

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

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

Committee Members Present:

**Representative Alcee Hastings (D-FL), Chairman;
Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC), Ranking Member;**

Witnesses:

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

**The Hearing Was Held From 9:58 a.m. To 11:28 a.m. in Room 2200, Rayburn
House Office Building, Washington, D.C., Representative Alcee Hastings (D-
FL), Chairman, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe,
presiding**

Date: Wednesday, November 20, 2019

HASTINGS: Good morning, everybody. It's 10:00, and I have a bad habit of trying to start on time and end on time.

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

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

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

In the case of Belarus, Russia's Western neighbor, the grip of the Kremlin is no less pervasive but much less obvious. Russia has not started a hot military conflict in Belarus as it has in Ukraine, but rather employs economic, social, political, and information leverage to weaken the sovereignty of Belarus and pull the country further into its orbit.

I saw this firsthand during my last trip to Minsk for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly annual session in July of 2017. Unfortunately, Belarus is ripe for infiltration by external forces. Civil society and fundamental freedoms have been stifled under the 25-year rule of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has cultivated a strong working relationship with Vladimir Putin. The two use similar tactics to crush dissent in their respective countries.

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

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

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

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

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

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

WILSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I appreciate your leadership and insight. And indeed, it was an extraordinary CODEL to Tunisia, to Israel, and ending up in Marrakesh, Morocco, with the OSCE conference, and very enlightening. And we look forward today to the expert witnesses and your input.

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

Vladimir Putin tramples on international norms and attempts to erode liberal democratic norms where they are just beginning to grow, or even where they're already well-established. Though not a military conquest, Putin's designs on Belarus should be just as concerning to us as the above-mentioned examples.

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

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

should take. We can only hope that these decisions give greater freedom to the deserving people of Belarus, who have for too long lived without the opportunity to express themselves without fear or repression.

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

I look forward to hearing our witnesses comment on the prospect for the Belarus future and the ways to combat Putin's pernicious influence. Thank you, and I yield back my time.

HASTINGS: Thank you, Representative Wilson.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ladies and gentlemen, a loss of Belarusian sovereignty would be a catastrophe not only for the people of Belarus who dreamed of a sovereign and independent country for many generations. This tragic turn would also encourage further Russian aggressive behavior towards

its immediate neighbors and instigate new Russian attempts to destabilize regional security. Great attention of the international community to developments in Belarus and urgent efforts are needed to help promote the sovereignty of Belarus, despite the very complicated relationship with its nondemocratic government.

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

HASTINGS: Right. Ms. Orlosky.

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

HASTINGS: Is that microphone on?

ORLOSKY: It should be.

HASTINGS: OK.

ORLOSKY: OK? I'll start with a vital contributing factor to Belarus' resilience to external influence, that is strong democratic governance. Pluralistic and fair elections, transparent and accountable government, thriving civil society, businesses, and independent media are key internal safeguards against economic, political, and sociocultural encroachment on a nation's sovereignty. Sadly, we've seen little progress in strengthening these institutions in Belarus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Russian government is already using Belarus' partnership to persecute political dissent. In the past three years at least six Russian nationals were detained or deported by the Belarusian officials at the request of the Russian authorities. Among them, an activist, a journalist, a blogger, an elections expert, and even a world champion in mixed martial arts. The most recent case resulted in the activist's arrest for his participation in this summer's protests in Moscow. Belarus also aided the Russian authorities in arresting a Ukrainian national, who has now been sentenced to six years on charges of promoting terrorism in Russia.

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

The U.S. could provide experts, technical assistance, and conditional funding to help advance change, ensure consistent and meaningful participation of the Belarusian civil society as an equal party in the Belarus-U.S. human rights and democracy dialogue, such as providing a critical stakeholder assessment on progress and achievements, continue to support U.S. public media programming in the languages spoken in Belarus, including through the U.S. agency for global media, the RFE/RL, as well as through independent media initiatives. Finally, expand foreign assistance for pro-democracy civic initiatives while at the same time ensuring that Belarusian government removes regulatory obstacles for receiving such funding.

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

HASTINGS: Franak, if you would go forward.

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

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

For example, endorsed by Lukashenko, Sputnik propaganda network reached unprecedented growth in Belarus. Now it is in the top 10 news websites, primarily due to massive support from Russian Yandex news and many news aggregators. Russian social media services like VK, Odnoklassniki, and Moi Mir all belonging to Kremlin-tied Mail.RU, have more than 3 million users and prevailed over Facebook and Instagram in Belarus. These networks censor critical content about Vladimir Putin policies, and predominantly serve as an extension of Russian soft power and disinformation machine.

Unfortunately, there is the resilience to Russian disinformation in this society. It targets multiple groups, especially young people under 25 years old, born under the current regime and raised in the Russian media space, as well as seniors nostalgic about the Soviet past without critical thinking. They're often targets of weaponized information, including entertainment TV shows and explicit anti-Western content in social media. Major TV shows from Russia Today network are included in their obligatory social package. But more critical, Kremlin has established many local news websites networks like Vitbich, Sochinfo, and hundreds, hundreds of communities, groups, and channels on social media. They are not pro-Putin explicitly, rather anti-Western, anti-Polish, anti-liberal, and, of course, anti-Belarusian.

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

It's not a secret that Russian Orthodoxy and Russian language are major instruments of Russian universe expansion and geopolitical revanchism. Kremlin uses them for political pressure too. Although 67 percent of the population declared Belarusian their native language, it was eliminated from significant parts of public life. In the army, I was punished by arrest for

speaking in Belarusian language not in Russian. Earlier, I was forced to study in the underground because my lyceum with instruction in Belarusian was liquidated by authorities.

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

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

HASTINGS: Mr. Williams.

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

HASTINGS: Is your mic on, Mr. Williams?

WHITMORE: It should be, ah, there we go. I'll start all over again. (Laughs.)

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

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

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

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

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

Lukashenko on the other hand, for all his faults, is not interested in sacrificing Belarus' sovereignty. And he has little to gain from a military standoff with the West in which his country would be on the front line. Lukashenko, in contrast, views the relationship with Moscow and Minsk – between Moscow and Minsk as purely transactional. He's happy to go through the motions of being Russia's ally, as long as Russia pays him for the trouble. Belarus' economy is effectively propped up by importing heavily subsidized Russian oil and exporting refined petroleum products.

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

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

But since Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2014, the grand bargain between Moscow and Minsk began to break down. Russia's aggression in Ukraine have led to fears on the part of Lukashenko that much – and much of the Belarusian elite that the country's fragile sovereignty could be in jeopardy. And Russia meanwhile, facing sanctions and a flailing economy, has scaled back its subsidies and economic assistance to Belarus. Moscow has also in this period sought to pressure Belarus into hosting a new Russian military base on its territory, integrating

the country's armed forces more deeply and accept a revived integration project that would effectively end Belarus' sovereignty.

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

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

Now, given the centrality of Belarus to Russia's perceived security interest, and nobody more than – except for Ukraine looms as large in Russia's security interest as Belarus – Moscow will likely view Belarus as a zero-sum game and will be willing to take risks to maintain it as a client state. Russia will most likely continue to pressure the Lukashenko regime into deeper economic and military integration. But if that fails, we cannot rule out that the Kremlin could attempt regime change or even a military solution to keep Belarus in its sphere of influence.

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

We can also, as my colleague said, intensify our work with civil society and media, which would shore up Belarus' sense of nationhood in the face of a Russian disinformation campaign that Belarus is not an actual nation, and make the country more indigestible in the event of eventual Russian aggression. And finally, we could send a clear and unambiguous signal to Moscow that any forceful effort to violate Belarus' sovereignty would incur costs, including but not limited to additional sanctions. As distasteful as we may find Lukashenko, we do regard Belarus' sovereignty as sacrosanct, and that message needs to be sent to Moscow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

HASTINGS: Mr. Williams.

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

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

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

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

HASTINGS: But nobody in the opposition won, did they?

ORLOSKY: But, exactly.

HASTINGS: I didn't mean to cut you off, but I just –

ORLOSKY: But you made my point.

HASTINGS: Oh, OK. (Laughter.)

Mr. Wilson.

WILSON: Thank you very much Mr. Chairman. And Mr. Yeliseyeu, your being here, your existence, is a dream come true to me. I supported a person of Polish heritage, Barry Goldwater, to run for president. My first visit to Washington was for the national draft Goldwater rally July the 4th, 1963. And so my whole life was really focused, as a teenager on, to hopefully the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe. I have a book behind my desk by Barry Goldwater, it cost all of 75 cents, and it was, "Why Not Victory?" What it meant was the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe, you. And so I'm just so excited to be here with you.

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

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

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

HASTINGS: Yeah, I know Solomon Passy, and so that speaks for itself.

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

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

ORLOSKY: Thank you for your question. Over the last decade we have seen certain efforts put in place to support civil society initiatives. And there is foreign assistance available for civic groups, but unfortunately we can't say that it's sufficient. Your counterparts in the European Union are doing everything they can to provide foreign funding as well. However, for as long as Belarusian civic groups continue to operate in the environment where they have to register their foreign funding and essentially apply for permission to receive a grant, where they have to register as an organization where they are placed under so many restrictions that compliance, so to speak, becomes a time-consuming endeavor as opposed to implementing the necessary initiatives to build a stronger awareness, to support youth, to support independent media, the efforts to provide funding are going to be met with challenges.

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

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

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

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

WHITMORE: Well, we're witnessing the first generation that only knows life in an independent Belarus is now coming of age. And I think we have to capitalize on that

opportunity. They're not going to be as susceptible to the appeals to Soviet nostalgia. And I think there are concrete things we can do. And as my colleagues have noted, working with civil society and seizing this moment. But I really think we need to invest in this high-tech sector to facilitate the development of Belarus' high-tech sector. Because in a lot of ways Russia's given us a wonderful opportunity right now.

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

HASTINGS: How inviting is investing in the high tech –

WHITMORE: Well, the authorities are saying they want investment in high tech. They are sending delegations to Silicon Valley. They are giving nominal tax relief and tax incentives for this. So they're acting like they want this. Now, I don't know if they understand the full political implications of this, because if you develop a vibrant Belarusian high-tech sector, that is going to change the political economy of Belarus and change the political dynamics and I would argue, over the long term, lay the foundation for a more pluralist political system. So I think this is one of the ways that we can engage this new generation.

WILSON: And I'm hopeful like you. I had the opportunity to meet with a delegation of business leaders from Belarus in North Augusta, South Carolina, where they were meeting with industry leaders. And so I'm hopeful. I now yield back.

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

VIAČORKA: Thank you for this question. So education is also the field of battle, I would say, between Russian or imperialist ideology. But it doesn't start, of course, in kindergarten, but in the high school and during all the history lessons we really see the change of the narrative. When the schoolbooks printed in '90s, before Lukashenko came to power and Russia built strong presence in Belarusian information space, kids were taught true Belarusian history about our great past, about our good times and bad times, about our unions and our wars, about our connections with Lithuania and Poland and Ukraine.

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

the Bear is the third-most popular video on YouTube ever after Gangnam Style and Despacito. (Laughter.)

ORLOSKY: It's on Netflix.

VIAČORKA: And it's on Netflix too.

ORLOSKY: In English.

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

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

WHITMORE: Well, the Zapad military exercises are conducted regularly, not annually. But the regional exercises rotate. You have Yug, which is the southern. You have Kavkaz, which is the Caucasus. You have Zapad which is the west. But they're conducted regularly. But the last Zapad military exercises between Russia and Belarus were notable for, I thought, how much discord there was between the Belarusian and the Russian authorities. The Belarus in the runup to those exercises was going out of its way to assure Belarus' neighbors that nothing aggressive was going to happen toward them. I was in Lithuania at the time of these exercises, and the Lithuanian foreign minister told me that Belarus has reached out and has, you know, been bending over backwards to assure this.

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

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

Not full-fledged bases. And that Russia is pressuring Belarus now into effectively integrating the Belarusian command with the Russian command, along the lines of what they did in the Russian-occupied areas of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Again, Belarus is resisting this. And, again this puts us in this conundrum that I spoke of earlier, this paradox, of this regime we find distasteful, that will never be our ally, but yet we want to preserve Belarusian sovereignty and we want to assure that Belarus is not militarily integrated with Russia, because that I think is a security nightmare. It brings Russian power right up to the border of our allies.

HASTINGS: OK. Mr. Wilson.

VIAČORKA: I would say that –

HASTINGS: Go right ahead.

VIAČORKA: Let me add a few words. So perhaps there are not traditional military bases, but unfortunately our air defense system is part of the union defense system. I used to be a soldier in compulsory military service in Belarus. And I was reporting about all the flights flying from the west and from the south, from everywhere, because we had enemies everywhere. And we reported both to Minsk, to Baranovichi, and to Russian side. So I think the same scheme, the same operation is working now. So basically we don't have sovereign air defense in Belarus. And within the Army there is no Belarusian narrative, there is no Belarusian ideology. It's still very Soviet, very Russian. We still were taught in military units that our main enemy is NATO. And we were trained, and we can be waken up in the middle of the night and asked the parameters of F-15 warplane, because we were taught that every day, perhaps tomorrow morning, NATO is going to attack us. And this is the way how soldiers, 40,000 soldiers in Belarus, are trained now. They are trained to fight against the West. And this is my concern.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So in more metaphorical sense I would say they have the leash, and they always play with the size of the leash. So they know that Lukashenko is under control. They know that Belarusian economy and politics and military sphere is under control of Kremlin. And what they do sometimes is they give more space to Lukashenko to play his own card, sometimes lesser. But I hope that it will not be forever like this. I also hope that there is a new generation of officials within Lukashenko's regime who see Belarus as independent, free, and pro-European, and these people also influence Lukashenko's policy in the direction of opening the country to the West.

WILSON: Yes, Mr. Whitmore.

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

But then you see a lot of stuff below the surface going on. The Belarusian Interior Minister Ihar Shunevich was recently dismissed. Now, there are different interpretations of why this happened. Mr. Shunevich was the most pro-Moscow figure in the Belarusian elite. And

dismissing him I think was a – did have kind of political overtones, although there were rumors he was sick. I don't know if that was true or not, or if he wanted to spend more time with his family, although he is rumored to be in Moscow now.

You'll see other things, such as the former Russian Ambassador Mikhail Babich, who was appointed in August of 2018 but resigned abruptly in April 2019. Now, he was meeting regularly with Belarusian security officials, and he was seen as kind of one of Putin's enforcers, if you will. He was used in Chechnya, in Tatarstan, in Bashkortostan, and other Russian regions. Now, his removal coincided with the arrest of a security official named Andrei Vtyurin, who officially was arrested for bribery but there were rumors he was meeting with Babich and was suspected of being party to a coup – a potential coup. We don't know if this is true. Again, this is what I'm told by my sources in Minsk.

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

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

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

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

HASTINGS: Yeah.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's impossible to counter fake news. It's a big mistake to believe that only factchecking and the traditional journalism can win alone. No. It's a digital space. New rules. New

competition. Instead of large and powerful, Russia used small and many. In 2013/14 they created Russia Today and Sputnik. Now they created thousands of small Facebook, Instagram, VKontakte-based pages and channels because it's much more efficient. It targets smaller group separately, but if we will see the whole picture all together they target, and they reach much more people aggregated.

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

HASTINGS: Go ahead, Mr. Wilson.

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

HASTINGS: Thank you, Joe.

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

ORLOSKY: Thank you. In my view the withdrawal of ambassadors back in the day primarily impacted the people of Belarus and of the United States, because it removed a very important cultural diplomatic link between the two nations. And, you know, the easiest manifestation was the difficulty with which Belarusian citizens had to receive U.S. visas, the length of wait for appointments, the lack of cultural exchange opportunities, and things like that. So I think that the return of ambassadors to both countries is a good step. But I think the first priority should be a reinstating cultural diplomacy relations. The peer to peer relations, the programs that show that it is not about necessarily the governments and the states but it is about the people of two countries and the goodwill of the people from the United States and Belarus towards each other.

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

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

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

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

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

So about the narrative. You know, I wanted to show you two Belarusian heroes. So one is Tadeusz Kosciuszko, who is also the hero of the United States and Poland, who actually contributed a lot in building United States military forces. But Kosciuszko is also the person who organized the first big uprising against Russian power in 1794. And now these pro-Russian narratives in Belarus on social media, they try to destroy and to say that he's Polish, that he's anti-Belarusian, he's anti-Orthodox. And another person is very important. And he's perhaps the hero number one in Belarus, Kastuś Kalinoŭski. He's a common hero for Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland. And one year ago his remains – his bones were found in Vilnius, capital of Lithuania. And in two days, there will be a ceremony of reburial of his bones. And thousands of Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians will come to Vilnius.

And that's a very good sign that still we have symbols, we have common values that can unify our countries in Central and Eastern Europe. And I think building coalition between Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, also Czech Republic, Slovakia, that's essential in order to prevent Russian influence. Because they are winning when we are separated, when we are divided. It will be together, it will be working together in politics, in economy, in military, in culture, in media space, then we will be winning. And I also would like to say and to answer the question how the U.S. can else help. So it's very important to include Belarus into all programs related to Russian disinformation, to monitoring of Russian influences in the region. Some programs are managed and coordinated by Global Engagement Center, but USAID. Projects like iSANS and their report, that's a fantastic tool and amazing data that can help not only Belarus but all the countries in the region to prevent potential Russian interference.

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

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

WILSON: And, Mr. Viačorka, thank you for referencing Slovakia. That's another example for the people of Belarus. I have been to Bratislava. I've been across the heart of

Europe. That's what Slovakia claims. A brand-new country, one that was never imagined to exist. But it does. And it's a dynamic democracy. And there's so many positive examples for the people of Belarus. And I want to thank you for, again, working and promoting freedom and democracy in Belarus. Thank you.

HASTINGS: Mr. Yeliseyeu.

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

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

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

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

HASTINGS: Mr. Whitmore.

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

empty forest. So I think this is something we have to remember. We're talking about a European nation that has been artificially cut off from Europe.

The second thing I'd want to say is that we have a window of opportunity right now. I agree with Sofya. We do not want to be an ally with a dictator. But we do have a window of opportunity right now because that dictator is desperate. He understands that his days may be numbered. It's clear that Russia is not happy with the current arrangement with Belarus and would like to change it, and would like to turn Belarus into, as I said, an extension of Russia's western military district or annex it entirely. There are leaks on Telegram channels that are known for Kremlin information – not disinformation, but actual information – (laughs) – that suggest that the plans are on the table in the Kremlin to annex Belarus. So this dictator is desperate. And this gives us a wonderful – it's a time of danger, but it also gives us a wonderful window of opportunity to work with the Belarusian people, to bring them where they belong, in Europe. Thank you.

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

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