

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

“Seeking Justice and Freedom in Belarus”

Committee Members Present:

**Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD), Chairman;
Representative Steve Cohen (D-TN), Co-Chairman;
Senator Roger F. Wicker (R-MS), Ranking Member;
Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC), Ranking Member
Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH);
Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI);
Representative Robert Aderholt (R-AL);
Representative Emanuel Cleaver, II (D-MO);
Representative Ruben Gallego (D-AZ);
Representative Marc Veasey (D-TX)**

Witnesses:

**Serge Kharytonau, Media Expert, International Strategic Action Network for
Security (iSANS);**

**Tatsiana Khomich, Coordination Council Representative for political
prisoners, Viktor Babaryka Team Coordinator, and sister of political prisoner
Maria Kalesnikava;**

**David J. Kramer, Senior Fellow, Florida International University;
Siarhej Zikratski, Representative on Legal Affairs, Office of Sviatlana
Tsikhanouskaya**

**The Hearing Was Held From 2:36 p.m. To 4:13 p.m. in Room 419, Dirksen
Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD),
Chairman, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding**

Date: Tuesday, September 21, 2021

CARDIN: The Helsinki Commission will come to order. I'm very pleased we have a lot of interest in today's topic, and I appreciate very much we're doing this in a hybrid fashion. We have three of our witnesses that will be with us via the internet and we have one witness that's with us in person. We thank them all for making this arrangement. This is an area of great interest to the Helsinki Commission.

It was a little over a year ago when the Belarus elections took place. And the self-described last dictator in Europe, Alexander Lukashenko, declared that he won overwhelmingly the election even though it was very clear that the election was just full of election fraud, voter intimidation, anything but a free and fair election, and anything but that Mr. Lukashenko had the support of the voters of Belarus.

As a result of his statements, which was contrary to what really happened, there was an outburst of peaceful protesters in Minsk and throughout Belarus. They came from all parts of the life of Belarus. It was widespread discontent with the way the elections were handled. It was done even though they knew Mr. Lukashenko had a long history of brutally suppressing demonstrations. It was a dramatic event, as we saw in the videos, where we even saw military and police joining the protesters because of the popularity of the opposition.

What was Mr. Lukashenko's response? Mass arrests, torture. He did everything he could to make that protest go away. And the brazen hijacking of a civilian aircraft and the kidnapping of a critic of Mr. Lukashenko really, I think, shocked the entire world that he would go to those types of extremes in order to carry out his repressive agenda.

The United States led in the international response to condemn the elections, to take action against the Lukashenko regime. We were joined by the European Union, U.K., and Canada. We had the strong support of the people of Belarus in this action. And we called the election for what it was, and that is a fraudulent election by Mr. Lukashenko to keep power.

We imposed new sanctions, including state-owned enterprises, to show that we would take action in addition to our words. I co-authored Senate Resolution 245 on the first anniversary of the elections on behalf of the Helsinki Commission. I was joined by many of my colleagues that are here today in our meeting in Vienna, where we had the opportunity to support an urgent resolution of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly on behalf of the people of Belarus against Mr. Lukashenko. And I had the opportunity in my office to meet with one of the opposition activists and leaders.

So we have made it clear that what happened under Mr. Lukashenko's direction violated all the commitments of a free and fair election, and the people of Belarus are entitled to elect their leaders. And this hearing is our opportunity to listen to experts and to plan strategies as to how we can help the people of Belarus.

With that, before introducing our distinguished panel, I'm going to give the chairs and ranking members an opportunity to make any opening statements that they may want to make. I'll start first with Congressman Cohen, the House chair of the Helsinki Commission.

COHEN: Thank you, Chairman Cardin.

This is an important hearing. Belarus is a country that is on the edge of Russia physically, and that's dangerous. The election was full of fraud, just as the Russian election that just took place was. Seems it's running in the waters there.

I've been to Belarus twice. I met with Mr. Lukashenko on both occasions. He is the epitome of an autocrat and probably the last of the great, so to speak, autocrats left over from the Soviet Union. He likes power. He has no desire to turn it over.

When we were there, we met with a lot of the NGOs and citizen groups that were offering alternatives to his rule, press people, and citizens, and they all expressed to us fear at what he was doing and what he had done with elections. And what he had done with elections in the past is exactly what he did with elections this time: he arrests his opponents, he criminalizes the activity, and he wins with 98 percent or so. It's absurd.

We need to respect freedom and freedom of speech and freedom of association and respect the press there, and we do. I've joined with Senator Cardin on all those efforts. The idea of taking an airplane and intercepting it and taking somebody off, and who knows what's going to happen to that dissident who was flying to Vilnius – I believe was his ultimate location – and his girlfriend, who knows. It's sad.

Ranking Member Joe Wilson and I will be introducing a resolution denouncing the different acts that we've observed recently from Lukashenko and his government, and expressing our continued solidarity with the people of Belarus. And we will be introducing that very shortly. It recognizes that crackdown on important freedoms and calls for an end to his continued repression of peaceful protesters, journalists, human rights defenders, political activists, and others.

Dr. King said an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, and indeed he was right as he always was. I, along with the entire Commission, am committed to supporting freedom and human rights in Belarus.

I do recall – I think there was a restaurant, I think it was called the Grand. I may be wrong, but it was on a major street there. Was it the Grand, Roger?

WICKER: It might have been.

COHEN: And there was a – there was a waitress there. And I spoke to her a little bit, and I kind of whispered to her because she – or, she whispered to me. I said, do you like it here? Do you want to stay here? And she said, no, I would – I would like to have freedom. I'll never forget her.

I yield back the balance of my time.

CARDIN: The Republican chair of the Helsinki Commission, Senator Wicker.

WICKER: Thank you, Senator Cardin and other distinguished members of the panel, and we are very delighted to have our witness here today.

Yes, I was with Representative Cohen when we met – on one of the occasions that he met with President Lukashenko. We also had an opportunity to meet with freedom lovers – with members of the opposition, with those brave Belarusians who were willing to speak up and meet with a group of Americans who are trying to do what we can to speak out on behalf of a free Belarus.

Some of us have also had the pleasure of meeting with Ms. Tsikhanouskaya, the legitimate winner of the presidential election, during her visit to Washington this summer. I was impressed by her sense of duty to the people of Belarus and to securing the unconditional release of political prisoners – including her own husband, who's been in prison for over a year. Many of us in Congress have been shocked by the cruelty of Alexander Lukashenko against his own people, and we've been inspired by Belarusian citizens like the ones we met with in Minsk and others who risked their jobs and even their lives to defy him and to speak out for freedom. That's what I want to do today.

Last month, several colleagues and I came together to show our support for Belarusians and to establish the bipartisan Free Belarus Caucus, which I'm proud to co-chair along with Senator Jeanne Shaheen.

In 2017, I was the leader of the delegation at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's annual session, which occurred in Minsk, and it was during that visit that several of us had a meeting with President Lukashenko. We were under no delusions that he was committed to democracy. He had already used violence and threats to suppress dissent. But back then we had some hope that he had been sobered by events in Europe: Vladimir Putin's unprovoked and outrageous attack on Ukraine. We wanted to believe that faltering efforts to reform Belarus' economy and engage constructively with the West was more than cynical political posturing.

But President Lukashenko's true colors became obvious in August of last year, the moment his power came under threat. Faced with thousands of Belarusians taking to the streets and demanding free and fair election, Mr. Lukashenko ran to the Kremlin for help. He ordered his thugs to beat protesters in the streets and throw them in prisons to be tortured. It is abundantly clear that President Lukashenko cares about nothing beyond self-preservation and he will do anything to stay in power.

Because of his ruthlessness, hundreds of innocent Belarusians are now stuck behind bars. This is a dangerous situation for many. And I know that many people, along with their families, friends, and colleagues, have put their own safety at risk to help fellow citizens. We admire their courage. We admire your courage. And we look forward to spreading the word and shining light on this terrible situation. We appreciate your presence.

I yield back to you, Mr. Chair.

CARDIN: Thank you.

Congressman Wilson.

WILSON: Thank you, Co-chairman Ben Cardin and Co-chairman Steve Cohen, for calling this timely and important hearing promoting freedom and democracy. It is sad for the people of Belarus, who are enduring violations of human rights and rebuking of democratic norms by the illegitimate authoritarian Alexander Lukashenko.

In July, I was honored to join Democrat and Republican colleagues in welcoming the Belarusian opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, to Washington for the launch of the Friends of Belarus Caucus at the embassy of Lithuania. Working together, we are confident that we can continue to support the people of Belarus in pursuit of democracy and basic human rights.

I am grateful to join Helsinki Commission Co-chairman Steve Cohen as a co-lead on a resolution, Democrat and Republican, of denouncing Lukashenko's violent campaign against human rights and pro-democracy activists and journalists. The people of Belarus deserve and demand better.

Thank you to the witnesses for your expertise that you will be bringing today, and we look forward to hearing from each of you. And I yield back.

CARDIN: Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

I'm going to introduce the four witnesses of our panel. One is with us in person. Three are on the internet. Then I'm going to excuse myself, because we have a vote on the floor of the Senate, and Chairman Cohen will continue the hearing. I'll be back shortly thereafter.

We're joined by Serge Kharytonau, who is with us in person, and we thank him very much for being with us. He's a media expert at the International Strategic Action Network for Security. Since 2011, he has contributed to a wide range of European, American, and Belarusian media, including two years as a foreign correspondent for Current Time in Belarus.

We also have Tatsiana Khomich, who worked for one of the candidates for president. She's also related to one of the individuals who is a political prisoner and a prisoner of conscience, her sister, so we'll hear firsthand from her as to the security concerns for protesters and those who challenge the Lukashenko government in Belarus.

Our third witness will be David Kramer, who is well known to this committee. He's testified before us on several occasions. He's currently with the Florida International University School of International Public Affairs. He spent 24 years in Washington, D.C., most recently with the McCain Institute for International Leadership as a senior director for human rights and democracy. And we all know of his four years as president of Freedom House. And also served

eight years in the U.S. Department of State during the administration of President George W. Bush, including as Assistant Secretary of State for democracy, human rights, and labor.

And then our fourth witness is Siarhej Zikratski, who is the representative on legal affairs for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who was the opposition candidate in the last election and can fill us in on a lot of the details concerning the specifics of the election.

So we have a very distinguished panel of witnesses, and we will start it with Mr. Kharytonau.

KHARYTONAU: Chairman Cardin, Chairman Cohen, members of the Commission, good afternoon. My name is Serge Kharytonau and I am providing this testimony on behalf of iSANS, International Strategic Action Network for Security, which was established in 2018 as an expert initiative providing detection and analysis and countering hybrid threats in Eurasia.

Indeed, with the findings of our team, we have identified that the media that are being mentioned as state media in the Republic of Belarus are current champions of hate speech in Europe and probably on the Champions League of the world in this mission. This testimony is based on monitoring and documentation of activity that was conducted by the system of the so-called state media, however I must make an important contextual disclaimer that whenever we refer to the so-called state media we must take into consideration that all of those were puppetized by Lukashenko and are controlled by this person, who acts in private capacity. And this control is both direct and indirect; however, he is the final beneficiary of all of the system of state media, which is really important to understand in terms of context.

We found out that since 2020 the information sovereignty of Belarus was given up to the Russian Federation in exchange for Vladimir Putin's support of Alexander Lukashenko in his private initiative and his personal ambitions as self-declared president of the Republic of Belarus. Local independent journalism in the Republic of Belarus is currently de facto criminalized, with a few limited exclusions for global media networks. The professional journalist has been wiped off the national media landscape while the Kremlin's propaganda and the propaganda controlled by Alexander Lukashenko within Belarus has the green light. This move severely jeopardizes the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Belarus, and is indeed a threat to peace and security in Central and Eastern Europe.

We've also noticed that state propaganda in Russia and the Republic of Belarus was synchronized after the mission of the Russian propagandists who arrived in Minsk upon the order of Vladimir Putin, who were effectively the workers and official workers of Russia Today – the notorious network controlled by the Kremlin, fully funded by the Kremlin, and known for propaganda outside of Russia.

With the synchronization of propaganda, Belarusian so-called state-owned media promote the “Russian world,” or “Russian mir” that was previously promoted by similar outlets in Ukraine prior to the illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas area of Ukraine by Russian forces and Russia-controlled proxies. Russia is currently using its soft power to promote its own interests in Belarus through the system of the so-called state media.

We're also noticing that there's a systematic – and I should underline this – it's a systematic use of hate speech and incitement to violence by the state media against peaceful protesters and civilians who did not explicitly and publicly promote Lukashenko or express support to this private individual. This activity is extremely dangerous, as in our expert opinion it is very close to the kind of propaganda that was promoted by the infamous Radio of the Thousand Hills in Rwanda prior to genocide, and the scale of the use of hate speech and the foment of hate speech is similar to the ways of propaganda and hate speech promoted by the parties to the conflict in Yugoslavia at the time of the breakdown of this country.

State media in Belarus, indeed, perform the role of PSYOP, or psychological operation, infrastructure. For that purpose, the state media are using the video recordings of political hostages and the victims of torture. One of the most notorious cases is the case of Roman Protasevich, the person who was on the hijacked plane in May.

We also focus on the research of how United States technology is being used to promote misinformation and hate speech on Belarusian state television. For instance, such technology as YouTube is being used to incite violence or threaten with the use of violence against civilians by the most notorious TV channel, called the STV, which has its own two minutes of hate which are, indeed, not two minutes but full-scale television programs broadcasted in evening prime time by the state television. For instance, the national TV broadcaster's newspapers threatened dissidents with inevitable violent death. They announce punitive operations inside and outside the country, bully individual protesters and civilians, use dehumanization language as a major form of their argumentation.

The critics of Lukashenko are being systematically labeled as “vile reptiles,” “abominations of the human race,” “inhuman.” “parasites,” “idlers,” “macaques,” “rats,” “jellyfish,” “corpse-looking witches,” “human abominations,” “scum,” and a lot more. This has nothing to do with journalism. It's clearly the infrastructure that is being used as a psychological operation to get rid of any exercise of civil and political rights within the Republic of Belarus by the people who oppose Alexander Lukashenko and criticize this person.

State media deliberately demand political repressions against civilians, they call for politically-motivated violence, target ethnolinguistic and religious minorities, promote psychiatric isolation of political opponents, extrajudicial reprisals against them, including such really eccentric forms of political competition as public hanging of pro-democratic activists. These demands call for the establishment of the dictatorship rule, which has nothing to do with democracy or the civilized government of a modern country.

With all this, I would like to transfer to you the materials that our team has prepared in the form of recommendations, including the recommendations concerning the members of Russia Today and Russian civil and military advisors who were brought to Moscow as a part of Russia's malign operation against the civilians in Belarus in support of Alexander Lukashenko, who claims to be the president of this country.

Thank you very much for your attention.

COHEN: Thank you very much, sir. We appreciate it, and that report will be made, without objection, a part of the record of this hearing.

We'd now like to recognize Tatsiana Khomich. Senator Cardin has already read her background, her biography, and I guess she's going to be on the – she's not here, is she? She's going to be on the video? Well, roll the cameras.

KHOMICH: Hello. Nice to meet you all today.

COHEN: Much better.

KHOMICH: Do you hear me?

COHEN: Yes.

KHOMICH: Nice to meet you all today. Thank you for organizing the hearing focused on Belarus and for the opportunity to join this panel.

I represent Coordination Council as a representative for political prisoners. Coordination Council was recognized by U.S. Congress as a representative of Belarusian democratic society.

I also represent Viktor Babaryka Team, the most famous presidential candidate of election 2020, who was not registered and was detained.

And also I represent today my sister, Maria Kalesnikava, who is also an activist of that presidential campaign. And she's a political prisoner and prisoner of conscience.

As of today, you know that there are 673 individuals who are recognized as political prisoners in Belarus. But according to the Belarusian Investigative Committee, 4,690 criminal cases connected to the post-election protests were opened as of July 30th, 2021. It means that there are more than 673 political prisoners in Belarus.

And most likely you are familiar with the story of the courageous woman, my sister Maria Kalesnikava, who was snatched from the street in downtown Minsk by masked men on September 7th, 2020. And in November 2020, while in a detention center, Maria recounted the story of her abduction and intimidation, which was subsequently published in the media. So a quotation from her: "They delivered an ultimatum: Either I'm leaving the country and from abroad I can do whatever I want, or they will force me out, alive or in parts. They will break my fingers and lock me up for 25 years in prison, where I will sew shirts for the security forces. The conversation lasted a couple of hours, plus a break for 'rest,' in a solitary confinement cell," said my sister, Maria Kalesnikava.

Minsk district court sentenced Maria to 11 years in the general regime penal colony, while Maxim Znak was sentenced to 10 years in an enhanced regime penal colony. Viktor Babaryka was sentenced to 14 years in jail. Maxim Znak was a lawyer of Viktor Babaryka's

campaign headquarters and the legal counsel for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. On August 21, 2020, Maxim filed a claim on behalf of Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya with the Belarus Supreme Court, requesting the election results be ruled invalid. These are some of the longest sentences issued to a political prisoner. Maria, Maxim, and their lawyers appealed the verdict in the Belarusian Supreme Court.

Now, imagine there are at least 673 stories like this. Some political prisoners get sick with COVID and then they're quarantined with healthy cellmates for 10 days. They don't receive any medical care. Some suffer from chronic diseases. Often they're driven to despair and go on hunger strikes like Igor Losik, Maxim Znak, and Inessa Studzinskaya. Some tried to kill themselves, like Stepan Latypov. There is a case of death in the colony: Vitold Ashurak died under obscure circumstances.

Who are political prisoners in Belarus actually? They are 673 ordinary people – taxi drivers, factory workers, students, CEOs of startups, retirees, engineers, and many others. Presently, 28 journalists are recognized as political prisoners. Forty-six representatives of the academic community are suspects or convicted under criminal charges. Twelve people were sentenced to two and a half years in prison for student activism. There are also minors Mitskevich and Kirik. Mitskevich fled the country; Kirik was sentenced to two years in prison. Dmitry Strizhak: At the time of the arrest, he was 15 years old so he could not be sentenced yet. Seven human right defenders are now recognized as political prisoners and all of them are from the human rights center Viasna.

On September 16th, seven people were released, pardoned by the presidential decree. These individuals committed Internet crimes or participated in riots. Earlier on August 19th, three employees of the Press Club of Belarus were released. They were released after filing petitions for clemency, thus agreeing to the crimes that they have been charged with. Some of them had their sentence time changed to a softer one, which means that they remain under criminal prosecution.

In the meantime, hundreds of political prisoners are kept in Belarusian jails in awful conditions under false, politically motivated accusations, serving unjust and unlawful sentences. And the number of political prisoners continues to grow and people are accused of being disloyal to the state. They receive huge sentences, are sent to prison, and sacrifice their freedom and, sometimes, their lives.

The hope of resolving this crisis is vanishing as this dire situation inevitably leads to a deadlock. Prolonged political standoff is likely to further destabilize the region. This crisis will likely result in complete annihilation of the civil rights of Belarusians, and the prospects of any political transformation in Belarus will disappear. In the current situation, time plays into Lukashenko's hands.

Firstly, Lukashenko's regime adapts to the sanctions, which has slowly become the new normal, thus weakening the negotiation position of the West. Secondly, over time, events in other countries attract the attention of the world, and interest in Belarusian affairs decreases.

What is the possible resolution? It's imperative to sustain focus on the situation in Belarus so that Belarus does not disappear from the agenda and the situation in Belarus does not become a dead-end. This continuous attention will provide an opportunity to periodically check the readiness of Belarusian authorities for dialogue, negotiations, and changes. Resolution of the current crisis at an opportune moment through a series of constructive negotiations involving representatives of the European Union and the United States appears to be most preferred by all the parties. The goal of the communication is to release all political prisoners and to put an end to repressions.

Now I want to end my speech with words of my brave and beloved sister: "Life in Germany and Europe has taught me a lot, especially respect for human dignity and the value of human life. These are the values the Belarusian people are defending and for which they are now fighting. Of course, we are only at the beginning of a long journey, but I'm absolutely sure that the time will come when fundamental human rights will be observed. Human dignity and human life will become an unconditional value. It's priceless. Thank you very much. You're incredible."

CARDIN: Thank you, Mrs. Khomich.

We'll now hear from David Kramer.

KRAMER: Chairman Cardin, Co-Chairman Cohen, and members of the commission, thanks very much for convening today's hearing and shining a spotlight on Belarus. And let me say it's a privilege to join you here today, but it's also an honor for me to be with such distinguished panelists who have shown tremendous bravery and courage and commitment to the cause of democracy and freedom, and so I salute them for everything they're doing and for everyone else who is fighting for democracy in Belarus.

You've just heard them describe the dreadful situation in Belarus, and I want to address the question, why should we in the United States and in the West care? Why should we care about what's happening in Belarus?

Lukashenko's blatant abuse of human rights is happening in the 21st century, in the heart of Europe, in a country of nearly 10 million people that has threatening spillover effects into other neighboring states, most notably Lithuania, but also Poland, Ukraine, and Latvia. Three of those four countries are fellow NATO member states with Article 5 security guarantees. Lukashenko's weaponization of migrants is a form of hybrid warfare that poses security risks to those neighboring states and is a gross violation of those migrants' human rights. His decision to force the Ryanair flight to land in May endangered everyone on that plane and, if repeated, could result in even more disastrous consequences in the future. The murders of Belarusian activists in other countries underscore the threat Lukashenko and his security forces pose to life, liberty, and rule of law. Supporting the democratic forces in Belarus is consistent with who we are as a nation, and with the emphasis President Biden has placed on human rights and freedom as part of his foreign policy agenda. In the struggle of democracy versus authoritarianism, Belarus stands out as a test case for the West and for the democratic world.

The situation in Belarus also poses a major challenge to the OSCE and the – (audio break) –

CARDIN: We have a 10-second rule, so we'll see –

KRAMER: (In progress following audio break) – is our business and that of other OSCE member states.

Moreover, the vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace cannot be realized as long as Belarus remains under dictatorial rule, supported by the like-minded Putin regime in Russia.

So what should we do? The Western response to the situation in Belarus has largely revolved around the imposition of several rounds of sanctions on Lukashenko and his regime, most recently on August 9th to mark the one-year anniversary of the stolen election. The West should go after the so-called wallets or moneybags, individuals connected to Lukashenko who prop him up financially. These include Russian figures who have been instrumental in Lukashenko's staying in power, as well as Belarusians who are supporting him financially. Cut off the flows from them and you reduce Lukashenko's days in power. We also need to inform our allies in the Middle East, particularly in the Gulf region, who have provided funding and support for Lukashenko, that they can do business with us or with the Belarusian dictator, but not both. It is time for them to make a choice.

We must do everything we can to stop Lukashenko's weaponization of migrants and support those countries on the receiving end, as well as the innocent victims of such inhumane measures. We should have blocked the IMF from granting nearly \$1 billion in Special Drawing Rights provided for many countries due to the pandemic. This was a lifeline that will only benefit Lukashenko, not the Belarusian population. Shame on the IMF.

We must never recognize Lukashenko as the legitimate leader of Belarus. He long ago forfeited any right to be considered a legitimate leader. As long as he remains in power illegitimately, Belarus has no hope of a better, brighter future. With him gone, Belarus has no guarantee of a better, more democratic future, but for the first time, it will have such a possibility. Thus, Lukashenko's departure from power must be the overriding goal of the West. This would align us as well with the aspirations of the people of Belarus. New free and fair elections are possible only after Lukashenko has left the scene. We also must press for the release of all political prisoners and accountability for the gross violations of human rights perpetrated by Lukashenko and his accomplices. We must warn Russian President Putin that continued support, military or otherwise, of his Belarusian counterpart will incur costs for the Kremlin. Without military, security, political, financial, and propaganda support from Russia and Putin and his circle, Lukashenko undoubtedly would no longer be in Minsk.

Finally, the West needs to prepare to support Belarus for the day when Lukashenko is, in fact, gone from the scene. It will need lots of help, and the people of Belarus have demonstrated that they deserve it. Even before that day comes, however, we need to support amazing civil society organizations like Viasna, Belarusian Helsinki Commission, and Belarus Free Theatre, all of whom have come under terrible attack, along with many others. We must stand with the

brave people of Belarus who, amid grave risks and threats, seek an end to dictatorship and the dawn of a new, more democratic Belarus. They are upholding the finest tradition of the Helsinki Accords, and that should be a cause worthy of our support.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

CARDIN: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Kramer.

We'll now hear from Siarhej Zikratski. Glad to hear from you.

ZIKRATSKI: Dear members of the commission, I'm Siarhej Zikratski. I am Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's representative on legal affairs. I'd like to talk about administrative and criminal liability for people expressing their opinions about the torture of protestors, about prosecution of lawyers, and discrimination. And I'll say a few words about activities and steps which the international community can do to restore justice in Belarus.

Back in the summer of 2020, lawyer Maxim Znak called the situation in Belarus a "legal default." It means the refusal of the state to obey its own laws. Maxim Znak was an attorney of the leader of the presidential election campaign, Viktor Babaryka. And after Viktor Babaryka wasn't registered as a candidate, Maxim Znak joined the electoral headquarters of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. In September 2021, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison. The state now uses both administrative and criminal responsibility to punish politically active citizens. As of today, 673 people are recognized as political prisoners, but the actual number of people who are imprisoned from politically motivated charges is much higher. As the investigative committee itself stated that more than 4,600 criminal cases related to the protest activity have been opened since the elections. Therefore, the number of persons who are prosecuted or may be prosecuted for politically motivated cases is obviously more than several thousand.

As an example of politically motivated case, I will refer to the case of journalists Katsiaryna Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova. I have enough reasons to speak about this case because I defended Katsiaryna Andreyeva. These journalists were live-streaming a peaceful protest from the apartment building. At some moment they went outside to interview the protestors to broadcast the interview on air. On the same day, they were detained and later sentenced to two-year imprisonment for allegedly organizing and actively participating in group actions that grossly violated public order. The court decided that the journalists were organizing the protest actions by broadcasting what was going on in the square live. The fact that they stepped on the roadway when interviewing the protestors was regarded by the court as active participation in the actions that grossly violate public order. Katsiaryna Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova were recognized as political prisoners.

I am absolutely confident that all 673 citizens who have been recognized as political prisoners are detained unreasonably and their detention was politically motivated.

Now about torture. During the first three days after the election, more than 7,000 people were detained. Most of them were subjected to torture. People were held in overcrowded facilities, jail cells with size of 12 square meters were filled by 35 people. And there is ample

evidence that the detainees were beaten, humiliated, and threatened with sexual violence. According to the official information, almost 5,000 appeals were filed in connection with bodily injuries inflicted by law enforcement. However, not a single criminal case was started in Belarus.

In my written testimony, I provided more examples of torture and also described the situation with fair trials. I'm absolutely sure that we can't talk about independent courts in Belarus.

Now I'd like to say a few words about the prosecution of lawyers. During the last year, about 30 lawyers have been expelled from the bar. They defended activists, journalists, and actively expressed their political views. This is a significant figure as the number of lawyers who dealt with political cases were estimated at about 150.

Amendments to the Law of Advocacy were adopted in the spring of 2021, which aimed at depriving the bar of its independence and establishing full control by the Ministry of Justice over the activities of lawyers. Here are three main changes to the law.

The first: Candidates for the position of members of the Council of the Bar must be approved by the minister of justice in advance.

The second: Before taking the bar examination, a traineeship in the bar is required. The Ministry of Justice approves the list of trainees.

The third: The only form of lawyers' work is consultations which are created by bar associations and operated not by lawyers themselves but by the head of the consultation, which is approved by the Ministry of Justice. Earlier there were also other forms of advocacy: advocates' bureaus, which were created and operated by lawyers themselves, and also lawyers were entitled to work individually.

I also described in my written testimony the facts of discrimination against citizens because of their political views.

And now, here are three main steps which the international community can do in order to help restore justice and freedom in Belarus.

First: As Lukashenko didn't win the last election, he cannot be recognized as the president of Belarus. Lukashenko and representatives of official state bodies cannot be invited in any official status to any events. Communication with them is possible only if they establish a potential dialogue.

Second: to use international legal mechanisms of human rights protection. It's necessary to use country complaints which are stipulated by a number of conventions. In particular, Article 30 of the Convention Against Torture and Article 41 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights can be used.

And the third: to gather information on human rights violations in Belarus, record evidence of crimes, institute and investigate criminal proceedings under the principle of universal jurisdictions.

Thank you for your attention.

CARDIN: Well, thank you for your testimony.

We also have the written testimony from Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya that will be made part of the record, without objection, as well. All the statements of our witnesses will be included in the committee record, without objection.

I'm going to defer my time and recognize Senator Shaheen for questioning.

SHAHEEN: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to all of our witnesses, but particularly to those of you who have been fighting for democracy in Belarus. We look to your model with great appreciation and hope that we can do everything possible to support it.

I hope – I would like to begin with you, Mr. Kharytonau, because in your written testimony, you talked about U.S. tech companies being used to promote misinformation and hate speech. Can you expand a little bit on that and talk about what the impact of that is in Belarus?

KHARYTONAU: Sure. The so-called state-owned media are using companies like YouTube to promote their content so they are replicating the recordings that are being broadcast on broadcast television and turn them into digital media files that are being promoted, let's say, in the form of advertising on YouTube or in the form of regular videos on YouTube. These are programs that include so-called testimonies of the victims of arrests. However, as my colleague Siarhej Zikratski will probably support, these are not arrests, because "arrest" has specific legal requirements and specific procedures which are not being followed in Belarus. And we may effectively speak about the enforced abduction of people, and these kind of recordings can be treated as torture and inhuman treatment of civilians. These kind of videos are being promoted by state television on YouTube; they're being used as advertising by certain channels related to the office of Alexander Lukashenko, and, in my opinion, these channels as well as all accounts of the so-called state media and propagandists, both in Belarus and those individuals and companies in Russia who were involved in the operation between August 2020 and December 2020 must be entirely removed from YouTube and be banned for an unlimited period of time in order to prevent the promotion of these materials and the use of these materials as a part of psychological operation. When I'm referring to this term, I mean the psychological operation in the reading of the term, which is widely being recognized by, let's say, the United States military or the Ministry of Defense. So in that sense – the television foremost. There are certain examples in print media, but foremost the television and related websites are being used to intimidate civilians and create the atmosphere of fear, which is coordinated in part with the state security and the units that are more similar to mercenaries rather than state organizations or state security organizations under the constitution of Belarus and within the international legislation.

SHAHEEN: That particularly caught my attention because we just saw in Russia during their election the pressure that was put on Google and Apple to take down an app that was created by opposition leader Navalny. And I guess the question I have is, should we be thinking about action in the United States to address our U.S. tech companies that are really allowing that kind of oppression to go on?

And I guess my question for you, David Kramer, because you talked in your remarks about the need for us to sanction those businesses that have promoted what's happened in Belarus and enabled Lukashenko: Is this something that you think we ought to be thinking about in the U.S. to be able to take action against those tech companies that are enabling Lukashenko, Putin, other autocratic leaders to oppress the rights of their people?

KRAMER: Senator Shaheen, thank you for the question. I would draw a distinction between companies that follow what are deemed to be local or national laws or rules or orders coming from places like Russia and Belarus, and those companies that are actually providing financial support to such regimes. I think technology companies that facilitate the repression by taking down apps that authoritarian regimes don't like need to understand that they are playing into the hands of the authoritarian regimes and are doing a disservice not only to the people in these countries but to the cause of freedom. For those companies, however, that are actually funding regimes like Lukashenko's or Putin's, then I think the need for sanctions is in order because they would be in violation of sanctions we had put in place against a regime like Lukashenko's.

SHAHEEN: Well, thank you for that distinction. I'm not sure I totally agree with it but it does help me better understand exactly what you were saying.

Can I ask: Earlier this year I had the opportunity to visit Lithuania and meet with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and hear very directly from her what was happening in Belarus, and we also visited Ukraine and Georgia with a congressional delegation. And it was about that time that Putin was talking about entering a union with Belarus and also adding – there was some question about whether he was interested in including Crimea in that union and of course the provinces in Georgia that Russia has invaded. I wonder if those of you who are here testifying have any perspective on whether this proposed union is really going to happen and, if it did, what the impact on Belarus would be.

And I will ask you to go first, Mr. Kharytonau, but also if the other witnesses would speak to that as well.

KHARYTONAU: Whenever we speak of this union we have to realize that the work on this union started in the late '90s and many of the aspects that were discussed back then – for instance, the common currency – were supposed to appear in 2005, 16 years ago today. So I must admit that the work over the so-called union state has been slowed down by both sides, since both sides are having their own advantages from having this process – as a process rather than a result. However, for Alexander Lukashenko, establishing a full-fledged union with Russia would mean the end of his career and the end of his control over the country, mainly because of

the power that Russia still has but also because of his functionality that will be definitely limited, if not legally, then, de facto. So for him to establish a real union with Russia would be political death. However, the Russians are still interested in establishing this union, foremost because of the military facilities that Belarus can provide. Because of Russian military presence, that actually was upgraded just a few weeks ago when Russia delivered 400 missile rocket launchers to the border with Poland and Lithuania on the western side of Belarus.

So although they are speaking about the so-called training center or training military center, we may say that these are the Russian forces, these are Russian military facilities that were deployed to the territory of Belarus. There's also aircrafts that were delivered to central Belarus. So it's a very touchy issue. However, it is clear that if only such union is a full-fledged reality, it would mean the end of sovereignty for the Republic of Belarus and we may speak of the construction that would be politically similar to the role of Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic in the USSR, which means all decisions, all military capacity, all financial roles would be controlled from the Kremlin and Belarus will only be the proxy, and the politicians in Minsk would be the proxies of the Kremlin.

So this is indeed something that has to be avoided and in order to prevent this development of events, Lukashenko has to be removed from power because he's essentially the only politician who was promoting this union in Belarus, and he's actually the most pro-Russian politician, to a certain extent, which, however, does not jeopardize his own personal rule and his personal rule is the supreme authority, the supreme value for himself in terms of politics. Whenever he speaks about control of sovereignty or maintaining of sovereignty or strengthening the sovereignty, he speaks about his personal control of the country for which he has no legitimate or legal rights and he acts in private capacity, which is as well recognized by the U.S. government.

CARDIN: Let me thank you for that response. I think that was a pretty comprehensive response. I'm going to go on to Congressman Cohen.

COHEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me ask Tatsiana Khomich about the prisoners that she mentioned. One I guess was her sister and the other a former candidate. What is their current state that you are aware of during their imprisonment in the penal colony? How are they being treated? Do you ever hear from them? Are they allowed to communicate to the outside world?

KHOMICH: So my sister, Maria Kalesnikava, is not in the colony yet because she's – there is an appeal to Supreme Court, so the final sentence will be known a little bit later. So she stays in Minsk, in the capital, in pre-detention centers, too, but she has been there for a year already. I can describe it, of course.

So there is no possibility to use a phone, for example. There is no possibility to use internet or emails. Our father, who is in Minsk, he tried to meet her the whole year, and he was allowed to do it only one hour after the year. So he met her for the first time last week and he hadn't seen her for a year already.

The letters – the situation with letters is really bad because sometimes political prisoners as well as my sister, Maria, they don't receive letters at all – written letters, I mean, for example, four months or two months, yes. And when they receive them, actually, it takes several weeks for a letter to reach the prisoner sometimes. Despite the fact that they are in the same town, two weeks to deliver a letter.

Regarding Viktor Babaryka, for example, the same situation is with Maxim Znak. He's also – he was sentenced, but he will be moved to colony after the final consideration of Supreme Court along with the decision. Viktor Babaryka was sentenced in July and now he's in penal colony, and they work there. This is six-day work. Well, they spend all day at some simple handcraft work.

So they also – they can receive letters. Maybe the situation there is better. They're allowed to meet relatives several times a year. It can be for – even for several days or there can be some small little meetings for several hours. So actually, these cases they really describe the situation with all other political prisoners. So it's not only about Maria, Viktor Babaryka, Maxim Znak, but for everyone, actually.

So this is how it goes. They do not see relatives. They do not get any information from them. If they have television, they have only state channels there. They cannot read independent media. It's great if they do have the possibility to meet with relatives sometimes, yes, once in several months, or have just even a state newspaper there to read because there is no information at all.

COHEN: Was your sister, who I might have seen in the media, making a heart with her hands when she was being before the cameras? I think that might have been her symbol.

KHOMICH: Yeah.

COHEN: That was her?

KHOMICH: Yes. This was my sister. (Laughs.) So –

COHEN: Yeah. I admired her. I thought that was very courageous and it was a sign of hope. I don't know if there is hope. But she was showing that she's putting herself above the fray and she's a warrior and she's, obviously, a prisoner of conscience. It was very impressive. The Supreme Court's no hope, I'm sure, and then when they go to the penal colony – if I remember correctly, they were sentenced to hard labor at the penal colony, which is like a double whammy. Not good at all.

Do you know what the current state is of the man that was taken off the airplane and his girlfriend? Maybe – sir, would you – do you know what their situation is here, the journalist, I think?

KHARYTONAU: Yes, sir. His name was Roman Protasevich and there's a pretty manipulative operation conducted towards him and with the use of these gentlemen, whom I know personally, he is being used to create an image of a person who is enjoying his life in a closed area, which is not prison still. But he is being used by the state security to promote his good condition, to represent his life as something that is not really a human under repressions but someone who is limited in capacity to exercise his freedoms. However, he lives in a regular private building with state security officers.

The reason for that is that the case of Roman Protasevich and the case of the hijacked plane, indeed, raised the bar and the knowledge of the situation in Belarus, and it was actually one of the first situations when the external world was, indeed, hit by the actions of Alexander Lukashenko, and by that I mean the aircraft security and the security of air transportation globally, since the impact was, indeed, global.

So he's been removed from the detention center. He is provided with internet access. However, the general public understands that the idyllic image of his life and the life of his girlfriend is just a KGB operation and nothing less than this.

COHEN: And he gave a statement that looked like it wasn't necessarily sincere, and that was a ticket to his better treatment. Is that true?

KHARYTONAU: Our expert position, and by us I mean iSANS, is that when he was giving an interview to state television and when he was giving statements on that matter in national press service, it was, indeed, the use of the hostage. These were hostage interviews. And that person who, indeed, had no control over the situation and who was the hostage of the people who had full control of his activity and who were in charge of his decisions, cannot really be treated as a free person, and whatever is being told by him should be treated as something that has been told by a hostage. And with this I think the practices of the state of Israel or the United States towards the prisoners of war and towards their own prisoners of war who were hostages in conflicts overseas should be taken into consideration when evaluating the statements of Mr. Protasevich and people like him who, indeed, do not have any control over what they are doing and who are in real danger.

COHEN: Thank you, and I yield back.

CARDIN: Congressman Wilson?

WILSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, Mr. Zikratski, as an attorney myself, I want to recognize your courage and your service and to the people of Belarus. How do you assess the OSCE role in Belarus? Was the Moscow mechanism investigation and report published after the 2020 elections a fruitful effort? Do you see any other role for OSCE or other multilateral organizations?

ZIKRATSKI: I think that the OSCE does a lot for Belarus and the use of the Moscow mechanism was very important. It showed the whole world the level of violence that has

developed in Belarus after the elections, and I think that every international organization should do everything that is in its mandate.

And when we are talking about legal mechanisms, we are talking, for example, for the Convention Against Torture and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and state complaints under these conventions could be used. And, of course, all foreign countries and international organizations have to do their best to convince official Minsk to negotiate with its own people. (Audio break, technical difficulties) – and we can – also may talk not only about international mechanisms but also about the domestic legislation of other states.

For example, there are countries which have already started the criminal cases for violations against humanity in Belarus and in Lithuania, and I think that other countries where legislation allows can also start these procedures. So it will be useful to use both international mechanisms and also to use domestic legislation to try to help Belarus in this situation.

WILSON: Again, thank you for your courage.

And, Ms. Khomich, Lithuania and Poland have become important hubs for Belarusians who have had to flee their country for safety. What role is there for the Belarusian diaspora in the United States and elsewhere playing in the struggle for freedom? How much influence do the diaspora have in Belarus?

KHOMICH: Actually, Belarusian diaspora plays a great role in every country, I would say. Maybe it depends from country to country. But from the very beginning, Belarusian diaspora started to work – they worked their participation early in summer 2020. So their first role here was helping people and promoting going to vote during the elections, and it was for the first time in the history of independent Belarus where so many people living abroad, and I want to remind that 1 million Belarusians live abroad, actually. Nine (million) in Belarus and 1 million abroad.

So they organized voting in different countries and helped so that all Belarusians who wanted to vote went to embassies to vote. Then when the situation started to elaborate, they started to constantly inform local authorities about the situation in Belarus, working with local politicians, yes, talking and knocking on every door that is possible.

So inside the countries, European countries, I think you will say also politicians react to the situation in Belarus on the human rights violation. And, of course, the great role is supporting people in Belarus, families of political prisoners and people who suffered from persecution. There were thousands. More than 35,000 people were detained and arrested or fined. It means that they had to pay a lot of money, and the diaspora played a huge role there also. They helped – and even now and after a year they're helping people inside Belarus to cope with this crisis, financially and just helping with some other stuff, because a lot of political prisoners have children and they remained without a man or a wife in the family who can support and provide stuff. And I think that now they are also playing the same huge role. They proceed to do it and also participate in a lot of the initiatives created by different democratic forces, by Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya's office, by Coordination Council, and so on.

WILSON: Thank you very much.

And, Mr. Kharytonau, Lukashenko has, essentially, liquidated all real civil society organizations, even many completely unrelated to politics. What is the future of the Belarusian civil society, and if groups are not allowed to operate do they move abroad? Do they move online? Underground? Or is there any way to support civil society?

KHARYTONAU: Well, on this particular point, the situation with the civil society where the trends that we observe show that Alexander Lukashenko is willing to establish a totalitarian dictatorship in which the institutions of the civil society are either fully controlled by the office of Alexander Lukashenko or simply do not exist.

So as of now, I would trust that most of the organizations and people you've met with your colleagues in Minsk either don't exist or are in jail, were dissolved, or were pushed out to work from outside of country. So when you were asking my colleague about the influence of diaspora, indeed, diaspora is playing a crucial role now in the resistance.

There's more calls for underground movement, which would be similar to Solidarity, I would say, to establish the underground movement and to promote Belarusian culture mostly online, and this is where we really rely on the role of diaspora.

I must express my appreciation for the role of diaspora here in Washington, D.C. and in New York as well that played a key role in the sanctioning process, that played a key role informing the members of Congress on the latest developments in Belarus, and I think these are the to-go people to ask for opinions and information on how this could be helpful.

But when we talk about the support, it's really important to understand the scale of support that we – that our competitors, let's call them, have on the other side. For instance, the largest media holding controlled by Lukashenko, Belteleradio company, slightly two years ago had a budget of \$60 million. The amount of money that will be allocated to support the civil society in Belarus in 2020 by the U.S. budget is nearly 20 million (dollars).

So we're talking about the support to just one organization involved in propaganda. And on the other hand, we have the support for the whole civil society of the Republic of Belarus, which is three times less.

I mean, these are the money of American taxpayers and there's definitely many other ways they need to be allocated to the situation with people in this country, the situation with their rights. But as Mr. Kramer rightly said, this is, indeed, the battle for – it's a battle and a test for democracy globally. What's happening in Belarus now is most likely compared to the civil rights movement in the Baltic countries and it would be a shame to lose this opportunity now.

So I think if only there's ways to support the Belarusian society it is, first and foremost, to have no appreciation and no connection and no legitimization of Lukashenko regime as such as a whole.

Secondly, this regime and the leader of this regime must be acknowledged as a threat to international peace and security, and it's really important to include the people involved in propaganda and involved in the system of the so-called state media – I mean, those whom I referred to in my testimony, to acknowledge them as people who incite for the crimes against humanity and to begin the criminal prosecution and criminal pursuit of these persons in line with the recommendations provided by the Moscow Mechanism of the OSCE and the relevant report that was presented last year. I think these would be the very best ways to support the society.

WILSON: Thank you very much for your input.

And one final question for Mr. Kramer. What are the effects, if any, of Western sanctions on the regime, and could the sanctions be more effective?

KRAMER: Congressman, thank you.

The sanctions, I think, have, certainly, made life more difficult for Lukashenko and his circle. They've also imposed some pain on the people of Belarus. I don't think we can deny that. But the sanctions are absolutely critical, and I think they could be tightened and they need to be tightened over a period of time, and we also need to look at the enablers outside of Belarus.

As I mentioned in my testimony, we need to look at sources in Russia that are providing support for Lukashenko, people such as Mikhail Gutseriev, who has been sanctioned by the EU and the United Kingdom but not by the United States.

There are Russian moneybags, as they're called, or wallets, that we need to go after – German Gref and Sberbank – and then we also need to talk with our friends and allies in the Gulf because Lukashenko has been getting financial support from the Gulf countries, in particular from the UAE, and that needs to be cut off. And if you cut off these financial sources through use of sanctions, I don't think Lukashenko will have a lot longer in power.

WILSON: Thank you very much. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

CARDIN: Thank you. I understand that Congressman Cleaver is on the internet. Are you there?

CLEAVER: Hi. I'm – yes. Yes. I'm here, Mr. Chairman.

CARDIN: We'd love to hear from you. A question you want to ask or any comments?

CLEAVER: Yes. Thank you very kindly.

I only have one question for the panel and it relates to Radio Free Europe. I mean, you know, at this time in our world the social media dominates almost everything, and so I'm wondering whether – I know that the broadcast is in Belarusian but I don't know whether it is

impactful today, considering the fact that the world is obsessed with social media, and is it of any value or significant value?

CARDIN: So who would like to respond as to the effectiveness of Radio Free Europe or other types of independent broadcasting to the people of Belarus?

KHARYTONAU: I mean, just so –

CARDIN: Looks like you're up.

KHARYTONAU: Since media are the main focus of my research, I must say that Radio Free Europe, Radio America, Radio Liberty, and the Voice of America are playing a really important role in informing audiences inside Belarus due to their technological savvy and their use of social media. Radio Free Europe were among the leaders on the social media within the country. They were among the pioneers of the use of the social media, and they're playing a really crucial role there among a few media who still continue their work inside the country mainly because of their status and their, I'd say, special relationship with the government of the United States, and I think that providing support to media like that would be definitely helpful.

That would be definitely a source of information for the people inside Belarus. But it's also important to support local media and to support local producers of content. And by that I mean the recommendations that are included on my written testimony as point six, I believe, where I'm telling about the support of local content producers and local media.

For instance, the research mechanisms on Google, that I've already mentioned today, decrease the importance of this media or decrease the positions of national media on the research because these media are banned in the territory of Belarus and, thus, in order to get access to them the users from the Republic of Belarus need to use VPN, a specific technology that virtually brings you as a user to another country and when you gain access to specific media you can still get access even if a country blocks specific news outlets online.

So there's specific recommendations on these in my written testimony, and I would say that it's important to support multinational conglomerates like Radio Liberty but it's also extremely important to support local journalists and local media outlets who now work from outside of the country. It's really important to support the bloggers and media activists who play a crucial role and who are sometimes even as important as classical media or media that work on the social networks.

In some cases, bloggers are not acknowledged as journalists, though – and it's the same situation with media activists. They are not acknowledged as journalists in terms of financial support, which means despite their work and their efforts they cannot be supported as journalists in the regular understanding of this word who have specific classification or specific requirements.

So I would say adding these categories is also very crucial and as crucial as support of Radio Liberty.

CARDIN: Thank you.

CLEAVER: Thank you.

CARDIN: Thank you.

KHOMICH: (Off mic.)

CARDIN: Congressman Veasey?

VEASEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

There have been reports recently in the news that Belarus is using migrants to try and destabilize the European Union. There are even reports that perhaps they are flying migrants in. At least Poland and Lithuania, two OSCE member countries, have made those claims and they're using troops to bolster their borders.

I wanted to ask how does that sort of action reinforce some of the already serious issues that we've heard about what they do in Belarus as far as human rights are concerned and how does this sort of help entrench Lukashenko and his hold on power there?

KRAMER: Congressman, maybe if I could jump in and –

VEASEY: Yeah, please.

KRAMER: – I'll just join. Thank you for the question.

These are more than reports. This has been happening, and this is the weaponization by Lukashenko, with Russian support and facilitation, of migrants into EU member states. They have been flooding the Lithuanian border, also the Polish border, somewhat the Latvian border, and this is payback, in Lukashenko's mind, for those countries' support for the democratic forces of Belarus, and it is imposing tremendous hardship on Lithuania, in particular, but also Poland and they have asked for support not only from the EU but from the United States. Foreign Minister Landsbergis from Lithuania was just in Washington last week and discussed this with Secretary of State Blinken.

And Lukashenko has been flying in migrants from the Middle East, in particular from Iraq, in some cases through Istanbul, and putting these poor migrants in a terrible situation where they are subject to horrible conditions and are being used by him in a kind of hybrid warfare against these EU states. And we need to do what we can to try to stop this flow going into Belarus and impose any consequences on those engaged in it.

VEASEY: Wow. That is amazing. What about the reports that there was also –

KHOMICH: Do you hear me? Yeah.

VEASEY: Oh.

KHOMICH: Yes. I would like to add –

VEASEY: Yeah. Please go right ahead.

KHOMICH: – yeah, regarding the refugees in Belarus, I suppose that this is like temporary tactics, yet one more step to use in this standoff between the West and Lukashenko, yes. And because we should understand that refugees are also a problem for Belarus because they come in and stay in there, and they cannot stay there for a long time. And people in Belarus are also facing this issue, yes, and they also – authorities also need to financially support these refugees, and they cannot stay there for a long time and then they should send them back. So this is a tricky, tricky step. But in that case, it's not also convenient for regime.

KHARYTONAU: It's also important to understand the mechanism of the use of refugees, specifically against Lithuania, mainly because Lithuania is a small country with a small population and it's a country which is predominantly White and that has a specific attitude towards Middle Eastern refugees as, let's call them philosophically, the others, the people who are distinctly different.

And playing with these cultural differences, Alexander Lukashenko is using the migrants to create an internal crisis of democracy and internal political crisis in this country, to create a similar crisis in Poland, which is less affected due to its population. But still, migration is a very debatable and touchy issue in Poland and Lithuania, just like in this country here in the United States.

And what Lukashenko and his allies have in mind is to create the kind of destabilization that would lead to the crisis of democracy, similar to what we are witnessing, let's say, in Orbán's Hungary. So that's really important to understand why he's using refugees and what's the long-term logic behind that.

Even though the migrants themselves appear in large numbers – let's say, 300 people for Lithuania is a lot. This is the number that would try to cross the border every day. It's a certain amount of money that needs to be spent on them. But also the refugees are being used, as acknowledged by the governments of Poland and the Baltic countries, as elements or the agents of hybrid war.

However, it's really important to highlight that although the European Union and its member countries are using this term and this terminology, this terminology is not being used by NATO. And I wonder why this terminology is not being used and why NATO is not playing a more active role in the solution of this crisis and in the relations between Alexander Lukashenko and the threat that he's imposing to at least two NATO members, or, to be precise, three members if we include Latvia, since Latvia is less affected by the migration crisis at the moment.

VEASEY: Interesting.

Also, one more thing in closing. So with Lukashenko's recent announcement that he is going to cede power to some local government officials, is that, basically, just something to sort of put a softer face on what he's doing, particularly now that he's weaponizing migrants and the other human rights abuses that we've heard that are happening in Belarus? Because I don't think that he was ever very specific about which powers he was going to give up. Is this just sort of a PR game that he's playing?

CARDIN: And I'd appreciate it if it'd be a brief response.

VEASEY: Yes.

CARDIN: We have two more members who want to question.

KHARYTONAU: The distinctive feature of the current crisis in Belarus is that all the things that were happening within the country are now happening at the larger scale. So whenever Lukashenko is promising something, there's very little possibility that he would stick to his promises and certain agreements that he has given, and he's definitely not giving up his personal power.

CARDIN: Congressman Gallego?

GALLEGO: Thank you, Chairman. I want to switch gears just a little and have a question for Mr. Kramer.

Mr. Kramer, I want to ask you about the reasons recent Zapad exercise that just concluded in Belarus and Russia's Western Military District. Russia has a particular track record of using exercises to mass significant troop movements, like we saw in Ukraine in 2014, and to practice military maneuvers like we saw in Georgia in 2008, especially when combined with Russia's recent repositioning of equipment and mobilization of forces on the border with Ukraine. I think we should be looking at this very closely.

What insights can you draw from this recent Zapad training exercise and what specific lessons or takeaways came from it?

KRAMER: Congressman, thank you for the question. It's not the first such exercise that Russia and Belarus have conducted. But according to the Russian defense ministry, there were some 200,000 personnel involved, though they claim there were only 12,800 troops.

Either way, that seems to be a clear violation of Vienna Document of the OSCE, which calls for – it's a protocol designed to promote transparency and confidence building regarding military exercises. It's a great concern to the neighboring states, in particular to Lithuania and Poland, but also Ukraine, and as Serge mentioned, about the weaponization of migrants. Of course, Lithuania and Poland are members of NATO and so that is a factor as well.

We see a growing Russian military influence and almost takeover of bases in Belarus, and Lukashenko has tried to prevent this but has not been very successful, in part because he has left his entire country vulnerable to growing Russian influence. So it's a major concern. It's something we need to keep an eye on. And it did end last week and it's not clear how much Russian equipment and personnel have been left behind.

GALLEGO: OK. Thank you, Mr. Kramer. I yield back.

CARDIN: Thank you. I understand Senator Whitehouse is available on the web.

WHITEHOUSE: I am, Senator Cardin. Thank you very much for recognizing me in my virtual capacity.

I wanted to ask the witnesses about the grand corruption and the so-called wallets –the construction wallet, the energy wallet, and the tobacco wallet – of Lukashenko in the context of two things that are happening with Congress.

One is that we've changed the laws in the United States for shell corporations to require reporting of real owners – beneficial ownership, we call it – and the Department of Treasury and the Department of Justice are working on the implementing regulations to be able to get a better handle on who's hiding money behind U.S. shell corporations.

And then, internationally, President Biden has teed up what I'm calling his anti-kleptocracy summit to look at the problem of shell corporations, hidden accounts, anonymous money as an international phenomenon. Clearly, people like Lukashenko are helped and their wallets are helped by being able to hide stolen money in foreign accounts where they get some rule of law protection that they might not enjoy in other arenas.

And I'm just wondering what lessons you would have us take from your experience of looking at what Lukashenko and his cronies have been up to as we develop those U.S. shell corporation regulations and as we develop an agenda for the Biden kleptocracy – anti-kleptocracy, I should say – summit.

KRAMER: Senator, I can jump in if you'd like to start.

Thank you for the question. There is, I think, two trends here. There is the overt support coming from Russia in particular for Lukashenko from people, as I mentioned before, like Mikhail Gutseriev and German Gref, Sberbank, other Russian state banks such as VTB, VEB, Gazprombank, but also Gazprom, Slavneft, RussNeft. I could go on and on.

So some of that is in the open. Gutseriev, for example, provided support for the RT propagandists to go to Belarus to fill in for the Belarus TV presenters who resigned. His son plays a prominent role there. So those are the ones that are more known.

There's also the factor of the Middle East and, in particular, with the Gulf where there are financial ties between the Lukashenko regime and, in particular, the UAE and others, and I do

think it's time to, essentially, issue an ultimatum to our friends there in the Gulf and say, you can either do business with Lukashenko or you can do business with us, but you can't do both.

I think there is less in the way of Lukashenko regime assets in the United States. But the legislation you and others have been pushing forward, I think, is indispensable, whether it deals with the authoritarian regime in Belarus or Russia or anywhere else, for that matter. It's also about cleaning up our own house and making sure we do not enable this kind of corrupt authoritarian behavior. So I really salute you and others who are pushing on this. Thank you.

CARDIN: Senator Whitehouse, are you completed your questioning?

WHITEHOUSE: Oh, sorry. My theory has been that the glue that binds people together in kleptocracies is a mutual willful blindness to each other's thefts and that people are, fundamentally, in it for the money and that they need to get the money behind rule of law protection so that it's there for the long haul, and the next big fish doesn't come along and re-steal what they stole.

So that's the context of what I'm trying to get into, the extent to which the Lukashenko kleptocracy is enabled by having protection – rule of law protections of anonymous accounts where they can go and hide stolen money.

CARDIN: And, Senator Whitehouse, first, let me acknowledge your extraordinary leadership here in the Senate on shell corporations and anti-kleptocracy efforts, including a caucus. Your point is right on target. It's interesting, and I'll have the witnesses respond if they want after I complete this. The relationship between Lukashenko and Russia has been inconsistent over a long period of time.

Clearly, they share the same objectives, and Lukashenko is now using the Putin playbook on an asymmetric arsenal to keep control in his country and to bring down democratic institutions, and part of that is corruption and kleptocracy and controlling the power brokers within his own country.

So I thank you for raising that. But it's clear to me that as we look at the use of migration, as we look at the use of corruption, as we look at the use of forces against peaceful protesters, that this is a playbook right out of the Kremlin that he's using, where they invented the model for corruption and kleptocracy.

Any of the witnesses want to respond to Senator Whitehouse?

We have a – we have a taker here.

KHARYTONAU: I would support what Mr. Kramer said, that there has to be closer attention to the partners and – not allies, maybe but, rather, partners of Alexander Lukashenko in the Gulf, and this is the area which requires specific interest from the U.S. government. I would be less sure about companies in Europe or in the United States soil, since those are partially protected by a new sanctions regime.

But the Middle East and the Gulf specifically should be the areas of specific interest of the U.S. investigators and U.S. legislative bodies on the grounds that Mr. Kramer mentioned. These people should either have business with the United States or with Alexander Lukashenko.

KRAMER: Mr. Chairman, if I could just add one other thing to Senator Whitehouse's comments.

Putin's greatest export is corruption. But in order to export it, we import it, and so shame on us for doing so. But at the same time, Putin and the Kremlin and RT and others demonize us. They hold us up as threats, as dangerous, and yet the West is where they put their money because we are a safe place to do it. They don't trust their own systems for the reasons you cited, Senator Whitehouse, the fear – and Senator Cardin – the fear that they will lose the money that they have received illicitly. And so they look at us as a safe place to put it, and we need to do a much better job of cleaning up our own act.

WHITEHOUSE: Well said. I'll end on that.

CARDIN: Yeah, well said. Indeed, they destroy the rule of law in their own country and then depend on the rule of law in the West in order to protect their ill-gotten gains. So that's something we have to definitely refine our game plan. Of course, our sanction laws, including Magnitsky, are aimed at trying to deal with that, but we need to be more effective.

Thank you, Senator Whitehouse, for your leadership on this issue. I really appreciate it. Any other comments from members of the committee?

This has been a remarkable hearing. First of all, we've had more participation than I can remember from commissioners at a hearing. Secondly, our panelists really have helped us and given us a lot of information about what is happening in Belarus, but also, I think, charging us to strengthen our game plan to protect those who are being abused within Belarus, including the prisoners of conscience, including those who are being harassed and tortured.

And, obviously, we are going to stand by democratic principles. Belarus violates the Helsinki Final Act, no question about that, in their denial of freedom of press and their denial of the freedom of expression and democratic principles for free and fair elections.

And we will be using this hearing not only in the work of our commission, but we'll be sharing it with the relevant committees that are also looking at activity in regards to Belarus.

So with the thanks of the commission, I want to, again, appreciate the time our witnesses have spent with us and I appreciate our commissioners being so engaged on this issue.

And with that, the commission will stand adjourned.

KRAMER: Thank you.

KHOMICH: Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 4:13 p.m., the hearing ended.]