



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

Hearing on “Not-So-Good Neighbors: Russian Influence in Belarus”

Wednesday, November 20, 2019

10:00 a.m.

Room 2200, Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Statement of Helsinki Commission Chairman Rep. Alcee Hastings

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

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

Unfortunately, Belarus is ripe for infiltration by external forces. Civil society and fundamental freedoms have been stifled under the 25-year rule of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka, who has cultivated a strong working

relationship with Vladimir Putin. The two use similar tactics to crush dissent in their respective countries. Belarus is also heavily economically dependent on Russia, with its economy propped up by discounted oil and gas from its neighbor. The shared Soviet history of the two countries makes it easy for Russia to appeal to the hearts and minds of many Belarusians, and the Lukashenka regime is feeling the squeeze. And with little linguistic or cultural barriers, the Kremlin and its partners easily operate in the media and information sphere in Belarus, spreading pro-Russian propaganda in an effort to keep Belarus from turning toward the West.

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

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

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

[...]

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

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

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

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

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

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