

GAME-CHANGER: THE BALTICS UNDER PRESSURE

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND
COOPERATION IN EUROPE

U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

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GAME-CHANGER: THE BALTICS UNDER PRESSURE

COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND
COOPERATION IN EUROPE,
U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION,
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

Thursday, March 17, 2022.

The hearing was held from 10:03 a.m. to 12:06 p.m., Room 106, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, DC, Senator Roger F. Wicker [R-MS], Ranking Member, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Committee Members Present: Senator Benjamin L. Cardin [D-MD], Chairman; Senator Roger F. Wicker [R-MS], Ranking Member; Representative Steve Cohen [D-TN], Co-Chairman; Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Ranking Member; Representative Ruben Gallego [D-AZ]; Representative Robert B. Aderholt [R-AL]; Representative Gwen Moore [D-WI]; Representative Emanuel Cleaver II, [D-MO].

Witnesses: Laima Andrikiene, Chair, Foreign Relations Committee of the Seimas [Parliament of Lithuania]; Marko Mihkelson, Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee of the Riigikogu [Parliament of Estonia]; Rihards Kols, Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee of the Saeima [Parliament of Latvia].

OPENING STATEMENT OF ROGER F. WICKER, RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATE, FROM MISSISSIPPI

Senator WICKER: This hearing will come to order. Thank you all for being here. My colleagues, today we meet with our friends and colleagues from the Baltic states. We meet against the backdrop of the horrifying and totally unprovoked assault by Vladimir Putin against the Ukrainian people, now entering its third week.

I want to begin by thanking Senator Cardin, our chairman, for allowing me to call this hearing to order. He generously did so because the impulse for this hearing originated in a meeting I had in my office on September 15 with Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis. At that time, the minister and I agreed that the challenges facing the Baltic states, including the potential of further Russian aggression, the continued crisis in Belarus, and China's pressure campaign against Lithuania over Taiwan merited additional attention in Washington and that the Helsinki Commission was a natural home for such a conversation.

What we did not know, of course, was the extent to which Putin's callous and brutal designs would make this exchange even more urgent and timely. Indeed, since my meeting with Minister

Landsbergis the Baltic states find themselves in an even more challenging security situation than a few months ago. Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine has closed the door once and for all on any hope that his regime might be passively deterred, and perhaps through diplomatic means come to play a responsible role in the international system. That idea is now over forever.

Having traveled to Kyiv in January with a bipartisan delegation to meet with President Zelensky, and more recently having traveled this past weekend to Poland and the Ukraine border, I can attest that the crimes being perpetrated in Ukraine are creating huge humanitarian and military challenges for our NATO allies and that we have not—to the extent that we have not seen since perhaps the height of the Cold War. I might mention to my colleagues that the night before last the United States Senate passed legislation calling the actions of Vladimir Putin war crimes. I was heartened, my colleagues, that the president of the United States yesterday when asked specifically that question also came to the public conclusion, that what Mr. Putin is doing is—amounts to war crimes, and that he is a war criminal.

Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine has closed the door once and for all for any hope. The situation for the Baltic states has been further complicated by the Lukashenko regime's utter subservience to Moscow. Mr. Lukashenko now leads a client state of Russia. The unprecedented deployment of Russian forces into Belarus, and the prospect of more to come and, for a limited period of time—an unlimited period of time, creates an entirely new set of challenges for our Baltic allies. Of course, other pressures continue to press on our Baltic friends, including China's disproportionate response to the courageous and principled stand taken by our Lithuanian friends regarding Taiwan.

Our Baltic friends have not been cowed by these challenges. On the contrary, they have been at the forefront of supporting Ukraine, lending not only moral support but also providing funds and military equipment. Once again, in this crisis, the three Baltic countries are punching above their weight, and I have every expectation they will continue to do so. As our guests are aware, members of our Commission have long been supporters of the Baltic states. This hearing aligns with other efforts we have made to remain engaged with our Baltic friends, including very recent congressional delegation visits to the region in July of 2021 and February of this year.

This hearing also follows an event I had the honor to convene in July of 2019, when the Helsinki Commission held an unprecedented field hearing on Baltic Sea regional security in Gdansk, Poland, our first-ever hearing away from U.S. soil. I will not say that on every one of these occasions, and on others, our Baltic friends have warned us about the gathering storm clouds under Putin's regime, and of the possibility of the kind of tragic events we are now seeing unfold.

My colleagues, it is my hope that in today's hearing, we will explore three main threads. First, how can we best support our Baltic friends in meeting their direct security challenges from Russia, Belarus, and China? Secondly, how can we deepen our partnership to provide even more effective support for Ukraine and others who

stand in the looming shadow of Moscow? Third, how can we work together to make sure Vladimir Putin loses this fight as quickly and as decisively as possible? I am especially pleased to be having this conversation with senior leaders of three parliaments of the Baltic states, our natural interlocutors on all issues of mutual concern.

Before I introduce our distinguished panelists, I call on my dear friend from Tennessee, Representative Cohen, for any remarks he might make.

Representative COHEN: Thank you, Senator.

STATEMENT OF STEVE COHEN, U.S. HOUSE, FROM TENNESSEE

It is a pleasure to be here and a pleasure to welcome each of you to our meeting. The three of you, the foreign affairs chairs of your parliaments in the Baltics, will bring us information that we need to hear and the American public needs to hear about the dangers to NATO countries on the eastern edge bumping up to Russia. Now, I am a member of the House. The other two gentlemen to my right are members of the Senate. In the House, we do not have meeting rooms like this that remind me of Putin, where we are so far away from everybody. It is very bizarre. I see you out there, I think, without binoculars. It is nice to have you here.

Senator WICKER: I move that we rearrange the chairs. [LAUGHTER.]

Representative COHEN: You all are on the edge of Russia and have warned us for years. I have visited all of your countries, most recently Lithuania, where we were, and we visited with Madam Chair just about two weeks ago, maybe three weeks ago it was. Then Estonia, Mr. Wicker was on the CODEL where we visited Estonia, and I have been there several times, and Latvia as well. You all are sitting right there on the edge of Russia. We visited when we were in Estonia, we went to the east of Estonia, to where you can get there at that castle, and you can look out and there is the castle on the Estonian side and there is the castle on the Russian side, and they are just cannoning apart. It is right there.

We went on the river, and we saw the Russian patrols, border patrols, and the barrier. It was not much. I suspect if the three Baltic countries were not members of NATO, you might have already met Vladimir Putin's armies. He has arisen lately in his desire to have a Soviet Union reconstituted, or a Peter the Great Russia reconstituted, and he is seeing himself as the great Peter. He is a dangerous man, and we want to assure you that we are with you.

I did a little journey in Vilnius to visit the Jewish center, which is, unfortunately, all historical and just markers of where the Jewish people lived in Vilnius because they were wiped out by the Nazis, and not treated too terribly well by the Soviets, who the Lithuanians fought for, I think it was, nine years with guerilla warfare and fought against the Soviet occupation of their country. They were, to some extent, the Ukrainians of that period, in the 1940s and early 1950s, in resisting Soviet oppression.

There is a plaque which we were shown on the wall of the Vilnius town hall. It is a quote from President George Bush that says, "Anyone who would choose Lithuania as an enemy has also

made an enemy of the United States of America.” Our tour guide was very proud to show us that. I was proud to see it. On this issue, Americans are bipartisan. There is—there are a few people out there that are on the fringe of everything. They were on the fringe of graduating from high school, I think, that are not necessarily with us. I would say 95 percent of the House—and I suspect 100 percent of the Senate—supports strongly NATO and our relationships with our NATO allies and Article 5. We will be there with you, as President Bush was, and America is today.

We visited with our troops, American troops that are up, I guess, north of Vilnius. I think it was, like, 8 or 10 kilometers from Russians who, as we were told, occupied the former Soviet forts that were built on the border of Lithuania, and for a reason. They, I guess—I got the impression that they would not been used lately, but now the Russians have occupied them. They are right there on the border and close up. Of course, we have got the Suwalki Pass, which is a serious question about the—whether the Russians would want to come and take that and divide the Baltic countries away from the other countries in NATO to the south, Poland in particular, and put the Baltic countries at great risk. That would connect them with Kaliningrad, which is a Russian port on the Baltic.

There are not a lot of people in the world that know about Kaliningrad and the weapons they have the importance it is to Russia, and the Suwalki Pass, and how important that is. We need to defend it, and it makes an attractive target for Putin. The Biden administration understands these threats. We are pretty much together with the Biden administration in its sanctions that it is put together with all the Western allies, the support we have given to Ukraine. I know when I was in Lithuania we met with your prime minister, we met with your president, we were hosted for lunch with parliamentarians, and we met with your foreign minister. We got a good perspective on how many people in Lithuania are on the alert, and they should be.

Got the same thing when we went to Estonia. We were with the president there in our visit to the east coast, where there were still some, you know, obvious Russian monuments still up, showing that the Russians are bad basically—you can go through there. The people were walking away, and it looked like an old Soviet city. It is an old Soviet city, where they took Russian people, and they moved them into Estonia to make their presence permanent. They will be doing the same thing in Ukraine. People are happy when people leave Ukraine because he is going to replace them with Russians and Russian passports and try to make Ukraine Russian. It is not going to be easy, and I do not think it will be successful.

We are with you. We appreciate your being here. We look forward to your remarks and your perspectives on Vladimir Putin, his actions in Ukraine, the challenges all this presents to your countries and defense, and how much the United States can help you. We know Lithuania wants a permanent force. We have made some suggestions to our military folks about that, and our State Department people. We have a battalion there now. I think each of the other Baltic countries would like a permanent American force there. I support it, and I think some of the other members of Congress would support it. It is a major undertaking to move that kind

of people and what is necessary into those countries, but at this time in our—in the world's history it may be necessary for us to undertake that responsibility.

With that, I yield back the balance of my time.

Senator WICKER: Thank you so much, Chairman Cohen.

Senator Cardin, do you have opening remarks?

**STATEMENT OF BENJAMIN L. CARDIN, CHAIRMAN, U.S.
SENATE, FROM MARYLAND**

Chairman CARDIN: Well, first let me welcome our colleagues and friends from the Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. I want to thank Senator Wicker for his leadership on the Helsinki Commission, bringing us together in regard to the Game-Changer: The Baltics Under Pressure. Senator Wicker has been a leader on this issue, on the Helsinki Commission, as well as on the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, participating in a Saturday special session of the standing committee, where unity was shown within the OSCE in regard to supporting Ukraine against the aggression of Mr. Putin.

I think we all have been just inspired by the extraordinary courageous leadership of President Zelensky. He addressed a joint meeting of Congress yesterday morning, and it was powerful. I am proud of the leadership of President Biden and Congress. By our actions against the unprovoked attack by Mr. Putin on Ukraine. We have led by our actions. We have supplied defense with lethal weapons so that Ukraine can defend itself. We have imposed the strongest sanctions ever against Russia. We have provided humanitarian assistance to deal with the humanitarian crisis within Ukraine, as well as the refugees that are leaving Ukraine. We have been able, under President Biden's leadership, to unify the global community to isolate Mr. Putin and Russia.

We have been effective in what we have done, but we must do more. Mr. Chairman, I want you to know that the House of Representatives will be considering legislation that will remove Russia from [PNTR] Permanent Normal Trade Relations, which is our trade partnership in the [WTO] World Trade Organization. That legislation, as I understand it, will be considered on the floor of the United States House of Representatives today. I also understand that attached to that bill is legislation that Senator Wicker and I have authored that would not only make permanent the Global Magnitsky sanctions but expand those sanctions to include the enablers, those who enable these crimes to take place.

We are not finished. I can assure you that we will never recognize Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the legitimacy of any territory that they may control. It will always be Ukraine, as we did with the Baltic states when they were overtaken by the Soviet Union. This summer we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of our diplomatic relations. We always recognized the sovereignty of the Baltic states. You know firsthand what the Ukrainian people are going through. In 1991, I was in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. I saw firsthand the Soviet Russian tanks surrounding the parliament building in Vilnius.

I met with the courageous leaders of Lithuania in the parliament building to show our solidarity against the oppression at that time.

I stayed in a hotel in Riga in which there were bullet holes in the walls from the Russians. Just recently, Senator Wicker, myself, Congressman Cohen, and others have been to Estonia. We were in Tallinn just this past July. We had a chance to visit Narva city on the Russian border. We saw firsthand how the Baltic states are dealing with representative governments protecting the rights of all of their citizens.

I mention that because you all understand the risk of where you are what Russia has done in the past, and its risk to your sovereignty. I want you to understand that when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, we stood with the Ukrainians, never recognizing the takeover of Crimea, and we will continue to stand with the Ukrainian people. In regards to the Baltic states, it is different today than it was in 1991. You are now NATO members. You are helping secure the defense of Europe by your contributions. I am particularly proud of my state of Maryland, our national guard, with Estonia in our defense that we have since 1993, if I remember correctly.

We understand our commitments under Article 5 of NATO. We stand with you on your sovereignty and will be there to protect the sovereignty of your countries against any attempt by Russia to interfere with that. We also must be united in our support for the Ukrainian people, and make sure that we supply everything we can so that they can defend themselves. Make no mistake about it, Mr. Putin will never take away the independence of Ukraine.

Senator WICKER: Members of the panel, you have traveled far, and I can assure you, you are going to get a talk in a few moments. We are—we are going to take a moment or two though to recognize two more people for opening remarks. Representative Joe Wilson is the Republican co-chair of the Helsinki Commission in the House of Representatives. Representative Wilson, you are recognized for two or three minutes of opening remarks.

STATEMENT OF JOE WILSON, U.S. HOUSE, FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

Representative WILSON: Yes. Thank you very much, and Ranking Member Roger Wicker Chairman Ben Cardin, and Co-Chair Steve Cohen for holding this extraordinary hearing. It is to show our appreciation for our Baltic allies, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. We always know that they are an inspiration, that they never gave up on promoting their independence and freedom, and their commitment now to NATO.

I am also grateful that I visited all three republics. Americans can always be grateful that in 1940 the United States never recognized the occupation as devised and divided by Hitler and Stalin. We always recognized that the Baltic republics were independent states and not part of the Soviet socialist dictatorship.

Only a few weeks ago I had the honor to be in Lithuania with the delegation organized by the commission. The main message was to clearly indicate and show that America is fully committed to Article 5 of the NATO treaty, to protect, as America reassures, every inch of NATO will be protected. I was also impressed by the support our Baltic friends are providing to Belarusian dissidents, activists, and opposition politicians. I was especially inspired to

meet again with the leader of Belarus democratic forces, Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya. It is my belief that thanks to our Baltic allies, that one day democracy will prevail again in Belarus. The dictatorship of Lukashenko, who has become a puppet of Putin—Lukashenko will soon be replaced, as the people prevail.

Additionally, another war we need to win, and again, firmly, we will, is the ruthless war by Putin against the people of Ukraine. Putin is indiscriminately shelling cities and killing innocent women and children. Civilian deaths by the thousands. The Baltic allies have been at the forefront of trying to stop the advance by Putin, and from moving further west. You are a wall. In fact, Zelensky has referred today, speaking to the German Bundestag, to tear down the wall and hopefully open Russia to a better future. We will not forget that Putin is not just an enemy of the Ukrainian people, but he is an enemy of the Russian people. We know that the circumstance is clear that today Putin in a statement has, in a cold-blooded, Stalinist way, threatened the, quote, "self-cleansing" of the Russian people.

This means that Russians will become Soviet non-persons. Today I will be offering legislation that provides for defecting Duma members, diplomats, and Russian Government officials that—with their defection they would be offered immediate refugee status to come to America. This follows another bill I had last week that I introduced that provided legislation to encourage Russian military defectors and payment of up to \$100,000 for any Russian equipment delivered to Ukraine. I appreciate that President Zelensky on Monday reinforced this offer, calling for Russian troops to surrender.

Putin's evil designs have backfired and, in fact, unified Republicans and Democrats as never before in the last year. Additionally, it unified the European Union. We know NATO's unified, but 27 countries of the European Union now are actually providing military aid, including six countries that have been traditionally neutral in every conflict. Putin's evil design has backfired. NATO, of course, remains unified as never before. Again, in any way, we are just so grateful for the success—economic, military success—of the Baltic republics. God bless Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. God save Ukraine. Long live Volodymyr Zelensky.

I yield back.

Senator WICKER: Thank you, Representative Wilson.

Representative Ruben Gallego is chair of the Baltic Caucus in the House of Representatives. He is now recognized for an opening statement.

STATEMENT OF RUBEN GALLEGO, U.S. HOUSE, FROM ARIZONA

Representative GALLEGO: Thank you, Senator. Thank you, Ranking Member Wicker.

Let me add my welcome to our three witnesses for joining us today. Your presence speaks volumes at this critical time in European security, and I want to applaud the Helsinki Commission for holding this hearing focused on the challenges facing the Baltic states. I am particularly glad the Helsinki Commission is holding this hearing because it is my privilege to serve as co-chair of the House Baltic Caucus, alongside my fellow co-chair Congressman Don Bacon. We seek to strengthen the defense relationship be-

tween the United States and the Baltic countries on a bilateral basis and through NATO. We share the passion that the Baltic people have for democracy and freedom and strongly believe that the security of the Baltic states is as crucial now as it ever has been.

Like all of you, I am horrified and deeply disturbed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war that it is launching against civilians, targeting maternity hospitals and schools. Russia has massed a large-scale military buildup, deploying aircraft, air defense assets, and land forces, including in Belarus, and launched a ruthless disinformation campaign that spreads propaganda and lies. Russia's premeditated war on Ukraine has unilaterally and radically changed European security by violating territorial integrity.

I have one message for the Russian Federation: We stand with Ukraine. We stand with our Baltic and NATO allies and our commitment to Article 5 is ironclad. This is the resounding message I hear from my colleagues in Congress across the House and the Senate, Democrat or Republican. Our support for NATO is bipartisan and bicameral.

It is not just words that matter, it is also actions. That is why one of my proudest moments in Congress was securing our first-ever authorization for the Baltic Security Initiative. It bolsters the defense capabilities of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in areas including air defense, maritime situational awareness, ammunition, [C4ISR] Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, and anti-tank capabilities. The Baltic Caucus was also able to secure 180 million [dollars] for this initiative in last week's omnibus spending package. If we draw any lessons from the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is that we need to ensure our allies, and our partners are too prickly for any adversary or competitor to swallow. We will continue to stand with our Baltic allies in an increasingly dangerous neighborhood.

I just want to thank you again and thank the witnesses for being and for being such great partners. I greatly appreciate it.

Thank you, Ranking Member.

Senator WICKER: Thank you. I hope our panelists have gotten a clear impression of the deeply held support that we have for our three Baltic friends.

Now we will call on our first witness. She is Laima Andrikiene, who is chair of the foreign relations committee of the Seimas, the parliament of Lithuania. Madam Chair, you are recognized. Welcome.

TESTIMONY OF LAIMA ANDRIKIENE, CHAIR, FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE OF THE SEIMAS [PARLIAMENT OF LITHUANIA]

Ms. ANDRIKIENE: Thank you very much. Honorable Chairman, members of the Helsinki Commission, ladies and gentlemen, first of all, I would like to thank the Helsinki Commission for organizing this important and, I would say, unique hearing, as you have three chairs of the foreign affairs committees of the parliaments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. It is an honor and a timely opportunity to appear before you today.

Let me start by saying that a global democratic world order in the past decades has been greatly challenged by the autocratic regimes of Russia and China. This competition of powers was shaping the security environment and bringing a lot of tensions over time up until February 24. This day not only changed the established but deceptive peace in Europe exposing the real goals of the autocratic state of Russia but also unified the democratic western world and created the legend of the greatness of the Ukrainian nation.

The Baltic states for many years have been the whistleblowers trying to draw the attention of the whole world to Russia's real intentions and ill perception of the world order. The Russian revisionist policy cannot be eliminated by making concessions or one-sided promises to "reset" the relations. Russia has chosen confrontation with the Western world and will remain a major threat for many years to come. Our necessity is to establish a credible defense since any conflict on our soil would be too costly, not only for our nations but for the alliance as well.

For many reasons, both geographic and historic ones, the Baltic region was bound to remain the most vulnerable part of the NATO alliance, which required special attention from NATO military planners and allies. In addition to the Suwalki Gap issue, Russia's de facto absorption of Belarus means more than a double increase in the length of the Lithuania-Russia border, which is the NATO-Russia border. Increased Russia's military footprint in Belarus and its engagement in the war against Ukraine is a game-changer and significantly affects defense calculus in our region and requires the implementation of additional defense measures.

As we all witness today, the Kremlin employs massive propaganda and disinformation campaigns in an attempt to justify its aggression against Ukraine and to conceal its war crimes and atrocities. The Kremlin's anti-Western narratives and its interpretation of the sanctions applied against Russia and of the support provided to Ukraine by the West as an alleged involvement in the war against Russia serve the Kremlin as a means of shifting the blame. Strengthening deterrence is no longer enough. We need to build a credible defense before it is too late. We must change our approach by moving from deterrence based on limited forward presence and reinforcement to deterrence by denial and forward defense.

This requires not only the re-posturing of our forces but also a change in our mindset. The necessary measures should be taken immediately and continue in the long term. We have already taken robust measures to improve the host nation's support capacity and are ready to host United States and NATO forces by providing infrastructure, which would enable rapid and smooth deployment of forces and their operation on the territory of our countries and necessary training conditions. We call on the United States of America to step up its efforts in ensuring our defense, in particular by stationing additional substantial permanent combat forces.

Repositioning of U.S. military equipment and enhancement of our region's air defense would significantly improve our security. In our region, air defense with anti-aircraft and long-range missile defense assets is crucial. We need our own Iron Dome. Air defense

over the Baltic states has to be enhanced, including by deploying necessary assets such as combat aviation and surface-based air defense of short, medium, and long ranges in and around the Baltic states.

It would show the political backbone of NATO and give us credibility that NATO is ready to, and will indeed, protect every inch of its territory. For that, we need a strong political will from the U.S. side. Firm support of the U.S. Congress for a persistent U.S. military presence and capability development in the Baltic region is crucial. Lithuania is serious about its defense spending, which will reach 2.5 percent of our GDP this year. We will not stop at that.

Ladies and gentlemen, whilst Russia remains the biggest and the most imminent conventional threat to the Baltic states, China is becoming a pacing threat to our national security. While Putin's regime is using heavy weaponry, China is weaponizing cross-border economic and trade relations. China is eager to dominate, not to cooperate. We have always backed U.S. efforts in defending our common democratic values and containing China's global ambitions. China is targeting the Lithuanian economy with undeclared sanctions and applying various trade restrictions over deepening ties with Taiwan. Lithuania has made it clear that it considers such a manipulative Chinese policy to be contrary to our democratic values and a security challenge.

The case of Lithuania is a test for the entire democratic world of our ability to withstand economic coercion and deter—and to deter China from moving ahead with its redlines and from using coercion as a regular foreign policy tool to advance its goals. Enhanced coordination of actions with international allies, including in WTO, is needed to respond to economic coercion, find systemic long-term solutions, and send a message to China that such coercive actions will not be tolerated. Lithuania is not stepping back. Engagement with democratic Taiwan is in our direct interest. China's aggressive actions, including its threats to Taiwan, more than ever before, may have a direct impact on European security.

We thank the United States for its strong support to Lithuania in the face of pressure from China, including also in offsetting the effects of China's economic coercion. In addition, we call on the United States to lead the efforts to encourage our common allies to take a more resolute stance against China's intimidations.

Mr. Chairman, thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to address this distinguished group of U.S. Congressmen. I very much look forward to my colleagues' statements and follow-up discussions.

Thank you very much.

Senator WICKER: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, for that insightful opening statement. We very much appreciate it.

Our second witness is Mr. Marko Mihkelson, chair of the foreign affairs committee of the Riigikogu, which is the parliament of Estonia. Mr. Chairman, we are delighted to have you. You may proceed in your own fashion.

TESTIMONY OF MARKO MIHKELSON, CHAIR, FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE OF THE RIIGIKOGU [PARLIAMENT OF ESTONIA]

Mr. MIHKELSON: Thank you, Senator Wicker. Distinguished members of the Helsinki Commission, those who have witnessed the advance of the Russian brutal war machine with their own eyes are probably keenly aware that it cannot be stopped by gentle words alone. As a young journalist covering the first Chechen War from 1994 to 1996, I learned what Russian authorities were capable of. The carpet bombings of Grozny killed thousands of their own citizens. For what? To stop the empire from disintegrating and the free will of the people from becoming the norm. The Kremlin's appetite has only grown in 30 years and has not been thwarted by Western diplomacy, which has lacked a proactive strategy towards Russia.

Russia's blatant aggression and military invasion of Ukraine have caused a fundamental shift in the European security architecture and threaten the peace and stability of democratic nations, not only in Europe but worldwide. I argue that the future of our common security will be decided in Ukraine. This is why the Western allies should do everything to coordinate and supply a wide range of lethal weaponry and other help to Ukraine as long and as much as it is needed. At the same time, our leaders should not let Russia feel that it has the green light to destroy one of the biggest democracies in Europe. Putin must be stopped in Ukraine.

Dear colleagues, Putin's war against Ukraine is the biggest threat to Euro-Atlantic security since the end of World War II. What we need the most now is a strong and loud allied message that is not only loud in words but will decisively strengthen the deterrence and defense posture in the eastern flank of NATO. Russian military forces in the Western Military District and Kaliningrad hold a geographic advantage and outnumber NATO forces postured in the Baltic region. Russia's permanent deployment of land forces, fighter jets, and air defense assets in Belarus will strengthen Russia's force advantage even further.

It remains the only part of NATO where Russia can create credible military strategic dilemmas for the alliance, even during this crisis and with short notice, if necessary. This is the region at greatest risk of further Russian aggression. Taking into account the precarious security situation on the borders of NATO's Eastern flank, I would like to highlight that continuous U.S. engagement and presence in the Baltics is of paramount importance given the vulnerabilities of the region. We welcome the efforts already made by the U.S. and NATO to bolster the deterrence and defense posture in the Baltic region, but more is needed to effectively deter Russia and avoid the risk of miscalculation. We rely on your support for this.

President Biden's decision to reinforce the Baltic region with various assets and personnel has been much appreciated, and the recent deployments have been of crucial importance in maintaining a credible deterrence posture. We are doing a lot for our own self-defense. All three Baltic states have annual defense budgets above two percent of GDP and defense cooperation between our countries is at a historical high. However, the worsening security situation

has highlighted the need for further U.S. support to immediately fill out a number of critical capability gaps in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

I would like to thank Congress for increasing the resources for the Baltic Security Initiative for this year and hopefully also in the future. This sends a strong message to our citizens of U.S. support to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and, more importantly, it enables us to continue our critical regional capability development projects. We need your support with ground-based air defense, as the Baltics should not be left out as the only region in NATO still uncovered by air defense. We are also in need of a long-range fire capability. These are capabilities that the Baltic states plan to develop on their own with the help of U.S. security assistance, but such large-scale capability developments take time and the shortfalls in our defense need to be addressed expeditiously.

These are shared objectives among the Baltics that are endorsed by the United States European Command. We hope for the United States' substantial and consistent security assistance on this, on top of the ongoing projects under the Baltic Security Initiative, such as maritime domain awareness, C4I and secure communications, stockpiling of large caliber ammunition stocks, and special forces. We need to keep bolstering NATO's deterrence and defense posture also in the long term. NATO needs a forward defense strategy. This requires strong political will as well as courage to take action. It is detrimental that the United States, as the most credible deterrent, would take a leadership role in bolstering NATO's eastern flank.

We consider it critical to have the U.S. presence in the Baltics through the NATO framework. NATO should prepare to defend the most vulnerable part of the alliance—the Baltic states. This includes, first, establishing a permanent increased allied forward presence in the Baltic states in the land domain. Second, establishing a sound and appropriate NATO Command and Control, C2, a structure that is able to plan and conduct military operations with the Baltic state's national home defense forces and allied reinforcement forces. Third, establishing a credible air defense posture with additional fighter aircraft and ground-based air defense assets.

Thank you to this commission for the service that you provide for security and stability in the transatlantic community, including the Baltic region. I look forward to your questions.

Senator WICKER: Thank you very, very much, Mr. Chairman.

Our third and final witness will be Mr. Rihards Kols, chair of the foreign affairs committee in the Saeima, the parliament of Latvia. Welcome, Mr. Chairman. We are delighted to hear from you.

**TESTIMONY OF RIHARDS KOLS, CHAIR, FOREIGN AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE OF THE SAEIMA [PARLIAMENT OF LATVIA]**

Mr. KOLS: Thank you, honorable Senator Wicker, honorable Senator Cardin, distinguished members of the Helsinki Commission. As a concluding intervention, I think I have the task the most challenging which is to describe the threats that are awake and blurred, and those are the hybrid threats and the hybrid warfare

that the Baltic countries have been experiencing since regaining our independence.

To start with, Russian General Valery Gerasimov said, "The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness." This encompasses the majority of what I will be addressing you today. Since we gained our independence from the Soviet Union in 1990, the Baltics have been under constant Russian pressure. For us, having lived in this environment for the majority of our lives, this multi-vector warfare, hybrid warfare tactics, and the chaos they attempt to create have become intuitively recognizable and often seep into the background like white noise.

A key aspect to understanding Russia's actions is the so-called *sootchestvenniki* or compatriots abroad policy. Its officially stated goal is to support Russians living abroad, including defending their interests and rights in their place of residence. In this context, it needs to be emphasized that Moscow, per its compatriots abroad policy and the concept of the Russian world, aims to bind together all Russian speakers—not just ethnic Russians but quite literally even the descendants of ancestors who could have had a connection to, say, tsarist Russia. It considers these minorities as an essential political means of exerting influence.

In past regional wars, Moscow has argued that it must protect Russia's compatriots. In this Russian world, Putin's Russia anoints itself with the messianic title of the vanquisher of absolute evil, and with it the right to fight against what it considers fascism. Russia has weaponized information for a very long time, with it targeting not only Russian speakers but also what it deems as its geopolitical opposition, the West too. Spreading disinformation and building up twisted narratives aimed at further support for its political goals. It seeks to destabilize societies, and it does so also by its export of corrupt practices, by abusing Western legal and financial loopholes.

Russian doctrine argues that corrupting another country's elites is part of a new generation war. The Russian brand of corruption thrives on globalization and depends on access to the global financial system to loot its own or other states' funds and assets. The West, however, has several advantages—time, allies, and transparency. Transparency is a potentially devastating tool against authoritarians because when corruption is exposed it delegitimizes the authoritarians. The governments of free societies already face public scrutiny, which positions them well to demand the same of others. Russia's leaders are afraid of accountability.

Therefore, it is time for the West to realize that corruption is a severe security issue. The Baltic states have a lot of firsthand experience tackling hybrid threats that previously had been tackled by democratic countries, such as the recent Latvian, Lithuanian, and Poland experience with illegal migrants sent in from Belarus. Although these dangers were somewhat unexpected, the answer continues to be efficient. Therefore, we in the Baltic see ourselves not only as learners in the field but also as providers of expertise. The Baltic cyber expertise has already benefited democratic countries across the globe, and the same work should continue with border

incidents and issues such as countering disinformation and cleaning up financial markets from Russian money streams.

A critical issue is Russia's weaponization of its energy exports via its state-owned companies, such as Gazprom. Russia has attempted, through varying degrees of success, to use energy exports as a bargaining chip in achieving its political goals. Thus, one of the ways of resisting aggression and strengthening our resilience is the Three Seas Initiative, a new forge of unity between nations in the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea regions, integrating the north-south axis. It is a platform of pragmatic collaboration to create a network of cooperation possibilities for twelve countries of the Central and Eastern European region.

It seeks to promote large-scale infrastructural, digital, and energy-related investments that are highly needed in this geographic area, as the region still faces underdevelopment challenges—mainly in infrastructure, interconnectivity, and mobility—following 50 years of Soviet occupation and its lasting negative setbacks after the USSR's collapse. Three Seas would help maintain stability and democracy in countries that the Western countries formally describe as peripheral. We are not peripheral.

We are the frontier where democracy in the entire Western world has to stand or fall. A more robust economic U.S. presence in the region would strengthen transatlantic business, energy, and geopolitical ties to Central and Eastern Europe while compensating China's and Russia's initiatives and actions to advance and make regional inroads. Accordingly, the Three Seas merits, in my own opinion, American continued political support and investment, and investment from across the transatlantic communities.

Dear colleagues, for NATO and Europe this will be a marathon, not a sprint. We cannot afford to be cavalier about our short-term responses but must do everything in a strategic, organized, conscious, and prepared manner. This should not be mistaken for the lack of resolve and determination to act, but it takes time. Russia spent months building up its forces on the borders of Ukraine. Hybrid threats are often aimed at the most vulnerable points of a state. Thus, supporting a well-educated and informed society, using the means acceptable to them, is a fundamental step in countering hybrid threats. Well-educated and informed societies will be the most resilient force against attempts of historical revisionism, revanchism, and sowing discord.

To conclude, for those who worry that standing up to Russia could just provoke Putin and drag the world into war, we only have to look at the history of the 20th century. Nothing is more provocative to a dictator than the weakness of free nations. *Acta non verba*.

Thank you.

Senator WICKER: Thank you. Very well said, Mr. Chairman. Very well stated by all three of you.

We will begin questioning now under the five-minute rule. I am delighted to say there are 12 members of the House and Senate participating in this hearing today, which should be an indication of the level of interest we have, and the level of support from both parties in both houses for our guests today, and for the countries that they represent. Let me just say, that there is no doubt in my

mind that Russia would be aiming its troops at your three countries if you were not members of NATO. I want to express my support for our NATO friends, and for your membership, and to say how much that means to us.

Mr. Kols, you mentioned the Three Seas Initiative. Madam Chair Andrikiene, you specifically pointed to the challenge we have from China. I see the Three Seas Initiative as a potential alternative to the economic dominance of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative if we could only enhance its participation and make sure it is as financially viable as it needs to be and provides the countries participating in the Three Seas Initiative with an alternative to look at—to look at lenders and investors who do not have their own nationalistic self-interest at heart.

Ms. Andrikiene, would you start with that? Then I will let the other two speak to that. Where do we need to go with this Three Seas Initiative?

Ms. ANDRIKIENE: Thank you very much for the question. Yes, as you probably know, Lithuania has left the 17+1 format, designed by China for countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Very divisive format, from the EU perspective. Our preference is another format, 27+1, having all 27 EU member states sitting at the table with China and making decisions. Three Seas Initiative, yes. It is a new format. We see it as a promising, should be effective, format to also replace One Belt, One Road Initiative, and One Belt, One Road Strategy, which is, to my understanding, a strategy of de-Atlantization.

China is seeking domination in the world, and they are very clear about this. Their message was very clear, sent from the latest Communist Party Congress. They dominate the world by the year 2050, then they even said, by the year 2030. We have to coordinate our actions, we have to mobilize. We are—as I already mentioned—we are pro-cooperation, but not—we will never, ever accept China's domination of the world.

Thank you.

Senator WICKER: Mr. Kols, is Three Seas getting where it needs to be? I really do appreciate you bringing this up, but where do we need to go from here? What does the West need to do? What does the United States need to do to be helpful?

Mr. KOLS: Thank you, Honorable Chair, for the question. Well, you are absolutely right. Why I am addressing this is that Three Seas are gaining more and more momentum, and a clearer understanding of what the long-term benefit of such cooperation is, particularly in Europe and Central and Eastern Europe, connecting the north-south axis. The U.S. has been already identified as a strategic partner to the Three Seas. There are already operational Three Seas funds established based in London, United Kingdom. So far, what we are advocating and waiting for, for the financial commitment from the U.S. to be part of this fund, which will be a very crucial signal to any potential investor, private investor, to actually engage in the Three Seas and the projects.

There are almost 100 projects identified that are boosting the interconnectivity within the Three Seas region. As I mentioned in my speech, there are a lot of disparities due to underdevelopment for historical reasons. As we recall, I would say the Three Seas

right now for Central and Eastern Europe would be a 21st-century Marshall Fund, by other means, and with this, I think it is a momentum. We clearly, what Madam Chair said about the 17+1, I have to tell you honestly. The 17+1 has died of natural causes, at least in the political mindset. Therefore, Latvia as well is hosting the Three Seas Summit this year in June. We welcome also U.S. leadership and U.S. Congress representatives to be present and to actually start off on the practical aspects, how we can implement projects, and how we contribute, and there is a lot to do.

According to [IMF] International Monetary Fund, in order to reach the level of interconnectivity—be it energy, infrastructure, roads, rail, et cetera, the whole region needs \$660 billion U.S. dollars of investment. That is a huge difference that we are seeing. Also, it is—in my view, I see the Three Seas projects that are identified in different regions of the Three Seas, they have also a military dimension to them. A fine example I can mention is the Rail Baltic in the Baltic countries as well. It has also a close connection to the initiative within the EU, PESCO, which is contributing to the mobility of NATO troops within the Three Seas region.

Therefore, I think the Three Seas is paramount. We should go from words to practical deeds and actually start to work and implement and introduce the projects. As I mentioned, there are more than 100 projects. The difference from maybe past similar ventures in Europe is that the Three Seas Fund is actually sharing the risk with the potential investors. It is not just giving loans to somebody, but it is actually the governments that are participating in the Three Seas fund that are actually taking the risk together with the private investors as well.

From the Baltic countries, from Latvia, for example, and I know Estonia and Lithuania as well, we have set already the scrutinizing mechanism at the government level, scrutinizing foreign investment. Then primarily we are looking at the countries we welcome from NATO member states, EU member states, and OECD member states investments.

Thank you.

Senator WICKER: Thank you.

Before turning to you, Mr. Mihkelson, I should point out that our Helsinki Commission delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly last year made—took advantage of our proximity there to actually attend the Three Seas meeting in Sofia. I think we benefited from that. I will say there is a learning curve—within the United States Congress about the Three Seas that needs to be addressed. If you could comment briefly, Mr. Mihkelson.

Mr. MIHKELSON: Yes. Thank you, Senator Wicker. This is a very important question, of course, how to engage U.S. private investments in most possible way in our region. If Russia still is an immediate and existential threat to democracy in our region, and perhaps worldwide, definitely the challenge posed by China is long term. We have to think here strategically and actually work together as Europeans and Americans for more coordinated and more sort of well thought-through strategies, including also how we build a transatlantic truly open trade area.

I think here to accommodate better perhaps those investments into Three Seas countries, or into Europe, is—I would call actually

up to you, to support Transatlantic Telecommunications Security Act, which is, as far as I know, in process here in Senate and in House, which allows better to—for investments into projects for telecommunication in Three Seas. First and foremost, we should create as parliaments and governments, the possibility for private investments flow to our region.

Thank you.

Senator WICKER: Thank you very much.

We will now turn to Senator Cardin. He will be followed by Representative Cohen.

Senator CARDIN: Well, let me thank all of you, again, for your presence here. Chairman Kols, you mentioned the asymmetric arsenal that Mr. Putin uses in order to bring down democratic states and to get his way. You also mentioned the importance of fighting corruption, because corruption gives them the resources to carry this out, whether it is the use of misinformation, the weaponization of energy, or the infiltration into Russian-speaking communities to give the false flag opportunities that he then uses as justification for his military actions.

We saw this in Ukraine very clearly in the eastern part of Ukraine. Each of your countries has a Russian-speaking population. Since the invasion of Ukraine by Mr. Putin, has there been any activity within the Russian-speaking communities that we should be concerned about that would indicate that there have been efforts made by Mr. Putin to start the seeds of trouble within your country in regard to the Russian-speaking communities?

Mr. KOLS: Thank you, Senator Cardin, for your question. Just coming from the other way around as you posed the question. Russian-speaking population, as I mentioned, it encompasses not only ethnic or Russian just speaking, it is also, you know, historical ties between tsarist Russia, and the Soviet Union. By Putin's logic, or as they put it this policy, even Finns might be seen at some point, you know—[LAUGHS]—the compatriots. It is the lunacy the regime is conducting.

Of course, it exploits the Russian-speaking populations wherever they are in whatever quantities they are in any society. We saw just recently this ludicrous example in Australia, the Russian community having a support campaign in Australia. I mean, that is very integrated, you know, society and so on. They are praising Putin and praising the Russian war on Ukraine.

We cannot exclude any Russian-speaking communities in any part of the world from being exploited in this kind of way to gain the goals of the regime. When it comes to Latvia, I mean, the current one, we do not see the—Russia's actions in Ukraine have come from part of the Russian-speaking population in Latvia as a shock, really, like saying that—you know, to the last point, we did not believe that he is going to do that.

There are new realities as well—reality check. Of course, there are, as I call them, Russian chauvinists that, you know, no matter what is going to happen, no matter what, how you are going to put, you know, incentives into integration and et cetera, they will be committed to Mother Russia, to Putin, and et cetera.

That is something that, of course, our security intelligence community needs to work and identify beforehand. What I have to say

is that we still have to do a lot in the West. I mean, it has been three weeks right now when we suddenly realized that, you know, propaganda channels, we need to actually shut them down.

We see the fine example of Ukraine. If Ukraine had not abolished propaganda channels back in 2004 and had not started to strengthen its Ukrainian language, strengthen national identity, I think the situation would be totally different right now on February 24, and this is a miscalculation, I think, that Putin made as well.

Chairman CARDIN: I think that is a very important point. We were in Narva, in Estonia. Our observations were that the community of Narva is very happy being Estonian. They like their standard of living. They like their government, but they do have connections to Russia. The question in Estonia is, have you seen a problem developing instigated by Mr. Putin in a city like Narva or is there still very much free information going into the community, to understand the realities of what is happening?

Mr. MIHKELSON: Thank you, Senator Cardin. This is a[n] extremely important question, of course, how to handle the perceptions and narratives that sometimes come from the sources, you, as a government, a parliament, cannot entirely control. What we have done throughout the last 30 years, we have, first and foremost, recognized the issue and sensitivity of that matter and that the number one priority for us always has been that never mind what language or what the distance where—our residents or citizens are. They must feel in Estonia safe and well. This is why our reforms—economic, social, health care, educational reforms—have directed them not exactly how the—what you said about the feeling; do they feel that, really, that Estonia is their home, and they would like to support the idea that the home must be stable and secure?

Of course, the number one question today is how to handle this massive war-mongering propaganda. Estonia cut off all the propaganda channels of Russian national or federal TV stations, which actually we can call them not as journalistic units but—or TV stations but as a kind of formation of the Russian army as a propaganda unit to actually fight for hearts and minds in countries. They have sort of aggressive attempts. This is not only in the neighboring countries of Russia but it is also in countries like the United States and others where they had an opportunity to disseminate through Russia Today and other channels completely different narratives, which are against our interest as democratic nations.

Thank you.

Chairman CARDIN: Just to make an observation. I was part of the OSCE mission that came to Estonia in the early 1990s to deal with the handling of the Russian-speaking communities, and I think Estonia was a model country in how to handle minority communities after the fall of the Soviet Union. I just compliment the manner in which you have engaged all communities within Estonia and protected their rights.

Representative Cohen?

Representative COHEN: I recognize myself for five minutes.

I understand your countries, none of which are predominantly Orthodox—they are Catholic and Protestant majority—but you do

have some Orthodox communities. A colleague of mine, a friend, who is Greek American and has been active in the Greek Orthodox Church in Memphis, believes that Patriarch Bartholomew could have an influence on Patriarch Kirill in getting him to start to espouse more of the values that Patriarch Bartholomew has about ecumenism and peace and human rights.

Do any of you think that there are people in your countries who are involved with the church that might have an opportunity or a thought that this is a possible way to move Putin? I know that the Greek—the Russian Orthodox Church and Putin have a political alliance and it will be hard to break.

Is there any possibility that pressure through the religious sphere could have an influence on Putin? Maybe start with Estonia. You have got probably the largest Russian population. Maybe Latvia does. I do not know.

Mr. MIHKELSON: I think the kind of—idea behind your question is very noble and, obviously, we should completely not take it—this into account that there exists some sort of possibility that for religious communities there is a kind of hope to work for peace, not for war.

From recent statements of Patriarch Kirill and others in Russia, in Moscow, the patriarchy of the Orthodox Church, unfortunately, tells us that this alliance between Putin and Moscow patriarchy is rock solid. Unfortunately, they are supporting in their open and public statements currently this aggression not only against Ukraine but wider, possibly aggression against democratic nations.

Thank you.

Mr. KOLS: Just maybe a few comments. I think while Russia is not a secular country it is obvious, and there is numerous analyses and experts who have written articles on the Orthodox Church, you know, interlinkage with the regime and how each of them complements each other. Well, right now, in Latvia, of course, there was a high expectation within the society, not even a community that belongs to the Orthodox Church but overall, in the general public, what the Orthodox Church in Latvia will say about Russia's war in Ukraine. There was, you know, a long period of silence right now. I mean, a long period—I mean, several days. Then the leadership of the Orthodox Church in Latvia spoke out and condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

In the meantime, we see that the leadership of the Orthodox Church in Russia is actually echoing the opposite; that, you know, when speaking about the—Russia's war on Ukraine, again, "special operation," "liberating," and that is almost, you know, saying war that Russia is conducting towards Ukraine. At the same time also, when it references Baltic states, well, you know what is going to await Baltic states—as they call it, pre-Baltica. That indicates that the Orthodox Church is very much echoing, the narratives that the Putin regime is posing both to their population and also towards those who are outside of Russia as well.

Representative COHEN: Yes, ma'am?

Ms. ANDRIKIENE: If you allow me, I would like to reply to the previous question. Is it okay?

Representative COHEN: Please. Yes.

Ms. ANDRIKIENE: Thank you. The Russian minority in Lithuania is relatively small. It is between 6 [percent] and 7 percent. No public actions in support of Russia's aggression against Ukraine so far. They are quite the opposite. Our citizens of Russian descent are part of the united stance of our citizens in support of Ukraine, Ukraine fighting against the aggression. I am very proud that people in Lithuania, whatever mother tongue they speak, donated \$19 million during the first week of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. A lot of sympathy, a lot of support, and ordinary people pledged thousands of vehicles and their houses and apartments for the refugees coming from Ukraine.

Finally, democratic opposition from Belarus and Russia are seeking shelter in Lithuania and they are provided that shelter.

Thank you.

Representative COHEN: We met with the Belarusian dissidents when we were there. It was quite an honor to meet with them and see what Lithuania was doing as a friendly neighbor.

Lukashenko just passed in Belarus an election referendum on February 27, which adopted provisions that removed Belarus' previous status as a non-nuclear and geopolitically neutral state. Do you think that came straight from Putin and Moscow and does that indicate a danger to the world?

Ms. ANDRIKIENE: Thank you very much for your question. As I mentioned already in my statement, Belarus is almost 100 percent absorbed by Russia and Lukashenko is a puppet of Putin. He receives orders from the Kremlin, and he implements those orders. This fake referendum initiated by Lukashenko is very dangerous. We do not care how many caps Lukashenko will be wearing. He is not a legitimate president for us. He is not recognized as a president, and what we saw in 2021 were stolen elections, the dirtiest elections in the modern history of the Republic of Belarus.

He could call him the president of Belarus. You could call him chairman of the People's Assembly. What is really dangerous is that they deleted very important paragraphs from the constitution about the neutrality of Belarus, plus, nuclear weapons could be displaced on Belarusian soil in addition to an unprecedented number of Russian troops in Belarus.

That is really dangerous and that is a game changer for us, looking from our perspective.

Thank you.

Representative COHEN: Thank you. One last question, then I am going to yield to Mr. Wilson.

We know Putin is a liar, and he talks about the Russian-speaking people in Ukraine and Estonia and Latvia and wherever. We do know that that is a consistent theme in Russia over the years has been the Russian people, their heritage, the church, the language, the authoritarian leader, the czar, and now, you know, czar Putin.

Do you think he really cares about that or is that just like de-Nazification, just verbiage he uses to make the Russians think he is trying to do something for the Russian people? Because we see what he is doing in Ukraine as he is—he needed a port on the Black Sea and that is why he wanted Crimea. Now he wants a highway between Crimea and the eastern provinces there—the

eastern section of Ukraine, which will become his new breakaway Russian republic. He wants access to the sea, and he would want the same thing in Kaliningrad, that access that the Suwalki Gap would give him, and in Ukraine he wants minerals.

Has he just used the Russian language as a way to build up his support within the Russian people or to make it sound like he is doing something for the Russian people and, really, all he wants is access to the sea and economic power and minerals?

Yes, sir?

Mr. MIHKELSON: Yes, if I may, to answer this question.

The way how Mr. Putin cares about the Russian people we see today what is happening in Mariupol, what is happening in Kharkiv, in many other cities of Ukraine, that thousands of innocent people have perished by Russian brutal aggression, bombings.

This is how Putin is building a Russian world. They do not care about the Russian-speaking population or Russians. They only care about this idea of reshaping the world by force and, as we all know, they—you know, Putin and others have declared that the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century was the breakup of the Soviet Union, and this is exactly an idea not only to rebuild the Soviet Union but Russian Empire. That is where human lives do not matter, of their own citizens or the others, and this is where we have to stand as democracies strongly against this right now and do everything that is possible so that Ukrainians can win this war because this war is our war as well for democracy and freedom in our world.

Representative COHEN: Thank you, sir.

I am going to yield. My time is kind of up, and Mr. Wilson is my co-chair, and I would like to recognize him for the theoretical 5 minutes.

Representative WILSON: Thank you very much, Co-Chair Cohen. Hey, it is a dream come true for me, parliamentarians, to be with you. When I was in college, I was an intern right in this building and I had a dream because as a follower of Senator Barry Goldwater, a supporter of him, he believed why not victory.

I have a little book behind my desk when you visit the office, and everybody from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are invited to come by. We will even get a picture with the dome of the Capitol over your shoulder.

When you come by, I have a book, "Why Not Victory?" What that meant was a liberation of the Baltic republics. It is just been an inspiration of mine and then, of course, it was Barry Goldwater who provided for the ultimate election of the great liberator, Ronald Reagan, with Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II.

Again, it is just a dream come true to be here with you. Indeed, the Ukrainian—I call it Putin's war—Putin's war is a world war, and the people of the Baltic republics can make a real difference. The people of the republics have friends and family, all across Russia.

They need to hear from you the message of President Zelensky where he called for the surrender of Russian troops. Now, that would be somewhat bizarre, except we are talking about conscripts, 18- and 20-year-old young persons who were told they were going on a training mission, and then they were told they would be greet-

ed. Yes, they were greeted all right, with grandmothers saying, stop. Go home.

We have an opportunity and, again, the people across Russia need to know that, again, Putin has done something that I did not know could occur. He has unified Democrats and Republicans like I have not seen us unified, and that is why we have legislation pending that would provide for refugee status for Russian-patriotic Russian military defectors, that they would receive refugee status immediately to the United States and whatever equipment that they brought over would be to the Ukrainians. They could be paid up to a hundred thousand dollars.

This is real. Then later today other legislation will be provided for members of the Duma—for diplomats, for government personnel of the Russian Federation—with their defection—patriotic defection against a dictatorship—authoritarian rule. It is quite personal to Congressman Gallego because there was a member of the Russian Duma—can you believe that when he and I were in Kyiv he made a presentation on television and a member of the Russian Duma publicly threatened to have this wonderful fellow here kidnapped, brought to Moscow, and put on trial.

Hey, we have a real interest. We want people from Duma to come here but to be welcomed as refugees.

With that in mind, Chair Andrikiene of Lithuania, I want to thank Lithuania. The courage you have to stand up for the people of Taiwan, 23 million people who could suffer the same consequences we have seen with mass murder in Ukraine. You are standing with the people of Taiwan and that is just such a positive indication.

I would like to get an observation from you. With the extraordinarily bizarre statements by Putin about possible nuclear escalation, what do you see as the potential for that, and what—how should this be addressed?

Ms. ANDRIKIENE: Thank you very much, first of all, for your kind words.

With regards to our position on Taiwan, and as I already said, we—Lithuania is not going to step backward. We will move forward. We will open our trade and economic representative office in Taiwan, and, of course, we count on your solidarity and your support, and we are grateful for what you have already done.

On Putin's threats, this man is unpredictable. Before February 21st, even seeing those—you know, Russia's buildup along the Ukrainian border and in Ukraine, not many people in the world believed that Putin would give an order for massive military aggression against Ukraine, and I have to say that our intelligence also they—that was, you know, miscalculated. There was, you know, information that the Russian army will be in Kyiv in 48 hours since the beginning of the military attack.

This did not happen, and we miscalculated the readiness of Ukrainians to defend their country and the spirit of the country. We also miscalculated the strengths of the Russian army, and we miscalculated the position of the European Union on this. Not many politician[s] and political leaders expected this dramatic change in the position of Germany and some other countries, and that changed the situation dramatically.

What I understand is that Putin is targeting not only Ukraine but also our security architecture in Europe. If Putin remains in power after this war, we will not have peace. Lithuania is—we have to support Ukraine until the very end, whatever Putin says, until the victory of Ukraine. If we fail in Ukraine, it will be only a matter of time until Putin continues his aggression against us—against NATO allies, against Georgia and Moldova.

We are supporting—Lithuania is supporting Ukraine in many different areas, and we will continue to do this. As you possibly know, Lithuania was the first one to provide lethal munition to Ukraine and many other things.

Thank you.

Representative WILSON: Again, as I conclude, you are an inspiration and I also—as to Taiwan, my father served in the Flying Tigers during World War II to defend the people of China. Our families had a deep affection for the people of China. He served in Kunming, Chengdu, and Xi'an. The people of America are not against the Chinese people as we are not against the Russian people.

Then I, finally, want to conclude giving credit to a U.S. senator which, from the House side, it is really hard to do. I want to give credit to Senator Lindsey Graham. We had a joint roundtable at the University of South Carolina Law School, which has been working to promote the rule of law in Ukraine and, particularly, to undo kleptocracy. While I was there, the senator really pointed it out—we are in a worldwide war between authoritarians and people who support democracy.

It really needs to be placed where people can understand it is a conflict between the rule of guns or the rule of law, and you all—the Baltic republics are champions for the rule of law. God bless you.

I yield back.

Representative COHEN: Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

I recognize Mr. Gallego for five or more minutes.

Representative GALLEGO: [LAUGHS.] Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Mihkelson, I want to ask you about Russian cyber capabilities. In your written testimony, you described the steps that you would like to see the United States and NATO take in response to Russian aggression, largely from a conventional standpoint. In addition to Russia's conventional capabilities, I also worry about how it uses cyber tools. Could you share your perspective on this key issue and how have you seen Russia employ its cyber capabilities over the last few weeks?

Mr. MIHKELSON: Thank you. Of course, already, for the last 15 years, Estonia has built very solid and sound cybersecurity architecture in our country in cooperation with allies within NATO. As you know, in Tallinn we have a Center of Excellence on NATO's cybersecurity efforts and, actually, this is one of the most important success stories that we have created around this particular new domain where international cooperation is much needed and we have to be, of course, ready to address upcoming risks.

As we have seen throughout the last several weeks, the cyber domain in regard to Russian aggression against Ukraine has been present. It has not been present as much, perhaps, as we all antici-

pated in terms of cutting off vital infrastructure or some other areas. Our main focus for this aggression has been using conventional weaponry and means as we have seen during World War II.

What we have, too, today and actually answering to your colleague—to Representative Wilson as well—what should be done when we hear those threats coming from Russian leadership about the possible use of nuclear weapons, of chemical weapons, we should not give in into this bluff.

This is not the first time Russian leadership has threatened the world with weapons of mass destruction. They have used it also when they even targeted their opposition leaders like Litvinenko in London or Mr. Navalny in Siberia a couple of years ago, but—and also, we know what they have done in Syria.

In order to—you know, to stand against this kind of threat, we should show our strength and resolve both in area domain as you asked but also, I argue that today there are three key elements that are very important.

First and foremost, reinforce also U.S. presence in the Baltic area. Build solid and sound air defense capabilities in our region in the Baltic states.

Secondly, we have to support Ukraine in all its efforts. We can supply them with lethal weaponry and other tools so they can fight against Russian aggression and prevail, and we are sure that Ukrainians will prevail.

Last but not least, we have to build a strategy for how to deal with Russia's evolution from this war. It is unimaginable that we can stick still to Russia's NATO Founding Act, which was concluded in 1997. I think it should go in the dustbin.

Representative GALLEGO: Thank you.

Mr. Kols, I appreciate the intel you shared regarding your perspective on Russian information operations because I am increasingly concerned about the threat that Russia poses, especially in the gray zone. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we are drawing lessons from the ongoing war in Ukraine, so we need to ensure our allies and partners are too prickly for an adversary or competitor to swallow.

That is why regular warfare is so crucial. Recognizing that we are in an unclassified setting, are there any insights you can share about how Latvia is approaching this challenge? Are there particular steps your government is taking to bolster irregular warfare capabilities?

Mr. KOLS: Yes. Thank you very much, Representative Gallego, for the question.

Well, we have introduced and now the question is the practical implementation of the total defense concept. That is, you know, top-down bottom-up or horizontal, vertical, all dimensions, where the capabilities, resilience are developed across the society, across the public institutions, and that is also what I mentioned what is critical to invest in education, be it media literacy, be it the assessment of consuming the information because that is, you know, where the pre-orchestrated activities are being conducted by Russia.

It is not just, you know, they decided suddenly we are going to intervene or interfere or attack one or another sovereign country.

There is preparation going on and usually the preparation is through these domains—through information space, through compatriots abroad as well, NGO sectors, et cetera.

I would also invite another area as well to focus on, at least for the U.S., Congress, and administration, to look at the entities that have been working closely or been representing the institution called the [Rossotrudnichestvo] Russian Cooperation Agency or the Foundation Russkiy Mir. The tentacles are wide and deep across the world and that should be identified and cut off.

Last but not least, on the cybersecurity domain, as my colleague, Marko Mihkelson mentioned, I think what we need to do within NATO is establish not only security defense policies but also think about counter-offensive measures that we can actually take and implement because, clearly, in 21st century, the wars in cyber domain will become more and more, and that also includes the critical infrastructure, protection of it, the—down to the individual consumer as well. That also applies to purchasing and installing equipment, and [ICT] Information Communications Technology solutions that are produced in like-minded countries, rather than in third countries, authoritarian regimes, at least.

I think that is also an area where we have to really focus and at least establish the guidelines for NATO member states on what to follow. I am pleased—for the Baltic countries to be also the signatories of the memorandum of the 5G technology development together with the U.S. I think this is a way forward and this is where we have to deepen our cooperation and expand it as well. Thank you.

Representative GALLEGO: Thank you.

For my magic 5 minutes last question is for Dr. Andrikiene. Thank you, again, for your testimony, especially regarding Lithuania's very courageous stance against Chinese aggression when it comes to economic space. What more could the United States and the EU be doing to support Lithuania's efforts?

Ms. ANDRIKIENE: Thank you very much, Representative Gallego. As we all know, Lithuania has been experiencing the worst of China's economic coercion, not just bilaterally but also through secondary sanctions on global supply chains. All multinational companies in China are being pressured to cut their ties to Lithuania and stop manufacturing and sourcing goods in Lithuania in exchange for their access to the Chinese market.

China's measures against Lithuania are a clear case of economic coercion. It is in violation of the WTO rules. We appreciate your support and the WTO's standing with the European Union, with us, and with buyers.

What we are asking for is, first of all, China-free supply chains. We are de facto, you know, building those China-free supply chains. We do not have any other option. As the issue in the—is Indo-Pacific region, we would appreciate your expertise, your experience there, taking into account the strategic dialogue you have with the countries of the region, because we are looking for the—we have to have this diversification of our export markets, and until now we were focusing on China and Chinese market. Our expectations were not met, and we are looking for new markets in that region.

Your support there would be highly appreciated.

Thank you.

Representative GALLEGO: Thank you, and I yield back.

Representative COHEN: You are very welcome, sir.

Let me recognize the gentleman from Alabama, Mr. Aderholt.

**STATEMENT OF ROBERT B. ADERHOLT, U.S. HOUSE, FROM
ALABAMA**

Representative ADERHOLT: Thank you. Thank you each for being here today. It is great to have you in Washington and a chance to share a little bit about some of these issues that we have worked on.

One thing that has been interesting to see is the dichotomy of the way that different people, especially how even in Russia—I am sorry, how Ukraine Russian speakers and some that are sympathetic to Russia even if they are in Ukraine and, of course, the Russian-speaking population in the Baltics are, certainly, a target for propaganda outlets, I would assume. Of course, the Kremlin has persistently accused your governments of mistreatment and discrimination against this group and their rationale is, of course, to protect the Russian—ethnic Russians and Russian speakers.

The question—and I will just open it up to whoever would like to answer—is whether there many avid consumers of Russian state media in the Baltics.

Mr. KOLS: Thank you very much. Well,—as we know, Russia is not only right now a[n] authoritarian country but a dictatorship. It is a totalitarian state, particularly, knowing that last week's new laws adopted are actually aimed at prosecuting any ordinary people who are expressing their criticism of the regime, et cetera, you know, and facing almost, potentially, 15 years, imprisonment.

That also applies to the laws of labeling democratic liberal media as external extremist organizations. That has, of course, silenced a lot of independent media outlets in Russia.

What the Baltics are doing and Latvia, in particular, we are offering to relocate their activities into Latvia. Like, we have Meduza, one of the most well-known media outlets. Right now, they are broadcasting from Latvia, also TV Rain—the TV Dozhd. We also understand that Radio Free Europe will be opening its branch in Latvia and working towards the Russian audience from the Baltic countries.

This is a lot of what we are doing. It is just trying to provide any additional alternative information sources for Russian people who are residing within Russia. Of course, we know it is becoming more and more limited for any Russian—residing people to find any alternative information whatsoever. We see, you know, the alternative internet concept is being introduced. The VPN channels are being blocked, and this is something where at least those who know the bypassing avenues in Russia can work freely and without the threats of their, you know, workings in the Baltic countries.

We also have said the Baltic Media Center for Excellence provides—and that was prior to February 24—both the Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, and Belarus journalists education on media pluralism and expertise. There is a lot of what we are contributing

towards liberal and democratic media to be still functioning even outside Russia.

On the contrary, with the propaganda channels, I mean, this is what we have been raising alarms since we regained our independence in 1990. I mean, we have been exposed to Russian disinformation since day one and different intensities of the levels for these certain periods.

At least, of course, we are sorry that, you know, the West has somewhat lost pink eyeglasses in the past five years. It is good that, you know, direction is there. We encourage and we call to do more to tackle and to take down the propaganda channels, be it the—on the classical media outlets or be it on the internet area as well.

We are continuing to do that. I do not think very soon there will be any Russian propaganda channels streamed via the internet or TV or radio in the Baltic countries as well. Of course, in the meantime, we have to look at how we can provide truthful and legible information for the Russian-speaking population in Latvia and the Baltic countries as well.

Mr. MIHKELSON: If I may, just a few words on top of that, what my colleague, Mr. Kols, said.

In Estonia, we already for several years—actually since 2015—have a public broadcasting channel TV in the Russian language and also for many years radio channels, and actually the popularity of those broadcasting units has grown significantly during the last several months, actually.

Of course, it is—one is what is—how do we deal with this Russian aggressive propaganda tools in, like, TV outlets or tools on the internet. Another area, which is extremely important, is also education—the education system, specifically when we talk about teaching history and what—you know, what is all related to that, how—once a democratic society is built up.

In Estonia, we have succeeded quite well, but more dramatic change we need—well, actually, we see that this is one of the key elements why Russians today in Russia—in the Russian Federation overwhelmingly support aggression against an independent nation like Ukraine right now.

It is connected that they are manipulated massively by lies disseminated by propaganda channels but also the other area, which is critical—has a critical importance. They live in a completely different world. Then we speak about history and what—how they understand what happened specifically during World War II and later on as well, how they do recognize the repressions of Stalin's regime, for instance, and many other issues.

It is—that is a very complicated situation and this actually tells us that we have to be ready for a very long-term confrontation with Russia and do not please make also a mistake—there are very many Russians who support Putin's aggression today. This is not only Putin.

Ms. ANDRIKIENE: In addition to what has been said, in addition to EU sanctions, Lithuania implemented additional national sanctions against Russia. We suspended the broadcasting of eight TV channels from Russia. We suspended the sale of Russian and Belarusian printed media outlets. We suspended visas and we also

suspended certificates of Russian and Belarusian services and products.

I would like to remind you that Lithuania took legal international action outside the scope of the European Union and NATO framework. We requested the ICC prosecutor to open an investigation into the crimes of the Russian Federation and Belarus committed in Ukraine. Also, prime ministers of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have addressed major online platforms with the request to take measures to stop the spread of Russian disinformation.

Thank you.

Representative ADERHOLT: Thank you.

Thank you. I yield back.

Representative COHEN: Thank you.

I believe we have one more panel member, who is on Zoom with us, Representative Gwen Moore. Representative Gwen Moore, if you are here, we are going to have to ask you to stick it to five minutes because we are way over time. Representative Moore, you are on.

STATEMENT OF GWEN MOORE, U.S. HOUSE, FROM WISCONSIN

Representative MOORE: Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman, and I just want to lift up the importance of the member-to-member relationship rather than deferring always to heads of parliaments. This is really a critical time. I think I first visited the Baltic region in 2006 with the Helsinki Commission and most recently, on our 2021 July trip, visited the region of concern to us now.

Very quickly, a couple of questions, and maybe it would be more appropriate to ask Mr. Mihkelson. You raised earlier the concern about us doing more to help, and I—the bill that is going to be dropped this afternoon is a product of the chair and ranking member of the Ways and Means Committee to try to seek suspension of Russia in the WTO, to, really, give the president more powers to put some teeth in our sanctions process, and to try to prevent Belarus from ascending to the WTO, and I was wondering if that was in line with what you thought was a rigorous enough advancement or tightening of the reins with sanctions.

I also wanted to ask you and, perhaps, any of your other panelists about the Suwalki Gap. I mean, it is very awkward. Of course, I have been to Belarus, too, and it is very awkward that Belarus is a NATO member, I am wondering if there are any diplomatic channels available to pressure, I guess, the Belarusians into protecting that 40-mile area and to—for them to stand up their commitment as a NATO ally. I would yield to you all for those answers.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your indulgence.

Mr. MIHKELSON: Thank you.

On this first part of the question, what we should do more, I appreciate very highly the leadership of the United States in terms of immediately after Russian aggression the sanctions which were launched, definitely, were something that Russia did not expect, and in cooperation with European allies we have put up a very strong first phase of sanctions, which will affect Russian capabilities to launch and keep up this aggression for some time.

Of course, we see and understand that Russia is not—has not changed any significant step right now in order to turn back or to recognize that they have miscalculated a lot. We—in this regard, we have to, of course, add up our support to Ukraine through military and weaponry supplies. Yesterday's decision by President Biden was remarkable, of course, but this should be seen as only one step in order to bolster Ukrainians' capabilities to fight for freedom a war right now and a war for their independence.

Also, we have to do everything, as I said earlier as well, to make sure that Russia will not miscalculate with possible adventures against some NATO countries, and this is why we have to make immediate steps, perhaps, already next week during the NATO summit in Brussels. We have to—in addition to that declare that Article 5 is rock solid, and alliance is rock solid.

We have to go and show the steps, what is going to be visible on the ground in terms of the allied presence in the Baltic states with building immediate steps to build capabilities we badly need in coming weeks, months, or years, like air defense I mentioned.

We have to—and here I conclude—we have to be ready for long-term confrontation with current Russia. This is where the solid and united strategy of Western allies is needed right now.

Representative COHEN: Thank you very—would you like to respond, sir?

Mr. KOLS: Maybe just a few comments because—

Representative COHEN: Sure.

Mr. KOLS: —it was also addressed on the Suwalki Gap and the dimensions and the threats. While, of course, we all realize that Kaliningrad Oblast is the—I think, the most militarized land in the world, and that also requires a proper response from NATO allocating as we were calling air defense systems, be it both in the Baltics and in Poland, in particular, because, as we know, Putin has been—claimed that for his ultimatums put forward in December that NATO is militarizing the Eastern Flank inappropriately and it needs to pull its troops away and equipment as well.

Well, we know just recently, in 2019, Russia deployed Iskander ballistic missiles in Kaliningrad with potential tactical nuclear warheads installed on them as well. This is, of course, a challenge. I do believe in the expertise and skills of NATO military commanders to find the solutions that actually secure the region and, particularly, the Suwalki Gap as well.

Therefore, the importance is the rapid response also within NATO and mobility, particularly, in our region as well. I mean, we know we have in the past approved the 30-by-four. As Chair Mihkelson mentioned, we already need to review our adapted recent plans, be it the Baltic defense plan or wider defense plan across the NATO alliance, because it is a totally different security dimension that we are facing right now.

Thank you.

Representative COHEN: Thank you very much, and thank you, Congressman Moore.

If you are okay, we will now recognize Congressman Cleaver, former mayor of Kansas City, Missouri, a city second only to Memphis in its barbecue. A great American city and a great congressman. Congressman Emanuel Cleaver?

**STATEMENT OF EMANUEL CLEAVER II, U.S. HOUSE, FROM
MISSOURI**

Representative CLEAVER: I take exception to that comment. I have been listening to the meeting, and I would yield back the balance of my time in the interest of time.

Thank you so much.

Representative COHEN: Thank you, Representative Cleaver. I do like your barbecue, too.

Let me just ask, briefly, to the three gentlemen—the two gentlemen or the three panelists—or lady here. American news media have been reporting that there is progress made between Russia and Ukraine in the talks for peace and that they have gotten closer and closer et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

I find that kind of hard to believe. I heard this morning that there was a ship or ships which had left eastern Russia, and gone through the Japanese straits, which will take a while to get to Ukraine if they can come through Turkey. That does not seem like a long trip like that with a bunch of troops is—to be—you would not plan such a trip if you were going to—looking like you were close to having peace.

Do any of you think we are anywhere near peace? If not, what do you think could possibly get Putin to agree to a ceasefire and peace?

Mr. MIHKELSON: If I may, quickly, there is no reason to believe that we are anything close to—even to ceasefire right now because Russia has violated already during the last few weeks their own agreements to allow peaceful citizens to leave some places like Mariupol or Irpin or some other places where, instead, they shot evacuees and killed children and women and others.

I think that we have to be ready for more serious fights to be seen on the ground, and Russia—I hardly believe that they are ready to capitulate at the moment because capitulation by Russia is probably the option that Ukrainians are seeking right now, definite to free their territories which are occupied currently, including perhaps also Donbas and Crimea. Thank you.

Representative COHEN: Thank you. Any other comments?

Mr. KOLS: Thank you. Just one comment. I think when you talk about the peace talks, I think what the West needs to avoid is actually any cause to find an intermediary as to ones that will settle the two sides together. I think it is exclusively right only up to Ukraine and Zelensky's office in what will be the negotiations or talks and what will be agreed or not agreed.

I think it is—well, I will not applaud to these attempts that, you know, European leaders calling five, six times to Putin, God knows talking about what for one and a half hours, and then each time getting a slap in the face again and again and again. That is—you know, it is just gaining time for Putin to re-manuever, to rethink, and so on.

Therefore, the true talks, if they are even taking place, are exclusively up to Ukrainians and Russians that are conducted—I do not know what it is right now—the fourth time, and it is only for them to determine are they ready for any concrete proposals to already being implemented.

All the rest is just empty noise, unfortunately, from Russian sites, in particular, because you cannot talk about peace while you are bombing civilian objects in Ukraine.

Thank you.

Ms. ANDRIKIENE: Very briefly.

Representative COHEN: Yes, ma'am. Please.

Ms. ANDRIKIENE: Very briefly. Composition of the—Russia's negotiating team speaks for itself. The head of this delegation is a former minister of culture, and everybody understands that this delegation is not the one who makes decisions. There were reports that they managed to agree on humanitarian corridors—at least for the civilians from Mariupol.

Even those agreements—so-called agreements—failed. What could help in reality is our unified position, the united position of democracies of the world—our EU member states, NATO allies, and other democratic countries in the world. If, in the 21st century, in the very center of Europe, we cannot guarantee a secure corridor for the civilians who are leaving the war zone, I mean, all our words are nothing, and we, in the Baltic states, all our parliaments, we very recently adopted resolutions about security zones, no-fly zones, over humanitarian corridors and nuclear facilities in Ukraine.

They have 15 active nuclear reactors in the territory of Ukraine, and we know what Russian forces were doing in Chernobyl. Their very first target was the Chernobyl nuclear power station. Then they went to Zaporizhzhia and there was the third nuclear power station in focus. We have to stop this. We have to avoid, really, a very big—potentially, very big catastrophe. What could stop Putin is, as I said already, our united stance, our united position, and Ukrainians, who are fighting for their freedom, for their independence, for their families, and for the future of their children.

Thank you.

Representative COHEN: I appreciate each of you coming. I think the idea of the three of you all traveling together is brilliant. It is being helpful to this commission, and it will be helpful to our nation as they hear your remarks and your positions. I hope that you are going elsewhere. I mean, it is not a one-night stand, I hope, and you will be appearing maybe in Canada or the U.N. or some other—do you have some other formats planned?

Mr. MIHKELSON: Thank you. We are traveling, yes, constantly in recent times and this is something where, actually, as Laima said, the united position is built around the very vital topics, which matter not only for us, for our security, but for all security of our allies.

Representative COHEN: Well, thank you, again. On the trips that I have made to each of your countries—and I think there have been maybe three or four times I have been to each of your countries and met your parliamentarians in the OSCE—I have a deep affection for your people. My grandfather immigrated to this country, my great grandfather from Lithuania, and besides that, your people are just nice folks. You enjoy—they enjoy freedom. When you visit your countries, they are free countries. They are Western countries. They want to remain so, they should. Same thing for Ukraine, and we need to make sure that people are not put under

the yoke of an authoritarian figure again as they have been in the past and do not have to surrender freedoms and opportunities.

At the last meeting we had somewhat akin to this we had three kinds of think tank people come before us, the lady from the—used to be at the State Department and the gentleman who was an ambassador to—I think, to Ukraine in the past, Mr. Taylor, and a general, and they gave us their remarks.

At the end of the hearing, I said I wanted to deliver a message to Mr. Putin. I doubt he got the message. TikTok took it everywhere, but not to Putin, I suspect. I told him—I said, Mr. Putin, maybe you should just have a little drink of vodka, take a blini, put a little caviar on it, watch the Olympics, and chill.

It would have been good if he did that. He did not do it. I guess the only thing I can hope for now is something that many of my Christian friends say and that I believe is accurate, even though I am not Christian, which is WWJD—what would Jesus do?

Mr. Putin, if you are truly a Russian Orthodox member and believe in the Orthodox Church, what would Jesus do? Mr. Putin, do it.

With that, I appreciate your attendance. The hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:06 p.m., the hearing ended.]





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