lyceum still exists underground and unsuccessfully seeks for official legitimation license, along with Belarusian-taught Nil Hilevič University. Last year, only 291 young people (among the total of 363 thousand) received a university education in the Belarusian language (this is 103 times less than in the 1990s; BISS statistics).

This happens despite the fact that even in 2009, according to the last census, 66,71% of the population declared that they either regarded Belarusan their native language or spoke the language perfectly. The absolute majority of Belarus's. citizens have at least a passive knowledge of the language.

In the 1930s, before the first Soviet Russification campaign, more than 90% of pupils were taught at school in Belarusian; in 1994, the percentage was 40,6%, in 2018 — only 12,2% remained, according to official statistics. Smaller linguistic groups in Belarus have even fewer or no opportunities to teach their children at school in their native languages. Two secondary schools with instruction in Polish and one in Lithuanian remain in the West of the country. There are no elementary schools with education in Ukrainian, or Roma.

Democratic developments in Ukraine, as well as digital technology advancement in Belarus, contributed to some positive change. There are several independent news websites in Belarusian; international brands use Belarusian in online advertising. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Belarus Service operating exclusively in Belarusian gained new followers on social media. The viability of the language is demonstrated by its presence in the independent space of the Internet (i. e. approx. 250,000 articles in the two Belarusan chapters of Wikipedia — this is more than in many European languages), by a vibrant alternative music scene in Belarusan, etc. The sympathies to Belarusan language are not because of, but in spite of the official policy of Russification, they are manifestations of the will of authentic civil society.

MEDIA

There is evidence that the Kremlin has launched a long-term strategy in media. Sputnik propaganda network has established its Belarus branch. It reached unprecedented growth in Belarus due to massive support from Russian Yandex and Mail.ru news aggregators. In contrast to neighboring Ukraine, Russian services VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Moi.mir (all belong to Kremlin-tied Mail.ru group) significantly prevail over Facebook and Instagram. Currently, 2.4 mln users from Belarus use VK,1.3 million use OK, and 180 000 — Moi.Mir (Gemius Audience, May '19).

On the other hand, Yandex, Russian competitor of Google, has launched a wide range of services in Belarus: Yandex Raion (Neighborhoods), Yandex Taxi, Yandex Plus. In contrast to Google and Facebook, Yandex and Mail.ru have recently localized their products for the Belarusian market. These networks apparently limit critical content about Vladimir Putin's policy and predominantly serve as an extension of Russian "soft power" and disinformation machine.

Belarus authorities endorsed the inclusion of Russian TV-channels into the so-called obligatory social package and major TV-multiplexes. Unfortunately, the expansion of Internet-television did not solve the problem: in the offer of state-run IPTV service ZALA, 35 of 44 channels are Russian, and the state of Belarus owns the rest. The domination of the Russian language in the state-run media of Belarus also contributes to the feeling of common information space.

Russia has backed the establishment and supports the functioning of local news websites networks like Vitbich, Mohilew.by, Nash Gomel. Some of them are registered on the name of the same person, tied to pro-Kremlin organizations. Besides websites, recently, hundreds of pro-Russian communities, groups, and channels simultaneously popped up on VKontakte, Telegram, and even Facebook networks. Their anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-Belarusian bias is clear; actually, they are not openly pro-Russian all the time; however, their mission is revealed during, for example, Russian propaganda campaigns on the V-Day.

Besides the network of pro-Russian pages, they buy existing media outlets and accounts, place paid ads, seed ideas that polarize Belarusian society. For instance, recently, multiple groups began asking their members if they would support Belarus unification with Russia in one state. These pages keep themselves visible thanks to leaks and insights from the Kremlin and create additional pressure on elites and society.

There is no resilience to Russian disinformation in the society of Belarus. It targets multiple social groups, but some of them are more vulnerable than others. In particular, I mean young people under 25 years old, born under the current regime and raised in Russia's media space, as well as seniors, nostalgic about the Soviet past. They have low levels of media literacy and critical thinking, are often targets of weaponized information, including entertainment TV show or explicit anti-western content on VKontakte and Odnoklassniki.

Another group, which seems to be especially dangerous, are pro-Russian far-right activists. These organizations usually follow neo-Nazi, pan-Slavic, or ultra-Orthodox ideology tied to Russian Orthodox church and so-called cossacks. They use to be toxic and aggressive, so some call them "orthodox taliban." They explicitly oppose Belarusian liberal and pro-Western aspirations, organize provocations, harass pro-democracy activists on social media, and in real life. No practical efforts are made by the state to neutralize them; moreover, these people enjoy state protection and some of them and their curators even receive state awards.

EDUCATION

After the nomination of the Belarus Communist Party leader to the position of Minister of Education, the Soviet — Russian imperial approach in teaching humanities is incarnated. The concept of a “strong leader” (Stalin, Lukashenka, Putin) is part of teaching modern history and social science. The historical narrative tends not to regard Belarus as part of the pan-European historical process and a historical part of the democratic world, but rather as a bearer of Russian-Soviet “exclusiveness.”

The Russian presence in Belarusan education in a direct sense is backed by Rossotrudnichestvo Federal Agency offices in Minsk and several other big cities. They sponsor school books on history, various competitions for pupils, and conferences on the methodology for teachers with the participation of guests from Russia and even from the regions of Ukraine occupied by Russia. Schoolchildren and educators for Belarus are invited to Russia for participation in competitions, training, and meetings, including contacts of Belarusan children with their Russian contemporaries — members of “patriotic” (in fact paramilitary) organizations.

HOW THE UNITED STATES CAN HELP TO PROMOTE THE SOVEREIGNTY OF BELARUS

It is necessary to overcome the monopoly of Russian and local non-democratic narratives in the information space. This should be achieved by ensuring the sustainable presence of all kinds of Western surrogate media in the digital space, including Radio Free Europe, as well as by the support of Belsat TV, European Radio for Belarus, and Radio Racyja broadcasting from Poland. This is the right moment to re-launch Voice of America Service in Belarusan language, discontinued in 1954. However, traditional journalism can not win alone. Building strong cross-sector coalitions with grass-roots digital initiatives and influencers is crucial.

For sure, building resilience cannot be done from outside only. Nevertheless, supporting independent cultural initiatives and programs is especially important against the background of omnipresent Russian mass-culture. There is a lack of content and materials in the native language, ensuring translation and distribution of films and TV-shows in Belarusan language, for example, Netflix content, would be crucial for change of its status. The intersectoral programs of raising media literacy and critical thinking should be of foreground support in institutional and informal education. It is also important to back educational initiatives introducing new effective and person-oriented methods with instruction in Belarusan.

The announcement about reopening the U.S. Embassy raised a great enthusiasm among civil society and fury on the Russian side. The active presence of U.S. Public diplomacy can serve for building direct dialogue with Belarusian people not authorities. As one of the U.S. Exchange alumni, Digital Communication Network, I reaffirm the importance of Educational and Cultural Exchanges funded by U.S. State Department, especially for digital innovators, business, educators. Cross-sector

nature of Digital Communication Network can be the model how programs can be efficiently organized.

In contrast to its neighbors, Belarus is not recognized as a separate region in various global services, such as Google news. Belarusians who search or read news on Google, for example, are primarily exposed to Russian media content (not Belarus media news). Youtube doesn't allow promotion on the content in Belarusian language, instead, recommends to create content in Russian. Localization of these services is critical and urgent.

So too should efforts at building bridges with Belarus' neighbors be supported. Russia effectively plays on difference of interests and historical views between these states. This makes cultural exchanges, round tables of historians, presence of media between Belarus and Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic-very important. Belarusians as a society should not be excluded from the regional integration and dialog on historical values, including heritage of such symbolic personalities like Tadeusz Kosciuszko.

It is important to have Belarus included in programs coordinated by USAID and Global Engagement Center, on countering Russian disinformation and strengthening media freedom.

It is crucial to research and monitor the Kremlin's activity in Belarus through its mass media and public organizations. Establishing some kind of alert-system about extraordinary and unusual activity would be helpful and prevent us from a situation threatening Belarusian sovereignty, as happened with other states in the region.

While trying to intensify relationship with the West and playing the geopolitical seesaw, Belarus authorities do not take any visible measures to prevent Russian dominance in media, cultural, and educational space.

Russian influence imposes a threat to Belarus' independence, but -- hopefully -- not immediate at the moment. In any case, it facilitates long-term goals — to Russify national identity of Belarusians step by step and to prevent any potential pro-Western and pro-democracy aspirations.

Prepared Statement of Brian Whitmore, Senior Fellow and Director of the Russia Program, CEPA

Testimony of Brian Whitmore, Senior Fellow and Russia Program Director, Center for European Policy Analysis

U.S. Helsinki Commission Hearings
NOT-SO-GOOD NEIGHBORS: Russian Influence in Belarus
Wednesday, November 20, 2019
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2200

Chairman Hastings, Co-Chairman Wicker and Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to join this distinguished panel to discuss Russian influence in Belarus, the broader relationship between Moscow and Minsk, and the strategic implications for the United States and its allies. It is truly an honor to be here.

As you may be aware, the security of our frontline NATO allies such as Poland and the Baltic states is at the heart of CEPA's mission. Developments in Belarus and the dynamic between Minsk and Mosocw are highly relevant to this concern.

I would like to use my time before you today to broaden the aperture and take a look at the importance of Belarus for the security of our allies, the complex and very nuanced relationship between Russia and Belarus and how it is changing, and the shifting political dynamic within Belarus regarding the relationship with Russia.

The Strategic Importance of Belarus

I would like to begin by stating something that is obvious, but which nevertheless merits stressing: strategically speaking Belarus matters a lot. The position and behavior of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's authoritarian regime, as distasteful as we may find that regime, is a key factor in the security balance on NATO's eastern flank. It could also become the linchpin in the event of any kinetic conflict between Russia and the West.

Bordering NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland -- as well as Ukraine -- Belarus looms large in any Russian war plan against the West. It would be an essential element in efforts by Moscow to seal the Suwalki Corridor and cut off the Baltic states from the Atlantic alliance. It would provide a platform from which Moscow could threaten our allies on NATO's eastern flank.[1]

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[1] See "Securing the Suwalki Corridor: Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence, and Defense," by Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, and Peter Doran, CEPA, July 2018 (https://www.cepa.org/securing-the-suwalki-corridor).

It is not by accident that many wargames scenarios -- whether conducted by Russia or the West -- begin with Russian troops entering and effectively occupying Belarus and using it as a staging ground to attack NATO members Poland and the Baltic states.

In one scenario, conducted in 2017 by the Potomac Foundation, a Russian attack on the Baltic states was preceded by the overthrow of Lukashenka after the Belarusian leader refused to allow a new Russian military base on Belarusian territory.[2] Likewise, Russia's Zapad-2018 military exercises used the scenario of a pro-Western colored revolution in Minsk as the launch point for a conflict with NATO.

For these reasons, far being a sideshow, Belarus needs to occupy a central place in Western strategic thinking. Due to its abysmal record on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, it is unlikely, if not impossible, for Lukashenka's Belarus to be an ally of the United States. But at the same time, it is in the interest of the United States and its allies that Bealrus maintain its independence and sovereignty and that its economic and military dependence on Russia be minimized.

Imperial or Transactional? The Russian-Belarusian Relationship

The relationship between Moscow and Minsk is much more nuanced than the stereotype suggests. For Russia, Belarus is a problematic ally at best. Despite being part of a nominal union state, the ostensibly close relationship between Russia and Belarus is actually among the most dysfunctional partnerships in the former Soviet space.

Belarus occupies a central place in Russian strategic thinking and is an essential part of what Moscow considers "strategic depth," that is, the existence of satellite buffer states on its Western border. The Kremlin effectively wants to turn Belarus into a de facto extension of Russia's Western Military District at the very least -- and at the most, to absorb Belarusian territory into Russia. Vladimir Putin, therefore, views the relationship with Minsk as primarily imperial.

Lukashenka on the other hand, is not interested in sacrificing Belarusian sovereignty and he has little to gain from a military showdown or standoff with the West in which his country would be on the frontline. For these reasons, he has resisted Russia's efforts to

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[2] See "Belarus at the centre of Russia-NATO wargame simulation," by Arseni Sivitski, Belarus Digest, February 13, 2017 (https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-at-the-centre-of-russia-nato-wargame-simulation/).

establish a new air base in Belarusian territory, has dismissed Putin's idea of Belarus being part of a so-called "Russian World," has stated that he would not allow Belarusian territory to be used to attack a third party, has maintained good relations with the post-Maidan leadership in Ukraine, and has tried to keep the door open to better relations with the West.

Lukashenka effectively views the relationship between Moscow and Minsk as purely transactional. He is happy to go through the motions of being Russia's ally, as long as Russia pays him for his trouble. Belarus' economy is effectively propped up by importing heavily subsidized Russian oil and exporting refined petroleum products as well as the export of potash fertilizers. Recently Lukashenka has been trying to expand the country's economic base and lessen his dependence on Moscow by establishing a new high-tech sector. This has enjoyed limited success due to Belarus' highly skilled and educated workforce as well as targeted tax incentives. But it is insufficient to break -- or even put a significant dent in -- Minsk's economic dependence on Moscow.

The result of all of this is a strained marriage of convenience between two wary partners whose leaders can barely hide their disdain for each other. On the one hand there is Putin, the would-be emperor and on the other is Lukashenka, the crafty and manipulative gamer. It's an asymmetrical dance between a powerful patron with imperial ambitions that needs to effectively bribe an unruly client to keep it in line, and a wily client willing and able to leverage this to extort as much from its patron as possible.[3]

The Post-2014 Environment

The founding document of the Russian-Belarusian relationship was the 1999 Union Treaty, which, albeit largely symbolic, forged something of a grand bargain that has defined relations between Moscow and Minsk ever since.

The essence of the deal was simple: Belarus would renounce its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, make integration with Russia its main foreign policy priority, and act as a buffer state as NATO and the European Union enlarged eastward. In exchange, Russia would provide subsidized energy, financial assistance, and grant privileged access for Belarusian goods on the Russian market. It was effectively an exchange of economic assistance for geopolitical loyalty.

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[3] See "The Emperor Meets the Gamer," by Brian Whitmore, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 25, 2017 (https://www.rferl.org/a/the-emperor-meets-the-gamer/28696233.html).

But in recent years -- and especially since Russia's forceful and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent armed intervention in the Donbas -- the grand bargain between Moscow and Minsk has broken down. Russia's aggression in Ukraine has led to fears on the part of Lukashenka and much of the Belarusian elite that the country's fragile sovereignty could be in jeopardy.[4]

Russia, meanwhile, facing sanctions and a flailing economy, has scaled back its subsidies and economic assistance to Belarus. Moscow has also sought to pressure Belarus into hosting a new Russian military base on its territory, integrating the country's armed forces more deeply, and accepting a revived economic integration project that would effectively end its sovereignty.

According to the International Monetary Fund, between 2005–15, combined Russian subsidies amounted to between 11 and 27 percent of Belarus' GDP. In 2016, it accounted for just five percent.[5] Moreover, prior to 2015, Belarus bought Russian oil at half the market price. Currently, Belarus is receiving a discount of between 25-30 percent of the market price. Russia is also seeking to end Belarus' exemption from oil export duties, which could amount to a loss of $10 billion in revenue between 2019-25.[6] Russian gas subsidies also decreased from $2.2 billion in 2015 to $350 million in 2016.

As it reduced its economic assistance, Russia simultaneously increased pressure on Belarus for greater military cooperation and integration. Since 2015, the Kremlin has been pressuring Belarus to host a new Russian airbase on its territory. The base would be located in Babruysk, in eastern Belarus, and would station SU-27 fighter jets manned by Russian pilots.[7]

The commander of Russia's Western Military District, Anatoly Sidorov, has also suggested reassigning Belarusian soldiers who are part of the Regional Group of Forces for the Union State to the command of Russia's Western Military District.[8] And at the end of 2015, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu proposed integrating the defense and security apparatus of Belarus and Russia into a joint decision-making

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[4] See "Belarus and the Ghosts of 2014," by Brian Whitmore, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 17, 2017 (https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-and-the-ghosts-of-2014/28375750.html).
[5] See International Monetary Fund, IMF Country Report No. 17/383, Republic of Belarus, December 2017.
[6] See report by Vygon Consulting, November 2018 (http://vygon.consulting/upload/iblock/7e7/vygon_consulting_end_of_tax_maneur_ep1.pdf).
[7] See "Why Belarus is About to Get Interesting," Brian Whitmore, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 9, 2015 (https://www.rferl.org/a/why-belarius-is-about-to-get-interesting/27234694.html).
[8] See RIA-Novosti, October 21, 2015 (https://ria.ru/20151021/1305697600.html).

center in Moscow -- a model that has already been implemented in Georgia's Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.[9]

And in case Lukashenka did not get the message, Moscow began sending not-so-subtle hints. In 2016, for example, Russia began deploying mechanized military units near the Belarusian border.[10] Moscow also deployed units of the Federal Security Service and Federal Customs Service to the border in 2016, despite the fact that there are officially no customs and border controls between the two countries.[11]

Lukashenka has reacted to Russia's moves by seeking closer ties with the West while at the same time remaining nominally open to Moscow's efforts to force him into deeper economic integration. Lukashenka and Putin are scheduled to discuss a Russian-supported plan for deeper economic integration in December.

The Belarusian elite, meanwhile, remains divided between a pro-Moscow faction led by KGB Chairman Valery Vakulchyk and Defense Minister Andrei Ravkov and a more independence-minded group led by Foreign Minister Uladzimer Makey and Security Council Secretary Stanislau Zas.[12]

Moreover, these dynamics are playing out as Belarus, which just held parliamentary elections on November 17, prepares for presidential elections in August 2020.

What Next?

There are indications that Russia's military intelligence, the GRU, and its Foreign Intelligence Service, the SVR, are alarmed by Lukashenka's efforts to preserve Belarusian independence by attempting to move closer to the West.[13] Given the

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[9] See Belarus Security Blog, October 26, 2015 (https://bsblog.info/moskva-zainteresovana-minsk-net/).
[10] See RBK, June 2, 2016 (https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/06/2016/5750035d9a7947a4b3b8a2c0).
[11] See RBK, February 2, 2017 (https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/02/2017/589300f49a79471d0bc4add9).
[12] The pro-Russian faction lost a key player this year when Lukashenka dismissed Interior Minister Ihar Shunevich, replacing him with his deputy, Yury Karayeu, who also leans toward Moscow but lacks Shunevich's bureaucratic gravitas. The pro-independence faction lost an important member last year when First Deputy Prime Minister Vasil Matsyusheuski resigned in a government shakeup and will lose another key member next year when Zas becomes Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in January.
[13] See Arseni Sivitski, "Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Alarmed by Belorusian-Western Normalization," July 31, 2019 (http://csfps.by/en/posts/20190731). See also "Belarus's Relations With the West Receive Growing Scrutiny From Russian Military Intelligence," by Arseni Sivitski, Eurasia Daily Monitor, February 22, 2019 (https://jamestown.org/program/belaruss-relations-with-the-west-receive-growing-scrutiny-from-russian-military-intelligence/).

centrality of Belarus to Russia's perceived security interests -- and perhaps only Ukraine is seen as more central -- Moscow will likely view Belarus as a zero-sum game and will be willing to take risks to maintaining it as a client. Russia will most likely continue to pressure the Lukashenka regime into deeper military and economic integration. But if that fails, we should not rule out that the Kremlin could attempt regime change or even a military solution to keep Belarus in its sphere of influence.

In conclusion, as I stated at the outset, it is in the security interests of the United States and our allies, for Belarus to maintain its independence and for its economic and military dependence on Russia to be minimized.

Given the high priority Moscow places on keeping Minsk as a client, Russia clearly has escalation dominance in Belarus. But this does not mean the United States and its allies are helpless.

We can take steps to help make Belarus to become less dependent on Russia economically, such as helping develop its fledgling high-tech sector. This would have the added benefit of changing the political environment and potentially laying the groundwork for a more pluralistic system in the future.

As the first generation born in an independent Belarus comes of age, we can also intensify our work with civil society and media. In the face of intensifying Russian disinformation campaigns claiming that Belarus is nothing but a part of Russia, this would help shore up the Belarus' sense of nationhood and make the country more indigestible in the event of Russian aggression.

And we could send clear and unambiguous signals to Moscow that any forceful effort to violate Belarus sovereignty would incur costs, including -- but not limited to -- additional sanctions.

Thank you for your attention and I will be happy to answer any questions.

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