

Testimony by U.S. Ambassador-Designate to Belarus Julie Fisher
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Hearing on U.S. Policy on Belarus
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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me today to discuss U.S. policy in Belarus.

For the past three decades, the United States has consistently supported a free, independent, and democratic Belarus. The 2006 enactment and subsequent 2020 update to the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act has guided U.S. policies for more than a decade. I would like to start by thanking you, Chairman Menendez, and Ranking Member Risch, for this Committee's sustained interest in Belarus' future. Senator Shaheen's recent visit to Vilnius, together with Senator Portman and Senator Murphy, and this hearing itself are evidence of the high priority placed by the Congress on this nation, Belarus, that yearns for freedom.

Ten months ago, I appeared before this Committee seeking confirmation as the first U.S. Ambassador to Belarus in over twelve years. That was August 5, four days before the fraudulent August 9 election and the subsequent violent crackdown on democratic activists that continues to this day. Four days before the world would be captivated by images of one hundred thousand Belarusians peacefully protesting on the streets of Minsk. Four days before everything changed not just for the people of Belarus, but for the center of Europe and our shared security.

Despite the oppression, the violence, and the turmoil, that followed, the events of the past year give us hope. A new generation of brave Belarusians, with courageous women at the front, have emerged. They represent a Belarus determined to chart its own path. They represent a Belarus in which wearing a red and white dress, hanging a flag, or playing a particular song, will not result in torture, forced confessions, or even death. They represent a Belarus eager to seize the many opportunities that accompany democracies, regardless unprecedented internal repression from a vengeful regime and external political pressure from Russia.

Take for example, Mrs. Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, from whom you will hear later today. When her husband Syarhei was arrested after emerging as a leading opposition candidate, Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya – an English teacher by training – stood defiantly together with Maria Kalesnikava and Veronika Tsepkala to galvanize their people and inspire the world. Forced to flee to neighboring Lithuania, which generously offered her and thousands of others safe haven, Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya quickly emerged as the leader of the democratic opposition, and the face of a new Belarus to the world. It has been my distinct pleasure to get to know her over these past few months.

Consider as well, journalist Raman Pratasevich. During my most recent trip to Vilnius in April, I had the privilege of speaking with Raman. I was impressed by his dedication, his passion, and like so many others, his selflessness in the face of very real threats from a ruthless dictator. Raman's

arrest after the forced diversion of Ryanair flight 4978 is further evidence – as if the world needed it – of the regime’s utter disregard for international norms and human rights and reflects the new lows to which Lukashenka is willing to sink in order to eliminate any trace of dissent.

And then there’s Maria Kalesnikava, who was recognized by the State Department as one of the 2021 International Women of Courage this past March yet was not able to attend the ceremony because she languishes in a prison cell, charged with “establishing and leading an extremist organization” amongst other bogus charges.

Belarus under Alyaksandr Lukashenka will never realize its full potential. His is a regime that continues to commit human rights violations and abuses. It holds at least 470 political prisoners – journalists, bloggers, artists, teachers, everyday citizens - many of whom report squalid conditions and physical abuse, and the number continues to climb. It puts its best and brightest on public display in cages -- like Belsat reporters Katsyaryna Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova - rather than let them report objectively.

Thinking only of himself and his cronies, Lukashenka has been steadily ceding Belarus’ sovereignty to Russia for personal gain since he assumed power more than two decades ago. The Belarusian people are rightly concerned about the Kremlin’s clear desire to erode Belarusian sovereignty and independence; as are we, our Allies, and our partners in the region. For as long as Lukashenka remains in power, Belarus is under threat of absorption into Russia under the Union State agreement, with dire consequences for the people of Belarus, their voice, their agency, their culture, and their identity.

The people of Belarus deserve better. They deserve a future where people like Mrs. Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kalesnikava, Ihar Losik, Darya Chultsova, Katsyaryna Andreyeva and Raman Pratasevich participate in the governance of their country without facing personal risks to do so

In partnership with countries like Poland and Lithuania, the United States has sought to galvanize a broad coalition of likeminded governments, civil society representatives, and Belarusians in exile to effect positive change. At the OSCE and the UN, we launched fact-finding missions into human rights abuses, which raised the reputational costs of continuing repression for the Lukashenka regime and its Kremlin backers. Working with Latvia and other Allies we ensured a prestigious hockey championship was moved from Minsk. And with partners like the EU, UK, and Canada, we have coordinated – and continue to coordinate on new rounds of sanctions to promote accountability for human rights abuses. These efforts have in turn reinforced cooperation with key European Allies and reinvigorated old partnerships.

We are not done by a long shot.

As announced by the White House on May 28, additional sanctions are coming. And they are coming soon.

The State Department has made it clear that specific individuals responsible for undermining Belarusian democracy – whether by violently suppressing peaceful protests or impinging upon media freedom – are not welcome in the United States by taking action to impose visa restrictions on over 120 such Belarusian and Russian individuals. And we keep adding to it as new information comes to light.

At the same time, the U.S. Government is strengthening its assistance to the Belarusian people. Since August 2020, over \$20 million in additional regional and global State and USAID assistance has been identified to provide emergency support to civil society leaders forced to flee Belarus, to sustain grassroots voices within Belarus, promote independent media, document human rights violations, and help those inside and outside Belarus to speak with a unified voice.

And pending congressional approval, the State Department will contribute \$500,000 to the International Accountability Platform for Belarus. Tasked with working under the auspices of a United Nations Human Rights Council-mandated investigation, the Platform will collect and gather evidence on violations of international human rights law in Belarus to be used in future criminal investigations and prosecutions to hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes.

Belarus is a country at a crossroads. What happens next will impact the lives of future generations, not just within its borders, but across the European continent.

In closing, allow me to repeat something I told you last August, something that remains true today: we and our closest Allies and partners have an opportunity to make a lasting impact on Belarus. By working together in support of the Belarusian people's democratic aspirations, we are also making a lasting contribution to regional security and stability. It is quite simply the best way to advance our own security as well.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering your questions.