

Testimony of Ms. Julie Fisher
Nominee to be Ambassador to Belarus
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
August 5, 2020

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, Members of this Committee. It is an honor to appear before you today as President Trump's nominee to serve as the first United States Ambassador to Belarus since 2008. If confirmed, I look forward to working with this Committee and Congress to re-establish and strengthen the bilateral relationship at a critical time and to support Belarus's efforts to protect its sovereignty and independence in the face of unprecedented political pressure aimed at undermining both.

I am joined today by my husband Matthew Fisher who served alongside me in Kyiv and Moscow and endured my long days in the office and even longer commutes to places like Tbilisi and Brussels. He has been a supporter of my career since the day I took the Foreign Service exam, and my success is due in large part to his unwavering support. I am proud to hail from a family dedicated to our nation's service: my grandfather, father, and sister all served as Naval officers at times of war and peace. My family is joining online today, and I'd like to thank them for their support for as well.

If confirmed, I look forward to building on the work of our outstanding team in Minsk to further reforms and promote a more ambitious bilateral relationship. I will bring to this position twenty-five years of experience at the State Department including service at our Embassies in Kyiv, Moscow, Tbilisi, and at NATO, as well as tours at the National Security Council and at State Department headquarters. I most recently served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, focused on the relationships with our closest Allies and partners in Western Europe and in the European Union.

Following the withdrawal of our ambassador in 2008, the bilateral relationship with Belarus languished for the better part of a decade. But after Russia's illegal seizure and occupation of Crimea and its manufactured war in Ukraine's Donbas region, we began to see signs of interest from the Belarusian side for increased diplomatic and commercial ties. Since 2018, and in line with the goals laid out in the National Security Strategy of advancing American influence in an era of renewed great power competition, State Department leadership has sought to re-center our bilateral engagement with Belarus and advance a more engaged diplomatic approach and presence that recognizes Belarus's sovereignty and right to chart its own future—free from foreign dictates. Former Assistant Secretary Wess Mitchell initiated senior U.S. government engagement with his visit to Minsk in October 2018, and since then, we have seen an increased level of senior attention from both sides, culminating in Secretary Pompeo's visit to Minsk in February, the first cabinet-level visit to Minsk in over a quarter century.

This Sunday, Belarus will hold its presidential election following an eventful and testy summer. Recent elections in Belarus have been neither free nor fair, based on international standards. Despite the international community's efforts to convince Belarusian authorities to adopt the OSCE's recommendations, Belarus's 2019 parliamentary elections did not meet international standards, and neither the OSCE nor Council of Europe will observe the upcoming election, which is a break from past precedent and a reason why it is so important that the United States remains engaged. We have urged the government of Belarus to ensure the upcoming elections are free and fair and to demonstrate restraint in the event of protests. If confirmed, I

intend to support the continued aspirations of the Belarusian people for democratic principles, including universal freedoms, civil liberties, and the rule of law.

Human rights in Belarus remain a challenge. The United States has encouraged Belarus to address human rights priorities and implement the pro-democracy reforms outlined in the Belarus Democracy Act, which are essential for it to strengthen its international standing and fulfill its people's aspirations. At the core of the Belarus Democracy Act is a desire for increased space for a diversity of voices in Belarus, including the political opposition, civil society, and independent media. Despite numerous incidents during the ongoing election campaign, we have seen a trend of modest improvements in the treatment of the political opposition and independent civil society since 2015. Nevertheless, we remain concerned the Belarusian government continues to detain and pressure the opposition and impose restrictions on the press, civil society, and certain religious minorities. In the absence of progress on these issues, our relationship will be bound by the constraints imposed by the terms of the Belarus Democracy Act.

In the areas where we see progress, there are success stories to recognize and encourage. Belarus's young generation has a remarkable entrepreneurial spirit, as evidenced in the dynamic growth of the information technology sector, demonstrating the potential for economic transformation. Another bright spot is the recent delivery to Belarus of 600,000 barrels of U.S. crude oil, with another shipment on the way. These shipments can help diversify Belarus's energy supply and support jobs here at home. Belarus is increasingly pursuing American investment and, if confirmed, I will support the creation of an American Chamber of Commerce in Minsk and a Washington D.C.-based U.S. business council focused on Belarus. Such organizations will facilitate U.S. trade and investment, champion American companies doing business in Belarus, and create jobs and economic growth in the United States.

I want to thank Congress for its support in providing assistance to Belarus. This assistance prioritizes respect for human rights, a stronger civil society, and freedom of expression. U.S. assistance aimed at the private sector spurs the development of entrepreneurs, small businesses, and the middle class. Thanks to Congressional support, we committed over \$7 million in 2019 to helping Belarus undertake and continue reforms.

The United States also welcomes Belarus's cooperation on key priorities including non-proliferation, law enforcement, and information sharing. Of note, Belarus has signed agreements to bolster efforts in fields such as border security, cybersecurity, and counter-narcotics. If confirmed, I hope to build upon this foundation and harness Belarus's desire to play a positive role in the region.

I'd like to note that since the Belarusian government's March 2019 decision to lift its cap on staffing, the number of American employees at Embassy Minsk has already grown from ten to fourteen, and that number will grow further, commensurate with mission requirements. We are also engaged in discussions to construct a new embassy compound. I have learned from experiences in other fast-growing missions some of the potential risks of such growth, and I am committed to careful stewardship of taxpayer resources.

Finally, as Secretary Pompeo clearly stated during his visit to Minsk, we fully support Belarus's desire to make its own choices, pursue its own partnerships, and play a constructive role in the region. We respect its sovereignty and self-determination. Belarus should not be forced to depend on any single nation for its prosperity or security, and we are not asking Belarus to choose between East and West. Countries, much like individuals, choose their friends but not their neighbors.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Menendez, in closing, let me say that we have an opportunity in Belarus. For the sake of regional security and stability, we cannot allow this opportunity to pass us by. Cooperation is a two-way street, and we will move ahead at the appropriate pace as the Belarusians are willing, as our national interests dictate, and as our values permit. If confirmed, I will use my years of diplomatic experience in this region to pursue our country's overarching mission to create a safer, more democratic and prosperous world for the benefit of the American people.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you; I welcome any questions you may have.