

**SILENCED DISSENT: THE PLIGHT OF POLITICAL  
PRISONERS AND SEARCH FOR ACCOUNTABILITY**

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**HEARING**

BEFORE THE

COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND  
COOPERATION IN EUROPE

U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

—————  
JUNE 13, 2024  
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Printed for the use of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

[CSCE118-5]



Available via [www.csce.gov](http://www.csce.gov)

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U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

WASHINGTON : 2024

56-078

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# **SILENCED DISSENT: THE PLIGHT OF POLITICAL PRISONERS AND SEARCH FOR ACCOUNTABILITY**

COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND  
COOPERATION IN EUROPE,  
U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION,  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
*Thursday, June 13, 2024.*

The hearing was held from 3:08 a.m. to 4:31 p.m., Room 2212, Rayburn House Office Building, Representative Steve Cohen [D-TN], Ranking Member, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

**Committee Members Present:** Representative Joe Wilson [R-SC], Chairman; Representative Steve Cohen [D-TN], Ranking Member.

**Other Members Present:** Representative Nancy Pelosi [D-CA].

**Witnesses:** Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Leader of Democratic Belarus; Þórhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir, General Rapporteur for Political Prisoners of the Council of Europe; Annie Wilcox Boyajian, Vice President of Policy and Advocacy at Freedom House.

## **OPENING STATEMENT OF STEVE COHEN, U.S. HOUSE, RANKING MEMBER, FROM TENNESSEE**

Representative COHEN: [In progress]—take what you learn and spread the word to your friends on social media and your friends that are wherever.

Mr. Wilson, it is good to have you here with us at this important hearing. We found out, unfortunately, this morning that a great friend of the Commission's, Vladimir Kara-Murza, who is imprisoned in Russia, has been moved out of his prison. They have not—Russia has not let anybody know—his family or anybody—where he is being taken to. They just decided, out of nowhere—that they wanted to take him to one point in Moscow for a hearing. He objected to that. He did not want to leave for the hearing. He wanted to do it remotely. Therefore, they did it remotely. But now they are moving him to parts unknown. He was in Omsk in Siberia.

Who knows where he will be? We also learned, I guess, that The New York Times writer is being—going to be tried for treason—espionage, whatever he is going to be tried for. Russia's up to their old tricks. Vladimir will be receiving an award tonight with his wife Evgenia for human rights. He certainly deserves it. He raises the level of all the people that have been honored in the past because he is a wonderful man and his imprisonment is something

that is despicable, and part of what Russia has been doing, this stomping on dissent.

I am the OSCE parliamentary representative—a special representative on political prisoners. Suggested I take this position—it was Vladimir who asked me to take it. I was happy to do it because at that time I knew he was going to be arrested. He had been twice poisoned, and survived the poisonings—although the second one, particularly, caused him quite a few months of treatment and he was on death's doorstep. But he still went back to Russia because he said, I am a Russian citizen, and I cannot operate outside of Russia and be a Russian politician and work for a free and democratic Russia. He went back and was arrested and sentenced to 25 years.

That is what we have going. Then, of course, Belarus, we welcome my friend Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Thank you. When he gets it right and I get it wrong, I am in real trouble. But thank you. You are a hero too. I admire you, and over the years, I know you are recognized. What is happened with Belarus—I have met Lukashenko. He is the—central casting could not have a better person for being an autocrat, and bully than Lukashenko. He plays the role well, and he likes it. Well, he is a bad guy.

We are happy that you are here with us and can tell us more about what is going on in Belarus and all the people that have been imprisoned there. We think it is close to 1,600 political prisoners, including your husband. The times I visited Belarus, there were two occasions, when the NGOs always told us about how difficult it was to operate as an NGO there, and the horror stories. Therefore, it played out well. Therefore—quote/unquote. This particular—we at the OSCE and the Helsinki Commission have a strong belief in people's having the right to speak up, democratic rule, and transparency. That is something these autocrats do not believe in. So, that is a problem.

I look forward to hearing from our three witnesses. Joe, do you have a statement?

Chairman WILSON: Yes, I do.

Representative COHEN: Please.

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

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, acting chairman. Ladies and gentlemen and friends of freedom and democracy, I am so grateful to be here. Today, we will address a grave and pressing issue that strikes at the heart of our democratic values and the principles of human rights, the plight of human-political prisoners worldwide. I am actually pleasantly surprised to be here with three people, worldwide recognized as heroines of freedom and democracy. I cannot believe my staff did not tell me that I was going to have three superstars here today. Therefore, God bless each of you for what you do on behalf of political prisoners.

Political prisoners are individuals detained for their beliefs, expressions, and activism. They are men and women who have dared to challenge oppressive regimes, advocate for freedom, and demand justice. Their courage is met not with dialogue, but with imprisonment, torture, and often death. The world is in a global conflict of

dictators with the rule of gun invading democracies with the rule of law. As Americans, we have a moral obligation to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. Our nation's history is rooted in the fight against tyranny and the unwavering belief in liberty and justice for all.

As I mentioned to you, I have got my symbol here of Normandy. I was there last week. How incredible it was, the bravery of American troops landing at Omaha Beach—9,930 killed and wounded. The unique nature of the United States to conquer France and Europe, but we did not stay. We only asked for space to bury our dead. I was there at the Normandy cemetery, and so America continues to be rooted in a fight against tyranny and unwavering belief in liberty and justice for all. We cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering of political prisoners, nor can we remain silent in the face of systematic persecution by dictatorial regimes.

Finally, we must recognize the widespread nature of this issue. From the camps of Xinjiang and Tibet, where Uyghur Muslims and Buddhists are detained and subject to inhumane treatment; to the jails of Belarus, where opposition leaders are silenced; the oppression is pervasive. In dictatorial countries like Iran, Venezuela, the Russian Federation, and many others, political prisoners face brutal conditions, stripped of their basic human rights. It is imperative that we hold these governments accountable. Accountability can take many forms, including sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and international condemnation.

We must leverage our influence in international bodies to push for resolutions that condemn and take action against such practices. Furthermore, we must enact legislation, and it will be bipartisan. Can you imagine, Democrats, and Republicans together here? But it will be bipartisan. The legislation targets individuals and entities responsible for these human rights abuses, ensuring that they face consequences for their actions.

Our response cannot be limited to punitive measures. We must also extend our support to the families of political prisoners. These families often endure significant emotional and financial hardships, with in many cases breadwinners unjustly imprisoned and their sources of livelihood disrupted. They live in a state of constant fear and uncertainty, grappling with the absence of their loved ones and the threat of retaliation. We must provide these families with tangible support. This can include humanitarian aid, legal assistance, and advocacy to amplify their voices on the international stage—as we have done against the dictatorship of Assad in Syria. By partnering with nongovernmental organizations and human rights groups, we can ensure that families of political prisoners receive the resources and support they desperately and deservedly need.

The plight of political prisoners is not merely a policy issue. It is a human issue. It is about standing up for the inherent dignity and rights of every individual. As a nation that cherishes freedom and justice, we must lead by example and take decisive action. Let Americans work together, Democrats and Republicans, to hold oppressive regimes accountable, support the families of those unjustly imprisoned, and reaffirm our commitment to the principles that defined us as an America that stands for freedom and democracy. I yield back.

Representative COHEN: Thank you, Mr. Wilson. We will start our witnesses.

Chairman WILSON: Mr. Chair, I am in the Education, Workforce, and we are voting now. Therefore, I know I am leaving it in terrific hands. Thank you.

Representative COHEN: Thank you. Our first witness will be Ms. Tsikhanouskaya—I have never been good with that, and I apologize—national leader of Belarus. You won the presidential election on August 9, 2020, against the long-lasting dictator, Lukashenko. Her story began when she entered the race after her husband announced he wanted to run and voiced presidential aspirations, and I think that resulted in him being incarcerated, is that right? Yes. Then you announced that you were going to run. Mr. Lukashenko said, no, you are a housewife. A woman cannot be president. Well, you have united people and successfully led a democratic coalition from Lithuania, is that correct? Yes. Following the forced exile, where a lot of people from Belarus have gone.

She has become a symbol of peaceful struggle for democracy and has inspired unprecedented peaceful protests in Belarus—some numbering millions of hundreds of thousands. Dozens of distinctions, the Sakharov Prize, awarded by the European Parliament, the 2022 International Four Freedoms Award, and the Charlemagne Prize. I can say, we have been together many times, she has been greeted with deserved adulation for your heroism and your courage.

You are recognized.

**TESTIMONY OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA, LEADER OF  
DEMOCRATIC BELARUS**

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: Thank you, Co-chair Cohen, the members of the Commission, and the witnesses. Many of you know me as the winner of the presidential elections, but primarily I am the wife of the political prisoner. Today I speak on behalf of millions of Belarusians held hostages by Lukashenko's illegitimate regime. The regime is still taking revenge on our people for our peaceful uprising in 2020 and for our desire to live in democracy and freedom. Since then, our country, Belarus, increasingly resembles a huge prison, whilst the prisons have become torture chambers. Human rights defenders know the names of at least 1,500 political prisoners. In the U.S., that would be the equivalent of 45,000.

Every single day, 15 to 20 people are being detained on trumped-up charges. Liking a post on Instagram, wearing socks of the wrong color, singing a Ukrainian song, or even speaking the Belarusian language—all of these can land you in jail. Their only goal is to terrify people and suppress our will for resistance. Many are imprisoned not for what they did, but for what they might do. George Orwell found the perfect term for that—thought crime. Many arrests are based on denouncements, like in Stalin's time. Recently, Belarusian cyber partisans hacked the [KGB] Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti database and leaked 9,000 emails sent by KGB informants.

It is horrible to see such penetration by state police in all spheres of life. When you are in the hands of the KGB, your chance of getting released is close to zero. They would record a confessional



video where you plead guilty to crimes you have never committed. The KGB put these videos on YouTube as advertisements to seed fear and feelings of hopelessness. The regime is trying either to break you or force you to collaborate. Remember Raman Pratasevich, a journalist kidnapped through a commercial plane forced to land in Minsk? He started to collaborate with the regime, appeared on TV, praised the dictator, and denounced his friends.

People behind bars are totally isolated. Maybe once a day, they can see the sky during a short walk in the prison yard. They are deprived of medical, legal aid, or communication with the world. It looks—it took months for some to know that the war in Ukraine had ever begun. What this evil system is doing to our loved ones has a name. It is called torture. There is another form of torture for them and their families, incommunicado. It is when political prisoners do not receive a single word from their relatives. Most mothers cannot live a day without calling and checking how their child is, but parents of political prisoners do not have this luxury.

For more than a year now I have not heard anything from my husband, who was sentenced to 19 years in prison. I do not even know if he is alive. Our son and daughter continue writing him letters and never, never get any answers. The only information we have received is anonymous messages with hopefully fake news about his death. This is happening to many times. Radio Free Europe journalist Ihar Losik, lawyer Maksim Znak, my friend Maria Kolesnikova, former presidential hopeful Viktor Babariko, politician Mikalai Statkevich, and historian Uladzimir Hundar. They were sentenced to 15, 10, 11, 14, and 20 years in prison.

At least another 250 political prisoners are in mortal danger. Six have already died. We compiled a humanitarian list. This list includes 16 people with disabilities, 91 with serious illnesses, 65 senior citizens, 10 people with mental disorders, and 23 minors. At least five families have both parents in prison. All of them must be released immediately. More than 1,600 people have already served their time. They need rehabilitation and relocation to safe countries. Last month, together with Norway, we launched the humanitarian fund to support Belarus and political prisoners. I hope the United States will contribute as well.

The regime also hunts those who managed to flee Belarus. Today, a Serbian court decided to extradite an activist, Andrey Gnyot, at the request of the Belarus regime sent through Interpol. We must not allow this to happen. I hope the United States will take a strong stance to protect not only Andrey but all Belarusians who found a safe haven in the United States and all over the world.

Political prisoners are not only a political issue but also humanitarian. I ask the U.S. to support our call to the U.N. general secretary to provide access to those behind bars, give them medical and legal assistance, put pressure on the regime to release political prisoners and increase assistance to Belarusian civil society, human rights defenders, and families of the repressed. You must bring perpetrators to justice—judges, prosecutors, administrators of colonies, propagandists, Lukashenko, and all his cronies. They must know that every crime will be documented and prosecuted.

Adopt the Belarus Democracy Act, which has been introduced to the House and Senate. Appoint a special envoy to Belarus. We need the voice of the U.S. government to keep Belarus high on the agenda. Belarusians need U.S. leadership to help release political prisoners. In the end, I want to thank the U.S., Congress, State Department, and the White House for your consistent solidarity and assistance. In the last few days, I have had many powerful meetings here in D.C., and I know that you are on our side. Thank you.

Representative COHEN: You are very welcome. I appreciate your testimony. We are on your side, and we understand the difficulties in Belarus. I mean, after the election he just swarmed up everybody, and he is a bad guy.

Our next witness is the Special Rapporteur Sunna—do you want to give me your last name?

Ms. ÆVARSDÓTTIR: Ævarsdóttir.

Representative COHEN: You got that? [LAUGHTER.] She has served as the general rapporteur for political prisoners for the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly since May of 2023, a member of the Icelandic delegation to PACE since 2017, and additionally third vice chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights and is a member of the Committee on Rules and Procedures and Institutional Affairs. Icelandic member of parliament since 2016, where she has been the second deputy chair of the Economic Affairs and Trade Committee since 2021, and deputy chair of the Delegation of the Council of European Parliamentary Assemblies since 2021. I sat on the Parliamentary Committee on Judicial Affairs, Education, Constitution, Supervision, Industrial Affairs, and will bring us testimony. Thank you.

**TESTIMONY OF ÞÓRHILDUR SUNNA ÆVARSDÓTTIR, GENERAL  
RAPPORTEUR FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS OF THE COUNCIL  
OF EUROPE**

Ms. ÆVARSDÓTTIR: Thank you very much. Co-chair Cohen. [Comes on mic.] Ah, I see. Thank you very much, Co-chair Cohen.

The Distinguished Commission, ladies and gentlemen, imprisoning people for expressing their opinions is a lethal weapon against democracy. Criminalizing dissent is one of the most effective measures to drain the life out of any democratic society. Creating an atmosphere of fear, repression, and persecution of any opposition is a necessary precondition for totalitarian rule. Moreover, as Mr. Vladimir Kara-Murza, one of more than a thousand of Russia's political prisoners, has often stated, internal suppression always leads to external aggression. It is, therefore, an honor to address the Helsinki Commission today as a general rapporteur of political prisoners of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, a body representing 700 million Europeans and 46 member states.

I strongly believe that together we can significantly strengthen our efforts to free political prisoners and call the governments responsible for their imprisonment to account. It is a privilege to speak alongside Madam Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the legitimate leader of Belarus. Her husband, held in incommunicado detention since March last year, is sadly among the more than 1,500 political prisoners of the Lukashenko regime in Belarus.

My mandate compels me to intervene in matters relating to alleged cases of politically motivated arrests and criminal prosecutions in Europe, and in other countries having an observer or cooperative status with the Council of Europe. During my mandate, I have intervened in numerous cases originating from Russia, Belarus, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan, to name the countries with the largest numbers of political prisoners in Europe. I have written reports and resolutions regarding political prisoners in Azerbaijan, Russia, Belarus, and occupied Crimea. Most recently, I have started work on a report focusing on whether the detention and prosecution of Julian Assange can be considered politically motivated.

Moving on to the Assembly's definition of a political prisoner, established by Assembly Resolution 1900, in 2012. Broadly speaking, the Assembly considers a person to be a political prisoner if he or she is deprived of liberty in circumstances suggesting a violation of fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, for purely political reasons, or in a clearly unfair or disproportionate manner in connection with political motives. As rapporteur, I have met with many current and previous political prisoners and countless members of their families. Although all of their cases are different from one another, what unites them is their need for our support and for their voices to be heard across the world, because the greatest fear of any political prisoner is to be forgotten—to quote, again, my good friend Vladimir Kara-Murza.

Turning therefore to what can be done. In our resolution on the subject of—in our resolutions on the subject of political prisoners, we have called for our member and observer states to grant visas or asylum requests from former political prisoners and their family members, as well as to others exposed to the risk of political imprisonment, and to refuse politically motivated extradition requests. We have advocated for prisoner swaps. In my view, perhaps the strongest weapon or tool to work against political imprisonment is targeted sanctions.

In this regard, the leading role of the U.S. Congress should be commended. In particular, Senator Benjamin Cardin, Senator Roger Wicker, and the late Senator John McCain, who cosponsored the Magnitsky Act—a legislative initiative that has gone global, imposing targeted sanctions on human rights violators enjoying impunity in their own countries. Our co-chair, Mr. Cohen, for inviting us here to discuss this important topic and for his important work at the OECD on the subject.

The effectiveness of Magnitsky sanctions is undisputed. In fact, Vladimir Kara-Murza's 25-year sentence is seen as revenge not only for his openly expressed antiwar stance, but also for his campaign alongside Bill Browder calling for Magnitsky laws all over the world. Indeed, just calling for sanctions against oppressive regimes can help free political prisoners, as demonstrated by the recent example of Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu's release from an Azerbaijani prison following the legislative initiative of Congressman Chris Smith.

I believe that the increased cooperation between the Council of Europe and the United States can only strengthen our fight for the freedom of political prisoners. Let me name just one idea, in closing, that I think could be a helpful note. I believe that the joint

establishment of the International Day of Political Prisoners, possibly on October 30, could be a good opportunity to call for the release of political prisoners and to hold regular exchanges on the subject. Thank you very much for your attention. I look forward to our exchange of views. Thank you.

Representative COHEN: Thank you for your testimony and, more importantly, your work.

Our next witness will be Ms. Annie Boyajian.

**TESTIMONY OF ANNIE WILCOX BOYAJIAN, VICE PRESIDENT  
OF POLICY AND ADVOCACY AT FREEDOM HOUSE**

Ms. BOYAJIAN: We brought you the easy names today.

Representative COHEN: Yes, right. I know, yes. [LAUGHTER.] Vice president of policy and advocacy at Freedom House, and serves as the Mark Palmer distinguished fellow. She oversees Freedom House's policy and advocacy work, leading engagement with the U.S. government and collaboration with American human rights groups. Contributes to Freedom House publications, et cetera, et cetera. Welcome.

Ms. BOYAJIAN: Ranking member, Cohen, members of the Commission, it is an honor to testify today.

According to Freedom House data, political rights and civil liberties have declined worldwide for 18 consecutive years. Across the Eurasia region, we have documented 20 consecutive years of decline, driven by worsening repression in autocracies and backsliding in democracies. As repression intensifies, regimes often turn to political imprisonment as a tool of control. In the OSCE region, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan all utilize political imprisonment. Russia, of course, uses political imprisonment not just to repress people in Russia, but also thousands of Ukrainian civilians, including children.

The U.S. Department of State estimates that there are more than 1 million political prisoners worldwide. Political prisoners are routinely subjected to deplorable conditions, including torture and denial of access to lawyers, family, and medical care. Imprisonment also carries heavy psychological and financial burdens extended to prisoners' families. Sadly, there are too many political prisoners to name them all, but my written testimony provides details about several cases and the conditions that prisoners face.

There are several areas of concern related to political imprisonment that I would like to highlight today. First, incommunicado detention, which you have heard Ms. Tsikhanouskaya mention in relation to her own husband, and then we have also just heard about Mr. Vladimir Kara-Murza, who is also being held incommunicado. Second, the targeting of lawyers who represent political prisoners is also widespread across the region. This matters because, as Vadim Prokhorov, a Russian human rights lawyer who represents Mr. Kara-Murza, wrote: Lawyers of political prisoners help them maintain connections with the outside world. It gives those defendants a chance to have their cases heard in court and brought to public attention. Without lawyers, political prisoners would suffer even more, and they would do so in obscurity.

Third, for every political prisoner behind bars many more face subtler constraints, as our research has documented. Tactics include denying someone the ability to travel, physical monitoring, blacklisting from employment or government services, and seizure of assets. These measures can be formally or informally applied, with or without notice, and effectively prevent individuals from participating normally in society—something that some experts call civil death. Fourth, arresting those who dissent is not just about instilling fear. It is about creating perverse incentives to seek concessions from the democratic community. We see this clearly in Russia, where the Kremlin has arrested several American nationals. We have family members of some of those folks in the room today. Autocracies also routinely resort to what we call a revolving door of political imprisonment—releasing some, but simultaneously arresting others.

For political prisoners, international attention can mean the difference between life and death. We have many recommendations on the Freedom House website, but I would like to highlight a few today. First, the government should establish a dedicated office or team within the Foreign Affairs Ministry specifically focused on political prisoner and hostage issues. Appointing dedicated staff to work on this issue, both publicly and behind the scenes, will streamline existing efforts to free political prisoners and facilitate knowledge sharing and coordination with like-minded governments. Second, government officials should raise political prisoners and their treatment in all meetings at all levels, and in international forums. We would like to commend the Helsinki Commission for your leadership and consistency on this issue. Thank you.

Third, embassy personnel should attend and monitor trials and hearings for those facing politically motivated charges or already in detention and should visit detention facilities to assess needs. Fourth, governments should support the relocation of human rights defenders at serious risk of political imprisonment or civil death. In the United States, the Human Rights Defenders Protection Act would create a special non-immigrant visa to enable human rights defenders under threat to temporarily relocate to the U.S., where they could continue their work until it is safe to return home.

Fifth, targeted sanctions against officials involved in political imprisonment should be more vigorously deployed as part of a comprehensive approach to addressing the use of political imprisonment. Global Magnitsky, which we heard mentioned, and Section 7031[c] sanctions programs both already cover enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention, but it can be challenging to clearly determine whether or not detention is arbitrary. To make things clearer, Congress should urge the White House to issue a proclamation that clearly states that arbitrary detention is considered a serious human rights abuse and gross violation of human rights for the purposes of Global Magnitsky and Section 7031[c]. This was done for other issues and has proven helpful. Finally, donors should continue to provide financial assistance to cover the legal expenses incurred by political prisoners and their families.

Political prisoners are often jailed because they represent a direct threat to the regimes by working toward a future of freedom and hope. Support for political prisoners today is a direct investment in

the democratic future of their countries tomorrow. Until that day comes, we are honored to stand with all of you in this struggle. Thank you.

Representative COHEN: Thank you for your testimony. Let me start the questioning. I may finish the questioning too unless my compadres show up. In Belarus, has there been any change in the level of imprisonment of political prisoners since the 2020-21 elections? They arrested so many people then, but since then has there been any change in the methodology of Lukashenko in arresting Belarusian citizens who object to his rule and the fraudulent election? Are people just—been less opposing in presenting themselves as opposition?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: Therefore, first of all, I had to say that Belarusian people live in the country as in Stalin's time, in full tyranny and repression. Of course, the aim of Lukashenko was to suppress people and show political prisoners and the confessional video constantly, you know, putting on propagandistic TV, you know, all those messages about that everybody who is opposing regime or supporting Ukrainians in their war will be detained, of course, it frightens people. Honestly speaking, since 2020, repressions, and detentions have not stopped for a day. Every day in Belarus 15-20 people are being detained. Just in May only, 145 people were detained, and there are 31 women among them.

Representative COHEN: Were these people that were just demonstrating somewhere, or were they just chosen by the authorities?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: No. It is revenge for the 2020 uprising. But also, its revenge for the uprising in February 2022, when there were massive demonstrations against the war. Now you can be detained for anything. You do not have to be on the streets, you know, or opposing the regime. You can, I do not know, donate Ukrainian Army five euros. You will be detained for five years for this. You can speak the Belarusian language. You can buy Belarusian books. You can, I do not know, show solidarity and help families of political prisoners who are in dire also situations. Your solidarity is a crime at the moment.

Therefore, you—also a new wave of, like, prosecution of people is when people are active in exile. You know, at least half a million Belarusians left Belarus since 2020. If they are demonstrating in exile, or if they are politically active, or if they are supporting political prisoners from exile, their relatives in Belarus are under attack. Their property is confiscated, you know, in Belarus. Therefore, it is like if Lukashenko's regime cannot reach people physically, they reach their relatives. Thus, and it is constant, Lukashenko's message. Therefore if you are active politically, if you support the ideal for sanctions, if you support political prisons, be ready to lose your property and think about your relatives. This is a clear message.

Representative COHEN: Have there been any releases of prisoners in the last five years?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: At the moment, we have at least 1,600 political prisoners—ex-political prisoners who have served their time. Therefore, no pardons. You know, not pardon enough of people. Therefore, these people fully, you know, from bell to bell, sentence served their times, and—

Representative COHEN: They are released after they have served their time?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: Yes. Some are released. Some are not. We have cases when it is—there is, you know, a time when a person has to be released, and relatives are waiting for this time, and already in prison this political prisoner is accused, you know, one more, you know, accusation. You know, and his term is continued. It can be endless, you know, endlessly. Like recently our Belarusian activist Paulina Sharenda-Panasiuk, a woman, you know, with a husband with two children, we were waiting for her just like, you know, one month ago. She was not released, though she—they showed her on the propagandistic channel. Sometimes it, like, helps people to get released faster. You know, they used her but did not release them. It is, like—you know, it is revenge on the strength of this—of this woman.

Representative COHEN: Revenge is a term we have heard lately quite a bit from one of the potential candidates for president. He thinks it is a good thing.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: Yes.

Representative COHEN: You mentioned, and I think each of you mentioned, sanctions as a way to try to force the release of political prisoners. Can you cite any examples where sanctions or the increase in sanctions have resulted in the release of political prisoners?

Ms. ÆVARSDÓTTIR: I do not have a specific example of that on the top of my mind. I think it has actually possibly even led to, for instance, our friend Vladimir Kara-Murza being faced with such serious charges. What it does, however, is lift the impunity for these serious human rights violations. It makes it harder for, for instance, Vladimir Putin and his cronies to continue disrespecting any and all international laws dealing with fair trial, fair process and, you know, democracy and the rule of law, if we are going over there as well. What it does is make it more difficult for officials to participate in these things, for them to enjoy their time in the sun, go to different countries in Europe to buy luxury goods, and benefit from their often very corrupt—very corrupt actions that also result in political prisoners, as we saw in the case of Magnitsky that involved insane amounts of money. Therefore I phrase it rather delicately.

Therefore, what the importance of targeted sanctions is for the international community to show that it will cost you. It will cost your wallet if you are willing to violate people's fundamental human rights, and your state is not willing to do anything about it. Therefore, it attacks the impunity aspect of political imprisonment, which is one of the main facets of what allows it to continue, is that autocratic governments allow it to continue. But of course, just like I mentioned in my address, sometimes just naming the possibility of sanctions is enough to get a political prisoner released. I mentioned Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu, who was released after a member of Congress here suggested there should be sanctions against Azerbaijan.

I think the sensitivities of governments are also—they differ. Some feel quite confident that they will not be made to feel any real consequences. We can point to examples like Türkiye, which

has a significant number of political prisoners. Some might say they have over 40,000 people imprisoned on political grounds. But due to their strategic and political status in the international legal order, they do not really have to face a lot of consequences for that despite this very widespread lack of the rule of law and real judicial oversight to politically motivated prosecutions.

Therefore, we also must ask ourselves, you know, where do we draw the line in the sand? We should be imposing targeted sanctions against all states that have systematic problems when it comes to political persecution. I am naming here specifically the biggest offenders in Europe, which are Belarus, Russia, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan. These, I think, are, you know, hotspots that we really should focus on, because we will pay the price later if we do not act and if we do not focus on calling those to account that are responsible for it, because we will see a further deterioration of the state of rule of law in these countries. Therefore, I quote Vladimir again, internal suppression will always lead to external aggression. Therefore it is important that we hold these governments to account.

Representative COHEN: I presume the two of you agree that sanctions are probably our best tool. Is that correct?

Ms. BOYAJIAN: I would certainly say it is a very important tool. It cannot be the only tool. I think it needs to be part of a comprehensive strategy. But I would say, in the U.S. especially, we have a lot more room to try sanctions specifically against individuals who are engaging in political imprisonment. Human Rights First has done some excellent research that showed from the beginning of the implementation of the Global Magnitsky Act through the end of 2022, arbitrary detention was mentioned as one of many reasons for the sanction's designation. But actually, in 2023 sanctions for Mr. Vladimir Kara-Murza's jailers, three Russians, were sanctioned by the U.S. That was the first time the U.S. had arbitrary detention of a single person as the sole reason for the sanctions. Yet, there is a lot more room for us to try, and we should.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: Now, while I know that, you know, sanctions are no silver bullet, but sanctions help to weaken the regime, help to empty their pockets that, you know, they can give this money to siloviki, you know, to military forces, just to detain and terrorize people. But sanctions should be, you know, harmonized.

For example, in the case of Belarus and Russia, you know, in Belarus more sanctions are imposed on imports, and in Russia on export. The two dictators using each other, you know, circumvent sanctions very easily. For us, people of Belarus and maybe for, you know, opposition from Russia, it seems like one hand is trying to help political prisoners, you know, trying to help Ukrainians to win this war, and the other hand is feeding the regime, continuing trading with them. Therefore synchronization of sanctions.

We are asking Europe, you know, to watch what the USA is doing with secondary sanctions that are rather effective. But of course, sanctions have to be—you know, they have to be not the only tool. You know, positive messages to Belarusians and other people who are fighting the dictatorship are also very important. You know, because when—I always ask allies of democratic forces of Belarus, isolate Lukashenko regime but do not isolate people. It



is so important to show people that, you know, the doors of the democratic world are open for you, that you are welcomed. We are weakening the regime, but strengthening people, strengthening national identity, strengthening alternative media. You know, NGOs, and so on, and so forth. Therefore people need the energy to continue fighting—fight for political prisoners and fight for the country.

Representative COHEN: Are there other things you can recommend to the United States or to the European Council—or the United Nations, for that matter—that could be done to bring more pressure and maybe result in some releases?

Ms. ÆVARSDÓTTIR: I think a lot more can be done when it comes to the United Nations. For instance, in calling Belarusian authorities as well as Russian authorities to account for these imprisonments. I also mentioned in passing prisoner swaps, which I think are in many cases almost the only option to secure the release of political prisoners, in particular, those who we believe are, you know, justified to fear that their lives are in danger, or they have serious health concerns. There, the United States is, of course, a very strong player in this field. The ability to be able to trade with nations that are willing to exchange people like that.

Yet this, among also what madam Tsikhanouskaya mentioned, in supporting independent media, supporting NGOs that have connections to people on the ground. Therefore, you have an NGO in exile in, let us say, Lithuania, that has connections with people that are in the opposition on the ground in Belarus, or in Russia, where civil society has mostly had to go underground. They continue their activities, but they have to do it a lot more secretly than before because what we have seen, of course, especially after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, is that these two states have intensified their draconian legislation, which was—which was already very severe. But they have added. I have called it the unmasking of the Russian regime, this new approach that they have towards political imprisonment.

Whereas before, they would find some fake reason for persecuting political prisoners—they would accuse them of drug smuggling or child molestation or all sorts of trumped-up charges. But they would at least make up a facade to make it look real. But what they have done now is sort of just drop the mask and say, it is enough to criticize us and we can put you in prison. That is what their laws now say, and the same goes for Belarus. You know, these actions have intensified greatly. Therefore, I think that justifies escalating things at the United Nations on thinking about strengthening the sanctions system. Because, as was mentioned by Madam Tsikhanouskaya, they are not fully effective and there are many ways of circumventing it. There are also ways of attacking that, and I think that we should be focusing on how best to do that.

Representative COHEN: Are there any voices in the Belarusian Parliament that question Lukashenko and speak up for the political prisoners? Or is that just a recipe for disaster?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: No. [LAUGHS.] You know, there is—look, parliament in Belarus is like the pocket parliament of Lukashenko. Nobody there is going to ask questions of these dictators. You know, their task is just to raise hands when it is necessary for

Lukashenko's regime. Therefore, in Belarus, elections have nothing in common with elections. Parliament has nothing in common with parliament in the democratic sense of this word. Therefore, we cannot rely on institutions inside Belarus because Lukashenko built such a system that is obeying, you know, personally to him. It is not serving to people of Belarus. Yet, that is why it is—we rely a lot on the democratic world, on your institutions.

You know, regarding what else can be done, I think that all the accountability mechanisms have to be—has to be used more effectively. Because in the case of Belarus, we have all the proof of Lukashenko and his cronies' crimes—crimes against humanity, crimes of aggression, you know, abduction of Ukrainian children, immigration crisis, and so on, so forth. But no special investigation has been launched or has been started against Lukashenko's regime, against all the perpetrators. We know the proof of these crimes. Why so? That is the question. You know, why do not you use—I mean, the democratic world has not used all the tools and instruments you have. You know, it is—you have international courts, Court of Justice, Criminal Court. There is such a mechanism as universal jurisdiction. You know, so use it effectively. Show to people who are fighting with them—you know, for the release of political prisoners against dictators, that the democratic world is working.

Representative COHEN: You feel comfortable and safe and Lithuania where you are? Is there any Belarusian underground or officials that have come over there and threatened you, or anybody else that is taken political refuge there?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: Look, all those people who fled Belarus, they are also targets of the regime, you know. Nobody can feel safe, not inside the country, not outside. Even if we in Europe—who live in European countries or, you know, in the USA—we, like, physically in safe space, but look, our relatives in Belarus, you cannot feel safe. You cannot—every day, you know, you feel pain for people in prisons, you know, for hostages of the regime in Belarus, you know? Therefore, you do not think about your safety, you know. You think about the safety of your country and people.

Representative COHEN: Thank you.

Ms. BOYAJIAN: I would love to add that the issue that Ms. Tsikhanouskaya is talking about, of this targeting of individuals, even after they have fled their home countries, is what is known as transnational repression. We have actually done quite a bit of research on that at Freedom House. Yet, we have a database that looks at instances of direct, physical transnational repression. Therefore, the most famous case of this is Jamal Khashoggi, right? But it is also things like being followed physically, being beaten up, or being attacked. We use only open-source information that we can cite. Within those constraints, which suggest that what we are documenting is a drop in the bucket, we have still documented between 2014 and the end of 2023 more than 1,000 instances perpetrated by 44 countries in more than 100 other countries.

That is, you know, more than 20 percent of the world's government. That is a very shocking fact. When you think about the impact that has on democracies, a lot of times when people hear about political prisoner issues, they think it is not worth raising be-

cause this is some domestic issue in some far-flung place. In fact, when repression intensifies enough that folks have to flee abroad, it becomes a global issue. I would say one other thing that you asked about, you know, what else can be done, it is actually a very low-cost action, and that is simply just raising cases. Sometimes democracies do this very, very well. Again, we would commend the Helsinki Commission. But sometimes, quite frankly, we do not.

In the case of Azerbaijan, Leyla and Arif Yunus were released five-ish years ago, after a very high-level phone call from officials in the United States. Therefore, to the folks listening today who are policymakers, please do not underestimate—[LAUGHS]—your power in raising names. We are in democracies not great at doing this with countries where we feel like we have other interests, but especially in those moments we have such leverage, it would be such a waste not to raise political prisoner issues.

Representative COHEN: Well, we try to raise it. That is something we are trying to get at. But you do not get a lot of responses sometimes. There is not—unfortunately, the public has not risen up in some ways and tried to express their voices as well, which we need to have. Now, you mentioned Khashoggi. You have no question that the Saudis were responsible for that, do you?

Ms. BOYAJIAN: Well, we do not have access to classified materials. Of course, the information released in the press suggests that the CIA found that the Saudis were responsible. Indeed, the United States did impose sanctions on several individuals, I think it was 44, who were supposedly involved in that case. It was not Global Magnitsky sanctions, which allow you to publicly name the perpetrator. The U.S. actually used a different mechanism, which was a visa ban. Therefore we do not know the names of all of those individuals. Then I think there were a few cases where sanctions did publicly release names. But that is definitely—the Khashoggi case is definitely the emblematic case that we talk about when we are trying to explain to people what transnational oppression is.

Representative COHEN: Does Bill Browder have a second level that he wants to pursue on sanctions or Magnitsky type?

Ms. BOYAJIAN: Well, there are a number of countries that now have Magnitsky regimes, but they do not all incorporate corruption. I know that is something you may be able to speak to, General Rapporteur. But the U.K., the EU, and several Baltic nations have regimes. Actually, there has been some really good effort at coordination. A couple of years ago there were joint sanctions issued on individuals in China who were involved in abuses in Xinjiang. But I think there still is quite a bit of room to grow.

Ms. ÆVARSDÓTTIR: Yes, many more people can be added to these Magnitsky lists. For example, in the EU, as far as last time I checked, they had not included the people responsible for the death of Sergei Magnitsky in their own Magnitsky legislation. Thus there is room for growth in the utilization of these Magnitsky laws. I think that, as I referred to in my speech, what shows their efficacy is the level of vehemency that Mr. Kara-Murza has faced because of his involvement in the campaign because it really has negatively affected the close allies of Putin and his regime. This makes it more difficult for him to operate and maintain control.

I also would like to say that I think that the importance of visa-granting visas and assisting with travel documents cannot be understated here when it comes to the support of political prisoners and their families. A recent example of Belarus refusing to issue passports to people outside of Belarus is something that I think we really should be looking into with all seriousness because if we end up in a situation where many Belarusians might end up facing deportation because they do not have travel documents, or what have you, we would be sending them back to the hands of Lukashenko and basically letting him play out his plan, which is to isolate Belarusians outside of Belarus and make it impossible for them to do their work and live their life normally.

What we should also be looking into is the misuse of counterterrorism and money laundering measures against human rights defenders and political prisoners and their families. Therefore, countries that have a high incidence of political imprisonment and repression against NGOs and human rights defenders have a tendency to use the international systems that we use to flag suspicious activity when it comes to money laundering and terrorism charges, just as they have the incidence of requesting extraditions or red notices, as was made quite famous by Bill Browder's book, to use against political dissidents and their families.

Therefore, what this does is make it impossible for them to travel. They will get arrested where they go. They face possibly being extradited to the country that wants to imprison them. On top of that, with these antiterrorism and anticorruption measures, they will have a very difficult time opening a bank account, receiving money transfers, even using Western Union, having any means of sustenance really, wherever it is that they choose to reside outside of their own country. Therefore, these are all measures that are used to make the lives of political prisoners and their families, or previous political prisoners, unbearable. We need to find a way to strike the right balance between the very legitimate goal of combating terrorism and combating money laundering—it is very important that we do that—but we cannot let that impact the possibility of people fighting for human rights to be able to live a dignified life in a country of their choosing.

Representative COHEN: Bill Browder is certainly a hero and a great man of the world, and, again, probably not recognized as much as he should be. His life is at peril, I think, every moment of every day, just as Hurkaovski's probably is as well. He has been an aid or a supporter of Bill's work. He is to be commended.

Tell me what you—what you hear from your people about what is happening in Belarus? Is there any kind of group trying to form opposition to Lukashenko? Is that going on now?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: Therefore, first of all, I do not call our democratic movement an opposition movement, because we, Belarusian people, are the majority who are opposing, you know, the regime of Lukashenko. You know, for 30 years Lukashenko built a system that serves him personally, it is his personal security apparatus. But it is mostly about people. The majority of Belarusians are against Lukashenko, against unification with Russia, against the war, you know, in Ukraine. Therefore, of course,

after our prize in 2020 and after unleashed brutal terror in Belarus, our movement inside the country went underground.

However still, you know, people bravely act small acts of sabotage, you know, inside the country. Like our local intelligence, they provide us with information, what is going on, on the ground. They provide assistance to political prisoners and our brave military volunteers who fight in Ukraine, shoulder to shoulder with Ukrainians. Therefore, those who fled Belarus can be more active. Therefore, you know, our task, those who live in exile at the moment and want to return home, is to keep unity, strengthen our civil resistance. You know, strengthen our civil society, our media, our human rights defendant centers, to show European perspectives, for people, to show an alternative to Russkiy mir and, you know, to Lukashenko.

However, also provide assistance, to people inside the country. Therefore, believe me, I am absolutely sure when the moment comes, there will be a window of opportunity for Belarusian people, they will be on the streets again. But people on the streets are only a small part of the uprising and resistance. You know, hard work is being done now. You know, we are weakening the regime, strengthening the people. We are looking for new allies in the world. We are formalizing the relationship with the democratic world, like we launched a strategic dialogue with the USA, for example. It is a very important step for us. We have groups for democratic Belarus in many, many parliaments.

You know, so we strengthen the agency of democratic forces. For four years, Lukashenko, despite all the repressions, you know, and tyranny, he did not make Belarusian people like him again, and he knows this. He feels very fragile. He feels very insecure. Now he is—what he is doing now, he is selling our country piece by piece to Russia. He does not care about our independence, our sovereignty, our nation. Therefore, he is ruining our national identity. You see the process of Russification in Belarus. You know, it means that Russia interferes in our media, economy, and education. They erase any connection with Europe in our historic books. You know, like, Lukashenko with his hands, erasing Belarus from the map of Belarus.

Therefore, that is why resistance and uprising are not only on the people on the streets. It is about movement. It is about unity. It is about solidarity. It is about allies. No one war and no one fight cannot be won when you are alone. Therefore we need allies, to stand with us. We are not asking the world to fight instead of us. Just strengthen us. Be with us on this difficult path to democracy.

Representative COHEN: I am trying to—I cannot recall exactly, but was there some attack on an individual in Lithuania recently, that maybe they thought it came from—was it from Belarus? You know, does this ring a bell at all? A public attack, maybe the person had been hit in the head?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: Yes, as I said, you know, everybody is under attack, is the target of the regime, you know, of Lukashenko. It was—I suppose it was a person from the Navalny team. But, you know, you cannot give policemen to every person, who lives in exile. But we constantly produce—like, give instructions on what to do when you think that you are, like, followed by somebody, you

know, that something's going on around you. Yet people, of course, have to take care of themselves. Of course, we rely on the, you know, local security systems that verify people who enter in—who enter in Lithuania, Poland, where most of Belarusians are located.

Representative COHEN: I was able to attend a forum at the Peace Institute recently. There were a great number of groups that were trying to get more issues, and people in Russia to get freedom and democracy, and to do what they can to encourage people. What we heard is there is a lot of resistance in Russia, that there has been a lot of contributions in rubles as well as euros to help people that have been injured in Ukraine. That has been cut off some by the Russians, but there were a lot of contributions to these groups, which indicates, obviously, people who are not afraid of Russia and not afraid of speaking up.

As we speak of people who are not afraid of Russia and not afraid of speaking up, I would like to recognize and designate as the honorary member of this Helsinki Commission, the great emerita speaker of the House of Representatives, and one of the great leaders—female or male—in legislative affairs all over the world, Ms. Nancy Pelosi.

#### **STATEMENT OF NANCY PELOSI, U.S. HOUSE, FROM CALIFORNIA**

Representative PELOSI: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for your kind words, and for your great leadership on the ongoing issues of concern to the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. It is a very special day for us to have Sviatlana come and testify in Congress, along with your other distinguished guests—thank you, Madam, what do they call you, Rapporteur? [LAUGHS.] All of this, and, again, the Freedom House, such wonderful advocates for freedom.

Mr. Cohen and I just returned from Normandy. We were there to observe D-Day. We heard beautiful speeches about freedom, about the alliance that, on that particular day, turned the tide of the war in Europe, and then persisted until freedom prevailed and justice was done. At the end of that war, it was noted, that although Russia was part of the alliance that fought the Nazis at some point, it was also a country that took over so much territory after the war. As we know, some years later, in 1989, the Iron Curtain came down—or went up, or the Wall came down, whatever. But much of the injustice continues.

Sviatlana to us is just like the Statue of Liberty in life, just being so brave, so courageous, so—I do not—stoic. I think about her, I pray for, and I wonder how she is able to deal with the incarceration of her husband for such a long period of time, and not knowing, as you have testified, what the situation is. But to go out there and galvanize, women especially, in Belarus to elect you president of the country. Of course, unable to assume the office because of the current occupant of that position, with the support of President Putin.

Yet please, all of you, know how important your testimony is here because we want to raise awareness in our country of the situation in Belarus. We want to raise the support of the Congress to support the efforts there. We want to shorten the distance between

now and a time when Freedom House—Freedom House’s goals will prevail in Belarus. Therefore, again, it is an honor—again, just fresh off of meeting the—so many of the surviving, but lively—[LAUGH]—veterans who were there, and the stories they told, and the purpose that they served when they were kids—they were 17, 18, 19. The baby there was, like, 97. The oldest one I know from Baltimore, where I am from, was 104. He was there.

However, they all took great pride in what they did. But clearly, the work is not done. I thank you for that. I already have taken some guidance from Sviatlana for things we can do here, both from a policy standpoint, from an appropriation standpoint, and from a communication standpoint. But nothing is more important than your official on-the-record to the Congress of the United States of the situation there. I do not know if you have any other comments that you would like to make, as I yield back to the distinguished chairman. But, welcome, Sviatlana. It is an honor to know you, and a privilege to be close up to see your courage firsthand, and we hope that we can find justice and freedom soon for your husband, and for the people of Belarus.

Representative COHEN: We appreciate your coming to the hearing and expressing your thoughts. Speaker Pelosi has been a leader through many years for freedom and for the Helsinki Commission. We appreciate that. If you all have any thing you would like to ask or say to Speaker Pelosi, this is your chance.

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: No, I just only want to convey words of gratitude to you, dear Nancy Pelosi, for supporting us, Belarusians, on our difficult path to democracy. I know how you are personally, engaged in our course, and how much you are helping. You know, why I am also optimistic about Belarus that we have, I am, really blessed to have—we, Belarusians—are really blessed to have such friends as you. Therefore, thank you for coming. I really, really appreciate it.

Representative PELOSI: Well, thank you. I mentioned communication, appropriation, policy, and the rest, as well as organization, and mobilization. We want to take advantage of the beautiful diaspora of people from Belarus in our country to be a resource to us in this fight. Let me, as I say, before we go forward—because we have been joined by a distinguished member—say how really impressed I have been for decades by Mr. Cohen’s support for expanding freedom in the world. That is why he has taken on this responsibility at the USCE [sic; OSCE] for those purposes. It is a broader agenda, but it all comes down to freedom. Therefore, thank you for your leadership, Steve.

Representative COHEN: You are welcome. Thank you for your kind words. Do either of you have something you would like to address to Ms. Pelosi?

Ms. ÆVARSDÓTTIR: Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Pelosi, for addressing us today and for speaking with us about this important topic. I am invited here as the general rapporteur on the position of political prisoners in the Council of Europe. It is an institution, or organization, that was founded in the wake of the Second World War to prevent it from happening again. Sadly, when it came to the invasion of Russia into Ukraine, we failed. But what we have consequently done is expel Russia from the organization. I think

we are the one and only organization internationally that has actually taken that step. I am quite proud of it because it does not belong in our organization when it invades a neighbor and a fellow member of the Parliamentary Assembly.

What I would really like to convey is that I am very happy to be here on behalf of my organization, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The United States has observer status to our organizations, and often we hear from legislative members of your great parliament in our—like, our deliberative assembly in the Council of Europe. Your active participation, Mr. Cohen, in the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE has, of course, heightened the visibility of this situation of political prisoners across the region. I believe that with increased cooperation between the U.S. Congress and Europe, as well as between the OSCE and the Council of Europe, we can combine our forces to highlight these stories and help secure the release of political prisoners who really do need the combined efforts of democratic leaders, such as us, to ensure their freedom. Thank you very much.

Representative COHEN: I will be in Romania. Will you be in Romania?

Ms. ÆVARSDÓTTIR: I can try to make my way over there.

Representative PELOSI: [LAUGHS.]

Representative COHEN: Give them hell.

Ms. BOYAJIAN: I would just add my thanks to the Speaker Emeritus, who I should note is also a Freedom House Leadership Award winner, perhaps one of the most important titles. We really appreciate your leadership on these issues, particularly those related to human rights in China. I know all three of you care deeply about this topic. Obviously, you are here today. Thank you for that. In addition to political prisoners, I would just ask that you all do what I know you are going to do, and also focus on folks even after they are released, and the restrictions they continue to face.

Then I know in the United States we are moving into a tough budget cycle, and you three know well that democracy assistance really does pay for itself. Not just in the countries where we are working to support democracy and rights, but for all of us since we know, as we have already talked about, the trickle effects of repression. Therefore, thank you so much for the work that you three are doing to uphold a robust budget.

Representative PELOSI: Thank you. Thank you.

Representative COHEN: Thank you very much. I would like to recognize the chair, Mr. Wilson.

Chairman WILSON: Thank you very much, ranking member. You know, we could tell you that it is bipartisan. You see it right here, okay? Then I am going to tell you a little-known fact. I was really grateful that the speaker was now wearing a U.S.-Ukraine pin. The very first U.S.-Ukraine pin she received was from me. [LAUGHTER.] Therefore—

Representative PELOSI: Hey, and by the way, I have on my—I have my Belarus—

Chairman WILSON: Belarus, no, and we recognize—

Representative PELOSI: That I got from Sviatlana yesterday.

Chairman WILSON: See how she is ahead of the curve, having both pins. [LAUGHTER.] But very seriously, for the State of the



Union address, she did not appear to be properly dressed. Therefore, I made sure. [LAUGHTER.] Therefore I made sure.

Representative COHEN: She did not appear properly pinned.

Chairman WILSON: Pinned! Pardon me. Pardon me. Hey, see, he is so smart. But the bottom line, no, hey, it is bipartisan, our devotion to people of Central and Eastern Europe, and around the world. It is really bipartisan. Again, we are all so concerned about each country, but Madam President, and Belarus itself, how many political prisoners can be identified now? What is the status of their confinement?

Ms. TSIKHANOUSKAYA: Therefore at the moment we know the names of at least 1,500 political prisoners. But the real number is much, much higher because many prisoners who are detained for political-motivated cases do not want to be recognized as political prisoners because the attitude toward them in prisons is much, much worse. They are denied any medical help. They are denied parcels. They are denied books. Like, it is real, you know, torture. Very often relatives of these people do not appeal to human rights defenders to recognize them as political prisoners.

Political prisoners, you know, are marked with special yellow marks on their clothes, meaning that nobody among other prisoners can communicate with them. It is like full isolation, you know, for people. They are humiliated constantly, physically and morally. Yet this is what it means, you know, to be a political prisoner. It means that your relatives, you know, in freedom also will be attacked by the regime.

Chairman WILSON: Well, I just want to thank you for your courage. I also, am so grateful to the Republic of Lithuania for hosting you. How courageous Lithuania is. For the young people here they would not know, and even the speaker and Congressman Cohen and I were not around when this occurred. But in 1940, the Red Army invaded the Baltic Republics. To the credit of the United States, we never recognized that Lithuania, Latvia, or Estonia was part of the Soviet Union. Therefore any time they claimed to have 17 republics, we knew that was not true because we knew three were clearly occupied. America always recognized the independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Keeping that in mind, we get to Russia. For our two other colleagues, what is the status and how many political prisoners and we—hey, in the charges today against a Wall Street Journal reporter. Again, what a reminder of the barbarity of Putin—war criminal Putin's regime.

Ms. ÆVARSDÓTTIR: Thank you very much. Perhaps the most excessive violators of due process and those who conduct political imprisonments are Azerbaijan, Russia, Belarus, and Türkiye, those countries that I focus on in Russia—in Europe. Excuse me. Therefore, in Russia, what we consider to be political prisoners are estimated at over 1,000 at the moment. They have significantly increased since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where legislative measures have made it almost impossible to even hold up a white sign, as became quite famous, speak your mind about the invasion, or criticize Russia's involvement with it, or its responsibility for it, more correctly.

When it comes to Belarus, it has already been covered. We have a high number of political prisoners and a very repressive regime that has also very much strengthened its repressive policies against the population after democratic protests and democratic movements in the country. When it comes to Azerbaijan, perhaps this is the most significant example of the revolving door that my colleague here referred to before. Azerbaijan has a consistent practice of imprisoning people a few hundred at a time. At the moment, the current estimate is around 300 political prisoners in Azerbaijan, a rather small country.

What they did is pardon a lot of people, especially around inconvenient occasions. For instance, when somebody starts talking about imposing sanctions, or something like that, they will release some people. But then shortly thereafter they will imprison some other people. Later on, they will pick up the people that they released. This revolving door of Azerbaijan has been going on since before its accession to the Council of Europe. I believe that many of our representatives in the Council of Europe are now seriously considering whether a country such as this really belongs in the Council of Europe, and whether or not it should be expelled.

When it comes to Türkiye, estimations vary. The highest estimate is around 40,000 people imprisoned on political charges. Türkiye has a widespread problem with the lack of independence of the judiciary and what we could call widespread political persecution, the failed coup attempt being a very handy excuse for cleaning out any real independent judges, academics, people in public service, teachers—anyone really that might be considered a threat. This has a significant bearing on their membership status in the Council of Europe as well. They have repeatedly disregarded judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, which we hold in the very highest regard, and that our member states are obliged to fulfill.

The most prominent cases, of course, are Osman Kavala and Mr. Demirtas, who both have been recognized by the court for their detention of being politically motivated. They are also laureates—Mr. Kavala is a laureate of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, which is also a measure that we use to highlight the plight of political prisoners. Mr. Vladimir Kara-Murza got the prize in 2022, at my instigation. We have awarded many political prisoners with this prestigious award. I am happy to hear that Evgenia and Vladimir will be awarded tonight. I believe that Sviatlana will be among the prize winners tonight as well. I think it is also important to reward people for their brave fight for democracy because we can call political prisoners heroes for democracy and we need to support them in their fight to preserve democracy for all of us.

Chairman WILSON: Hear, hear. Your point of view?

Ms. BOYAJIAN: Well, I would say that was a fantastic but grim tour around the world. In Russia, obviously, it is not just Evgen Gershkovich who is imprisoned, but also Paul Whelan, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Ksenia Karelina, and Alsu Kurmasheva. These are all folks who are American nationals. I do want to point out, if I may, that actually, Alsu's husband is with us today, sitting right behind me. I feel like I should give him a microphone. You know, the

lengths that regime will go to, to exert pressure and pull political antics is unending.

I would just add, you know, you have heard me mention civil death briefly, but this is a tactic that all of the governments that we just talked about use to exert pressure on folks, even when they are not in prison. Yet, in Turkey, journalist Sofya Alagaş, for example, she has a case that we advocate for. She has been released but is under house arrest and cannot travel. Gubad Ibadoghlu, his documents have been seized so he cannot obtain the medical care that he needs since the hospital cannot treat him without his documents. Yet, it is not just imprisonment. It is travel bans. It is revocation of documents in the country, but also when you travel abroad. They can revoke your passport.

There is another great hero here from Nicaragua, Mr. Felix Maradiaga. He has—you know, I should give him the microphone also even though it is outside OSCE jurisdiction. [APPLAUSE.] Yet, you know, he can talk at great length about his own experience with revocation of documents, and what a pressure that was on his family, and when he was in incommunicado detention also. Therefore these issues are really—again, we really appreciate you highlighting them, because it makes folks unable to live a normal life.

Chairman WILSON: Well, as I conclude, I want to thank each of you. But I appreciate you referencing sanctions. Hey, we are in the 21st century. We can now identify oligarchs. We can identify complicit individuals within governments who are conducting illegal operations. We can also identify the fruits of their corruption of villas or whatever around the world. Every effort, I believe, should be bipartisan, to deter corrupt conduct and use sanctions as a deterrence to promote freedom and democracy. I yielded back. Thank you.

Representative COHEN: Thank you, Mr. Wilson. We have—I would like to recognize each of you. Thank you for your heroism and your courage and for attending today. We voted, I think, at 4:30.

Representative PELOSI: Yes, we have votes. If I just may—

Representative COHEN: Please.

Representative PELOSI: If I may, again, salute you and Mr. Wilson for his leadership and his attention and knowledge about all of these issues. As he was speaking and you were responding, I was remembering something that we, quoting ourselves, always said. That one of the most excruciating forms of torture that these oppressors engage in is to tell the prisoners that nobody even remembers that they are there and that they might as well just confess—to what? Who knows? However just to forget about it all and recognize that whatever they suffered, it was for nothing because nobody knows or cares anymore.

Of course, that is not true. But we just want to make sure—and thank you for having this hearing to give visibility and, as the rapporteur talked about, what the record is. As Madam Vice President said and Madam President said, about what is happening at Freedom House and, Madam President, in Belarus, it is—it is really important for us to keep naming the names, flying the flag of freedom for them. I myself want to just go on record as advocating for making Russia—naming them a terrorist state so that when we

do the sanctions, they can have more theft. That is a different conversation for another day, but since we mentioned sanctions, I thought I would mention that.

Thank you, again, Mr. Chairman.

Representative COHEN: You are welcome. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Vladimir Kara-Murza started an effort to have Russia—Putin not recognized as president. That his presidency would be illegitimate because he had to change the constitution or go against the constitution to continue in office. The European Commission has, I think, declared that. We have a bill in Congress to do the same. It was inspired by Vladimir, and it is in the Foreign Relations Committee—Foreign Affairs Committee. Yet, we are going to work on that as well.

Have—we are trying to get Ukraine, what has happened there, to be declared a genocide, which is what Russia's doing. Taking all those children. There was a big story, I think, it was in the Times this week. Did you see the picture? They had all the pictures of all the children.

Representative PELOSI: Oh, the children. It is so sad.

Representative COHEN: They have taken, and when you take the children, you are taking away the nation. I mean, it is a crime against the parent, but it is a crime against the country. They are trying to Russify them. Therefore, yes, sir.

Chairman WILSON: Mr. Chairman, I would like to point out, it is—you are ahead of the curve again, in that I am putting it in the congressional record today in absentia remarks identifying the legislation that you and I have introduced about the illegitimacy of the Putin regime. In particular, we have a very highly respected author, professor, and journalist, David Satter, who has written a book, "The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship Under Vladimir Putin." It documents how Putin came to power through fabricated attacks across the country. Therefore, this would be put in the congressional record today. I am really impressed that the chairman is ahead of the curve again. Thank you.

Representative COHEN: We are kind of an odd couple. I do not know who is Felix and who is Oscar, but—[LAUGHTER]—

Representative PELOSI: However, all three of us were in Normandy. I started my remarks by saying you have the Normandy symbol there.

Chairman WILSON: Again, indicating the alliance we have with France, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Thank you.

Representative COHEN: One thing I saw that was beautiful yesterday is at the French embassy—the French ambassador's home they have a statue in front, and it is draped in the—

Chairman WILSON: Statue of Liberty.

Representative COHEN: It is draped in the Ukrainian flag. It is really beautiful. But what Speaker Pelosi was saying, and we have repeated what Vladimir said, was that the worst thing that could happen to a political prisoner is to be forgotten. That is basically the theme of Elie Wiesel's first great book, "Night." Memory is so important, and that is one of the reasons he wrote that, was for people to remember what happened in the Holocaust and not to let it be forgotten.

With that, I thank everybody. We are going to get ready for votes. I declare this meeting adjourned. [Sounds gavel.]

[Whereupon, at 4:31 p.m., the hearing ended.]

## ADDITIONAL STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

STATEMENT OF BEJAMIN CARDIN, U.S. SENATE, FROM MARYLAND

The world's prisons are overflowing with political prisoners whose only "crime" is that they dared exercise their human rights or participated in peaceful activism. The plight of political prisoners underpins rising authoritarian efforts to silence dissent and suppress fundamental freedoms around the world.

The U.S. Department of State estimates that there are more than a million political prisoners around the world. In Russia alone, nearly 20,000 antiwar activists were detained for exercising their freedom of speech against Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine two years ago. The Kremlin has criminally charged almost 1,000 of those activists. In Belarus, over 1,500 activists were imprisoned for speaking out against a fraudulent election and Russia's war in Ukraine. These unjust detentions are devastating not just for these individuals, but for their family, friends, and loved ones—especially when they are held incommunicado and without access to lawyers, doctors, and the outside world.

These courageous individuals face trumped-up charges, sham trials, and mass sentences in the name of "national security." In prison, especially for women and marginalized groups, they are subjected to particularly inhumane conditions and countless abuses to further deter them from speaking out, including enforced disappearances, torture, and sexual violence. All of this occurs in contravention of international law and human rights norms. Further, these abuses often violate the constitutions and national laws of the state in which they occur.

The imprisonment of dissidents on political grounds has been a longstanding tool of oppression for many governments, particularly in authoritarian states. As society and technology evolve, these regimes are also finding new ways to intimidate civil society and voices they do not control. They silence dissent by limiting access to the free internet, harassing independent media, and sowing disinformation.

Recognizing the enormous human cost of political imprisonment, this Commission has long worked to advocate for the release of political prisoners everywhere. In my official capacity as a Helsinki Commissioner since 1993 and currently as the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I have sought to protect these universal human rights and integrate them into our foreign policy.

The plight of political prisoners is difficult to share, whether for former political prisoners or for those whose loved ones have been unjustly detained. Thank you for your courage in testifying before us today. I look forward to learning from you about the scope of the problem and how the United States and other democracies can do better to support political prisoners across the world in their principled efforts to advance freedom and democracy.





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