

THE BELARUSIAN DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT: ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE BATTLE AGAINST DICTATORS

This week, we were reminded yet again of the perils of the current dysfunctional state of our domestic politics as Senate Republicans continued to block critical and urgent funding for Ukraine, a gift to Vladimir Putin. A Putin victory in Ukraine represents not only a setback in the broader fight against autocracy but a threat to our own national security as well, as Putin is unlikely to stop with Ukraine. An attack on a NATO ally would trigger Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and bring us in direct conflict with Russia. There is plenty more to say, but, this is not a briefing note specifically about the perils of abandoning Ukraine.

I am reminded of what is at stake in the region after attending various functions last week in Washington, D.C. hosted in support of the Belarusian resistance. The exiled leader of the Belarusian democratic movement, [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](#), and her team made the rounds of official Washington, including Capitol Hill and the State Department. Tsikhanouskaya's dual messages have been crystal clear since the most recent Russian invasion of Ukraine – the United States must stand by Ukraine in its existential fight against Russia, for a Putin victory in Ukraine would imperil the security of much of Eastern Europe, and the fates of Belarus and Ukraine are intimately intertwined. There cannot be a free and independent Belarus without a free and independent Ukraine, and there cannot be a free and independent Ukraine without a free and independent Belarus.

Brutal Repression

Alexander Lukashenko is often referred to as “the last dictator in Europe,” a title of which he reportedly is proud. As [described](#) in *The Week*, since coming to power in 1994, he has created a cult of personality and turned Belarus into a corrupt “mafia state” tightly controlled and monitored by the secret police, still holding on to the Soviet era title KGB (State Security Committee). Lukashenko has, as [succinctly captured](#) by the *New York Times*, a longstanding pattern of rigging elections, silencing dissent and violently suppressing opponents.

There has been widespread reporting of the brutal crackdown, torture and other ill-treatment of Belarusian citizens following the August 2020 presidential election and on the crackdown on dissent since then that continues to this day. (See, e.g., [HRW Report](#), [Remarks of US Ambassador Michael Carpenter](#), [European Council Statement](#) and [iSANS Report on Incommunicado Detention](#) as well as an interview correspondent [Anna Nemtsova](#) that appeared in *The Atlantic*). Over 35,000 Belarusians were believed to have been arrested that August.

Malign efforts are not limited to systematic repression and human rights violations on the ground: in May 2021, Belarusian authorities, on the false [pretext](#) of a bomb threat and in a clear act of air piracy, diverted a commercial flight (bound from Athens to Vilnius) to Minsk to arrest (and later imprison) a Belarusian journalist and political activist.

Today, according to the [Viasna Human Rights Center](#), there are 1,450 political prisoners languishing in Lukashenko's prisons under harsh conditions, including

- journalists (33, [according](#) to the Belarusian Association of Journalists);
- opposition politicians and activists;
- presidential candidates;

- human rights defenders and activists, [including](#) Nobel Peace Prize laureate and founder of Viasna Ales Bialiatski, and fellow members of Viasna vice-president of the International Federation for Human Rights Valiantsin Stefanovich, coordinator of “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections” Uladzimir Labkovich, coordinator of the Volunteer Service Marfa (Maria) Rabkova, and volunteer Andrei Chapiuk, as well as Anastasia (Nasta) Loiko;
- lawyers defending human rights defenders and activists;
- students;
- artists;
- trade unionists;
- business owners; and
- former security officials –

all as Ambassador Carpenter described them, victims of “repression at the hands of a dictatorial regime afraid of its own people” and “Belarusian patriots who believe in a democratic, prosperous and fully sovereign future for Belarus.” The February 2023 [report](#) of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights states that some of the violations of human rights perpetrated by the Belarusian authorities against protesters and dissidents dating back to August 2020 “may also amount to crimes against humanity.”

The detentions continue to this day, with two journalists [reportedly](#) detained last Friday.

Belarus – Ukraine – Russia

Belarus provides key support to the Kremlin, fuelling the war in Ukraine. The Kremlin has trained forces on Belarus territory, had deployed troops in the very early days of the invasion to create a northern flank to attack Kyiv, used Belarusian territory to launch missile attacks against civilian targets in Ukraine and has reportedly stationed tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory.

Lukashenko is no free agent in this – he needs Putin to survive (made abundantly clear after the mass democracy protests around the 2020 elections) and so must do Putin’s bidding. He was a useful foil when Putin could not be seen as dealing directly with the then mutinous Yevgeny Prigozhin. Belarus has amplified Kremlin-scripted narratives about Ukraine, and the repression of democratic voices in Belarus (admittedly now [largely silent](#) due to massive arrests and continued detention of political prisoners) and in the Belarus diaspora is straight out of the Putin playbook. Belarus [reportedly](#) is complicit in the abduction and forcible transfer of more than 2,400 Ukrainian children.

Democratic Aspirations in Belarus

The voices of a free Belarus are not silent, though with the war raging in neighboring Ukraine, much less attention has been paid to Belarus.

There is no better voice for the democratic aspirations of the people of Belarus than Tsikhanouskaya, who became a champion of democracy literally overnight after her husband, Sergei Tsikhanousky, was sentenced to 18 years in prison for announcing he would challenge Lukashenko in the August 2020 election. Tsikhanouskaya ran in his place in an election foreign observers overwhelmingly concluded was stolen from her, and fled to Lithuania with her two children. She was tried in absentia earlier this year and sentence to 15 years in

prison, so cannot return to Belarus so long as the current regime remains in power. Officially the 41-year-old heads the government in exile – the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus, placing her at the center of the Belarusian democratic movement.

Tsikhaneuskaya carries with her a photo of her husband on the back of the notebook containing her speaking notes and, when asked about her husband, she unfailingly reminds her interlocutors that there are many political prisoners being held in harsh conditions, subject to torture and denied needed medical support. In conversation, she displays leadership qualities that can only come naturally – a steely resilience combined with a seemingly endless supply of genuine compassion and empathy. She delivers her appeal for support for her country and fellow citizens with clarity, directness, and a calm but determined sense of urgency.

Speaking last Friday at The Atlantic Council (“[Promoting Freedom in Belarus and Transatlantic Security](#)”), Tsikhaneuskaya stressed the importance of being able to show the people of Belarus that there is an alternate future, a future where the country is sovereign and democratic. She calls for further sanctions against the individuals complicit in the repression of Belarusian political activists – judges, prosecutors, propagandists, oligarchs and the security service. That repression continues unabated - there [reportedly](#) has been a very recent spate of raids and property seizures targeting the families in Belarus of leaders in exile.

She is urging the United States and countries in Europe to extend visa accommodations to Belarusians in exile without dual nationality, failing which they face certain imprisonment upon their return. There is an ambitious separate workstream focused on the creation of an alternative Belarusian passport as the Lukashenko regime [halts](#) overseas passport services (passport issuances and renewal) for those in the Belarusian diaspora. Also on the wish list is the appointment of an envoy to the Belarus democratic forces.

Last week’s meetings should have given the team much needed hope. The team’s meeting at the State Department has been [described](#) as the first comprehensive “Strategic Dialogue” between the US government and the Belarus democratic movement and civil society. As [outlined](#) by the US Embassy in Belarus, at the Strategic Dialogue several announcements were made:

- US efforts to promote accountability for the Lukashenko regime’s abuses in Belarus and abroad will continue, as exemplified by the [sanctions](#) levied December 5 against 11 companies and eight individuals enabling or complicit in the regime’s misdeeds.
- USAID this month is opening a dedicated office in Vilnius for its Belarus program.
- The United States will initiate exchanges and other programming designed to promote and protect Belarusians’ unique national and cultural identity, including their language, literature, arts and history.
- The United States and representatives of the Belarusian democratic movement agreed to convene working groups in the coming months to continue the important discussions started at the Strategic Dialogue.

The Strategic Dialogue also touched on human rights abuses perpetrated by the Belarusian regime, future economic development of a democratic Belarus, pressures on independent media, and countering disinformation and propaganda. As [stated](#) by US Embassy Minsk, the United States continues its “unwavering support for the aspirations of the Belarusian people

for a sovereign, democratic future, and salutes the courageous Belarusians who have risked, and continue to risk, so much in pursuit of that goal.”

Separately, during the visit to Washington, Senators Shaheen, Wicker and Durbin [introduced](#) the Belarus Democracy Human Rights and Sovereignty Act. The Act would:

- condemn the Lukashenka regime’s support for Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine;
- recognize Tsikhanouskaya as the democratic leader of Belarus;
- call for a return to free and fair elections and for observer status for the Belarusian democracy movement at international institutions;
- support a free and independent media environment in Belarus and investigations into the Lukashenka regime’s conduct of and support for war crimes and the crime of aggression against Ukraine; and
- include a call to establish a special envoy for Belarus and mandate an annual Strategic Dialogue session between the State Department and the Belarusian democracy movement until free and fair elections take place again in Belarus.

Concluding Thoughts

Central to the narratives championed by the voices of a free and democratic Belarus are messages that have broader implications for the fight in support of democracy.

Tsikhanouskaya is quick to point out that it is important to counter Russian and other malign efforts to destroy national identities. As she noted in her December 4 [Washington Post op-ed](#), support for Belarusian language, culture and history is the “best antidote to the so-called Russian world.” She also regularly urges her audiences to recognize that support for Belarusian democratic aspirations, like support for Ukrainian democratic aspirations, “is not charity. It is an investment in international peace and security. A free Belarus would be a key contributor to Ukraine’s victory and the strongest sanction against Putin.”

At a time when aid for Ukraine has fallen victim to partisan infighting on Capitol Hill, recognizing that support is an investment, not charity, is particularly poignant.

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