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## Senate

### STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD ON BELARUS

Mrs. SHAHEEN: Mr. President, today, the Senate will consider S. Res. 345, legislation I authored with Senator Roger Wicker to bring attention to the people of Belarus and their pursuit of democracy. Since Alyaksandr Lukashenka egregiously stole the presidential elections in 2020, we have witnessed a continued crackdown on the people of Belarus, who are being denied their basic human rights. After unjustly claiming victory, Lukashenka responded to peaceful, pro-democracy protests across Belarus with violence and oppression, throwing thousands of Belarusians in jail.

In May last year, his regime forced a commercial airliner flying between two European states to land in Minsk so his security forces could arrest a journalist and his partner, an action for which the U.S. has charged four Belarusian officials with hijacking. Then last fall, his regime exploited vulnerable migrants by bringing them to Belarus and forcing them at gunpoint across the border into the European Union, leading several countries to declare a state of emergency.

These abuses are demoralizing to the Belarusian people, who keep up the fight to bring Lukashenka to account for his egregious behavior. But now we are witnessing a new level of desperation by Lukashenka, who is supporting Putin in his campaign of aggression against Ukraine. He has endorsed Putin's agenda and invited Russian troops for major military exercises on Belarusian soil. Lukashenka has effectively given Putin permission to use his own country for a training ground to undermine a sovereign nation.

As Lukashenka supports Vladimir Putin's efforts to destabilize the democratically elected government in Kyiv, at home he has proposed a constitutional referendum that would allow him to stay in office indefinitely.

Indeed, life under Lukashenka is perilous. Today, there are more than 1000 political prisoners in Belarus—1000 people imprisoned because of the insecurities of one man. I welcome the recent statement from the Department of State bringing attention to the ill treatment of these prisoners. And I call on the Lukashenka regime to release these prisoners without conditions and abide by their commitments to human rights as a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Lukashenka has ruthlessly attacked independent media in Belarus, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which he

declared an extremist organization. Anyone who subscribes to RFE/RL can be arrested and jailed. RFE/RL's journalists who reported on the 2020 elections have been harassed, detained, arrested and stripped of their credentials.

I want to highlight the stories behind the names of these journalists. They have been arrested and torn from family and friends indefinitely, simply for doing their jobs to shed light on the truth.

Ihor Losik was sentenced to 15 years in prison in December after a lengthy, closed door trial. Andrey Kuznechyk has been detained since November on unknown criminal charges. Aleh Hruzdzilovich has been detained since late December for his reporting activities, after previously serving two stints in jail following the election.

The Lukashenka regime's cowardly attacks on the free press do not project strength. They show that regime is – in fact – weak, desperate and afraid of the truth. And the truth is – the Belarusian people want to live in a free country and choose their own future.

This is why I have been proud to lead efforts in the Senate to condemn the actions of the Lukashenka regime and support the brave people of Belarus who continue to stand up to an increasingly autocratic government. Last year, Senator Wicker and I co-founded the Free Belarus Caucus to advocate for the pro-democracy movement and continue to push for free and fair elections in Belarus.

I have met with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya numerous times and others from the Coordination Council who are leading the effort to bring a peaceful, democratic transition of power to Belarus. She is an admirable woman who did not seek the spotlight, but stepped up on behalf of her people when they needed her most. Her leadership is critical for the future of democracy in Belarus and we must do everything we can to assist her and the Belarusian people.

And today, I am calling on my colleagues in the Senate to join me in supporting this resolution, which expresses solidarity for the Belarussians' pursuit of freedom and a future of their own making. As we work together to respond to Russian threats against Ukraine, we must not forget the plight of Belarussians. We must be steadfast in our strong support to those suffering under the rule of authoritarians. So I urge my colleagues to join me at this critical moment and support this resolution.