

Testimony of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, President-Elect and Head of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus, in the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe,

“The Future of Freedom and Democracy in Belarus”

December 5, 2023

Dear Chairman Kean,
Esteemed members of the Subcommittee,

Let me start with the words of gratitude to the US Congress and the American people for supporting the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people for many years. I do believe that one day Belarus will become a truly independent, democratic country, reliable partner, member of the European Union and Trans-Atlantic Community. To achieve this goal, we have to dismantle the illegitimate regime of dictator Alexander Lukashenka, who has been ruling the country for 29 years.

In 2020, Belarusians made a clear choice in favor of democracy, freedom, and human rights. According to observers and alternative vote count, Belarusians resolutely voted down corruption, lawlessness, and incompetence. Instead, they voted for values of democracy, freedom and human dignity. I won that election. However, the dictator refused to step down, and instigated the terror against Belarusians. Security services detained protestors en masse. We have credible reports of torture, abuse and inhumane treatment in detention centers. The police also cracked down on journalists, civil society activists, and opposition figures.

More than 60 thousand people got imprisoned. At least 20 people were killed, thousands were tortured. Hundreds of thousands were forced to flee the country, including myself. The repressions against the general population can be classified as crimes against humanity, according to the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights. At least 1500 political prisoners remain behind bars as I speak, including my husband Siarhei Tsikhanouski who was sentenced to 19,5 years in prison. Including Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Ales Bialiatski, my colleague Maria Kalesnikava, presidential hopeful Viktor Babaryka, activist Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk, journalist Ihar Losik and others.

Feeling impunity, the regime of the dictator Lukashenka became a threat to the entire region. It hijacked the Ryanair flight to kidnap the dissident journalist, it orchestrated the migration crisis on the border with Lithuania, Poland and Latvia. Finally, it dragged our country into the Russian criminal war against Ukraine, providing it with weapons, infrastructure, training, and territory. All of that happened against the will of the Belarusian people.

Lukashenka's regime allowed Russia to deploy Russian troops and nuclear weapons on our territory. We have evidence that the dictator also participated in the abduction of Ukrainian children from the occupied territories. There is an ongoing attack on Belarusian culture, language and national identity. Belarus becomes more and more dependent on Russia.

However, Belarusian people don't want their country to be a Russian proxy and an accomplice in the war. Belarusians support Ukraine, and they want to have a good relationship with all neighbors. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Belarusians organized a pro-Ukraine movement that has taken many forms. Railway partisans stopped trains with Russian military equipment. Many

people went to Ukraine as military volunteers to join Ukrainian Armed Forces, and formed the largest foreigners' unit within UAF, the "Kalinouski Regiment".

Belarusians see their country as free and independent. Only 4.5% of Belarusians support the unification with Russia. Despite brainwashing propaganda, Belarusians remain dedicated to the idea of independent and democratic Belarus, free of oppression and tyranny, with strong national identity and a thriving private sector.

As the President-elect, I continue to perform my duties from exile. Together with civil society and political groups, we have formed alternative institutions of power, such as the United Transitional Cabinet, which is the executive body, and the Coordination Council. I represent Belarusians on the international arena meeting the world leaders and participating in the international fora on behalf of our nation. I am urging the international partners to distinguish between the regime and the people of Belarus, between Belarus and Russia, to support the democratic movement of Belarus.

I understand that democratic transition in Belarus is a task for Belarusians, but we can't do it alone. We need support from the United States.

I call on the United States to elaborate, in concert with other nations, an action plan to support the efforts of Belarusians to preserve independence and restore democracy in Belarus. Appointment of a US Special Envoy on Belarus would be a step in this direction. We call for setting up a coalition for independent democratic Belarus in which the US could take a lead.

This coalition should demand full removal of the Russian military from Belarus and a complete seizure of any involvement of Belarus in the war against Ukraine,

to counter the Kremlin's encroachment on Belarusian sovereignty and national identity. This should include imposing sanctions and non-recognizing agreements signed by the regime with Russia after the 2020 elections. There is an urgent need to introduce sanctions against Russia for its illegal attempts to subjugate Belarus and to instrumentalize it in the confrontation with our European neighbors.

We should not allow Belarus to become a consolation prize to Putin. Belarus should not become a bargaining chip in any negotiations with Russia. "Nothing about Belarus without Belarusians" must be an absolute principle. Our presence will ensure that the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Belarus are upheld consistently and principally. I applaud the US decision to launch the Strategic Dialogue with Belarusian democratic forces.

The US and its partners should support human rights efforts by monitoring the situation, providing aid to the victims and vulnerable groups facing repressions, financing initiatives and foundations that help political prisoners and their families, and supporting human rights education programs. International mechanisms within OHCHR must be maintained and strengthened. Given the gravity of the situation with political prisoners, it is imperative to create a bilateral US-Belarus working group to develop a strategy for the release of political prisoners and extension of support to work with them. Among other decisions, this group should lead to the creation of an international fund to help political prisoners.

I call on the United States to increase the isolation of the regime and the pressure exerted on it. Economic sanctions are not a silver bullet, but a tool to weaken the regime and its ability to conduct repressions and assist Russians in the war. It is crucial to strengthen sanctions on the military industrial complex

supporting the Russian war, on the banking and financial sector. The sanctions must be coordinated with the EU, UK, Canada, and Belarusian democratic forces.

The current sanctions don't work in full due to loopholes, so it's crucial not just to impose them but also monitor and enforce them. I ask to consider the secondary sanctions on those who help to bypass sanctions, based on Executive Order 14038, and to harmonize trade sanctions against Russia and Lukashenka.

The US can take a more active role in bringing the dictator and his cronies to account. The US could submit country referrals in ICC and ICJ on a number of cases, including the unlawful displacement of children, deportation or forcible transfer of civilian population, cases against the regime's officials under the universal jurisdiction, crime of persecution, etc.

While isolating the regime in Minsk, it is crucial to support democratic forces – to strengthen agency and ability to deliver practical results to the benefit of Belarusians inside and outside Belarus. The US can increase its assistance to Belarusian democratic institutions, civil society, independent media, and cultural initiatives. The US aid to Belarus amounts to 30 million USD a year approximately, while Russian aid to sustain Lukashenka's regime is in billions. The international aid to the democratic Belarus is enough to subsist, but we need resources to win.

All dictatorships fell, and Lukashenka's dictatorship will fall too. Therefore, it is crucial to prepare Belarus to democratic transition, by developing a plan for the country's economic recovery. We will need to rebuild Belarus after decades of poor management and tyranny, after repressions and Russian dominance. We will need to reconcile the nation and integrate it in the international economy.

Belarusians must know that, as a part of democratic transition, Belarus will be given all the necessary assistance to conduct economic and political reforms. Please help us to advance the agenda of democratic, independent, pro-European Belarus.

The path to freedom and democracy may be long and difficult. But this path is the only right one. I ask the United States to stand with free and independent Belarus.