

**Written Statement of Jamie Fly**  
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**Senate Foreign Relations Committee**  
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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and other members of the committee, I want to thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify.

I serve as President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). We are a multimedia news organization reaching 41.1 million people each week in 23 countries across Eurasia in 27 languages. We operate in places where freedom of the press does not exist or is under attack. Funded by the U.S. Congress through an annual appropriation to the U.S. Agency for Global Media, we are a living embodiment of America's commitment to freedom of the press and the vital role that the media plays in democracy.

I'm humbled to be joining Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on this panel. She and her family have suffered immensely over the last year because of her willingness to speak on behalf of the Belarusian people. The values that she champions on behalf of them are the same values our audiences across our coverage area aspire to. Freedom to choose your own leaders. Freedom of expression. Freedom to assemble. These are universal rights that the Belarusian people have been deprived of for far too long.

For more than 70 years, RFE/RL's journalists have revealed truths that governments and state-controlled media want to keep hidden. In some cases, our work has helped to change the course of history and helped bring freedom to millions. Our brave independent journalists are people born and raised in the countries where they work, and who care deeply about their homeland and their fellow citizens. We give them the microphone or TV studio, or now, more often, the Facebook, Telegram, or Instagram account, so they can provide reporting directly to their communities.

In all our markets we strive to attract and retain a loyal audience, but our value is especially obvious during a political crisis. And the recent crisis in Belarus is a case in point. RFE/RL's Belarus Service, known locally as Radio Svaboda, or "Radio Liberty," is one of the leading providers of news and analysis to Belarusian audiences. Established in 1954, Svaboda, despite working in what Reporters Without Borders calls "the most dangerous country in Europe for media personnel," continues decades later to provide independent news and analysis of the fast-moving events to Belarusian audiences in their own language.

***RFE/RL's Work in Belarus***

As one of the few independent media outlets working in the Belarusian language, RFE/RL's Belarus Service has played a significant role in reporting in and on Belarus

since the fraudulent election in August 2020. As it covered the wave of civic participation ahead of the election, Svaboda saw a spike in audience numbers – with a record 24.8 million recorded views on YouTube in August 2020. In fact, Svaboda broke all of its previous digital records in August and September of 2020 driven by interest in the coverage of the protests, remarkable levels of engagement in a country of less than 10 million people.

Our reporters provided a window of truth to the events in the country over the past year with exclusive live footage from street demonstrations, live reporting on police repression of ordinary citizens, and the vicious crackdown on civil society. Svaboda reported that in May alone courts in Belarus issued sentences for 252 years of prison time and 100 years of forced labor in political trials. It means that more than 10 years of freedom were being destroyed in Belarus every day of the past month.

Svaboda also revealed the truth behind what happened after riot police detained protesters, publishing numerous first-person accounts of individuals who were beaten, abused, and threatened. While conducting that coverage, our journalists also looked at the human side of the crackdown and how Belarusians were adapting to the increasing police state. In one short feature video, RFE/RL reported about the popularity of neighborhood Telegram chats and related street gatherings – showing how every day in dozens of Minsk neighborhoods, locals have started to use these “courtyard chats” to get acquainted, organize protest actions, and support each other.

Our work was seen as so integral to truthful live coverage of the country’s protests that our cameras captured ordinary citizens chanting “Radio Svaboda!, Radio Svaboda!” on August 15 outside of the State TV building, after they spotted our video crew, showing the emotional attachment Svaboda has with ordinary Belarusians.

More recently, RFE/RL journalists have found ways to cover closed-door trials that other outlets have been barred from. Just last week, media around the world cited RFE/RL’s courtroom video of the tragic attempted suicide of activist Stepan Latypov. This coverage has ensured not only that Belarusians are able to learn what is happening in their own country – but this unique reporting has also ensured that the world remains aware of the dire human rights situation inside the country.

### ***Lukashenka’s Criminalization of Journalism***

Svaboda has accomplished all of this -- and more -- despite extreme threats to its operations and people.

Detained on June 25, 2020, 29-year-old RFE/RL social media consultant Ihar Losik will soon mark a year in pre-trial detention in Belarus. Losik has been accused by authorities of using his popular blog on Telegram to “prepare to disrupt public order” ahead of the

August presidential election. Since then, authorities have added unknown additional charges against Losik – who has started two hunger strikes to protest his detention.

Ihar Losik has been cruelly separated from his wife, Darja, his two-year-old daughter, and his colleagues for far too long. Ihar must be freed from detention and allowed to rejoin his family. I spoke to Darja yesterday and she gave me this message to share with the Committee:

*“Ihar finds himself in a dire situation. His fate and his freedom directly depend on international pressure on Lukashenka’s regime.”*

Numerous other RFE/RL journalists on assignment to report on the election and its aftermath have been harassed, detained, jailed, and stripped of their accreditations. In 2020 and 2021, RFE/RL journalists other than Ihar Losik have spent a total of 118 days in jail. In one case, one of our photojournalists served 11 days in jail after being detained by unidentified men after covering a September 13 protest rally in Minsk. While in detention, he was beaten and the flash cards holding his photos were confiscated. In another case, one of our journalists was detained and beaten by riot police who left him handcuffed and kneeling on the floor of a police van, bleeding with a broken nose, as he was taken to a precinct station. These attacks against our journalists are not the exception, but rather the norm in today’s Belarus.

Access to Svaboda’s website was blocked inside Belarus on August 21, 2020. Since that time, RFE/RL has been relying on social media platforms such as Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as using circumvention technology provided by the Open Technology Fund, to ensure that the people of Belarus are able to access essential reporting and information that the Belarusian regime seeks to repress.

Unfortunately, the events starting last summer were just the start of the Lukashenka regime’s attempt to criminalize journalism.

In early May, police launched a probe of popular Belarusian news portal Tut.by, searching the homes of several of its editors and blocking its website. A journalist who was covering the raid was later sentenced to 15 days in jail for “petty hooliganism.” A Minsk studio used by the Poland-based Belsat TV station was raided by Belarusian security forces on May 21 and six people were detained. Belsat has produced investigations critical of Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his associates.

Not only coverage of politics or protests is risky. Two sports journalists who work on a popular YouTube channel covering soccer were arrested on June 3. The Belarusian Association of Journalists reports that 34 media workers are behind bars, either awaiting trial or serving sentences, including Katsiaryna Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova whose “crime” was livestreaming a protest from an apartment for Belsat.

Pressure on independent media is intensifying. On May 24, Lukashenka signed into law draconian new amendments to its Media Law that outlaw live coverage of “unauthorized” mass gatherings — which are defined elsewhere as any rally not formally sanctioned by the Belarusian government. The updated law also allows the government to shut down media outlets without a court order and bans publication of the results of opinion polls the government has not authorized. These changes will make the country even more dangerous for journalists who seek to report on events happening in Belarus.

The Lukashenka regime’s repressive campaign against the free flow of information to the Belarusian people and its targeting of independent journalists, including RFE/RL reporters and staff, must cease so they can continue their vital work.

### ***Russian Support to Lukashenka Regime and Targeting of RFE/RL in Russia***

Russian attempts to influence Belarus are well known. There are disturbing similarities between the Russian and Belarusian crackdowns on civil society and a free media. On May 23, Belarus dispatched a fighter jet to intercept a Ryanair commercial flight flying from Athens to Vilnius, forcing it to land in Minsk where journalist Raman Pratasevich, a former RFE/RL Václav Havel Fellow, and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, a Russian national, were taken off the aircraft and detained. And last week, the world saw a hostage style interview in which Pratasevich, who displayed obvious marks of torture, commended Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Following the forced landing and arrest of Pratasevich, Margarita Simonyan, the editor in chief of several Russian state-controlled media outlets, was criticized by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) for making public comments that amounted to “open support” for an ongoing crackdown on independent media in Belarus. Russian President Vladimir Putin himself, in meeting with Lukashenka, dismissed the Western reaction to the flight’s diversion as “an outburst of emotions.”

Lukashenka has clearly long admired the Russian government’s approach to propaganda. After employees resigned in protest from Belarus state-controlled TV stations in the early months of the post-election protests, at Lukashenka’s request, Russian state-controlled media outlets sent staff to assist Belarus State TV channels, which then started sounding eerily similar to their Russian counterparts. While Russian state media sent propagandists to lie to Belarusians about what was happening in their country, RFE/RL sought to provide an alternative to Russian disinformation. We sent some of our Russia-based journalists to cover the events in Belarus for a very interested Russian public until they, along with other foreign journalists, were kicked out by the Belarusian government.

Since last fall, the Kremlin has been engaged in its own unprecedented crackdown against independent media in Russia. This crackdown has targeted RFE/RL’s operations

in the country, which we formally launched 30 years ago at the invitation of then President Boris Yeltsin.

Pressure against RFE/RL in Russia has steadily increased over Vladimir Putin's 20 years in power but spiked in the past several years — most notably with the Russian Justice Ministry designating RFE/RL reporting projects in 2017 as “foreign media carrying out the functions of a foreign agent” in an effort to discredit our work. Despite access restrictions inside Russia on TV and radio, the RFE/RL audience in the country has almost doubled over the last five years. This success has not gone unnoticed by the Russian authorities.

The Russian media regulator is on track to impose fines amounting to more than \$3.4 million against our Moscow bureau for failing to label our content as the work of a “foreign agent” – a term that in Russia implies that RFE/RL journalists are spies. On May 14, Russian court bailiffs arrived at RFE/RL's Moscow bureau to notify us about enforcement proceedings for the outstanding fines. That same day, Russian authorities froze RFE/RL's Russian bank accounts.

If these fines are not paid, the Russian authorities have the power to place RFE/RL's Russian entity into insolvency and to block access to our websites. RFE/RL has filed a case with the European Court of Human Rights, challenging Russia's use of “foreign agent” laws, making the case that Russia's actions violate the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of the press protected by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and that our Russian staff will suffer irreversible harms if the Court does not act quickly.

No matter what the Putin regime tries to do to our operations in Russia, we have made clear that we will not abandon our Russian audience. We are redoubling our efforts to provide innovative programming and news and information to our Russian audiences at a time when their government is trying to control what types of journalism they have access to.

The Lukashenka regime is discussing similar legislation targeting foreign funded media in Belarus. The goals of both Lukashenka and Putin are clear – complete control of the information space with the goal of absolute political control. This is the opposite of everything we at RFE/RL stand for.

### ***How Congress can Respond to Threats Against Independent Media***

RFE/RL needs urgent support and assistance to preserve our ability to conduct independent journalism — not only in Belarus but across a region where authoritarians are resurgent and democrats are on the defensive. We were heartened by the strong language of support in the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of

2020, which called for support and reallocation of resources for RFE/RL's work in Belarus, as well as for surge capacity for our programs and activities in the country. **We have a need for additional resources to be able to support our work and the independent media ecosystem in Belarus as well as Russia.** This is an area ripe for greater international collaboration, especially between the United States and its European partners.

In Belarus, as well as Russia, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and other countries where our journalists conduct on-the-ground reporting, **we need additional support for journalists under pressure.** In Belarus, the regime's attacks on the media have put our correspondents at risk of arbitrary detention for merely performing their essential journalistic work. In Russia, our journalists are facing the difficult choice of continuing to report for us in-country and potentially face grave consequences, or to relocate for their own safety. In Ukraine, cars of several of our journalists have been firebombed and one of our contributors, Vladyslav Yesypenko, has been detained in Russian-occupied Crimea since March and reportedly tortured. In Afghanistan RFE/RL correspondent Mohammad Ilyas Dayee was killed in a targeted attack in November 2020, and many other reporters face credible threats to their lives as the U.S. military withdraws.

Governments that imprison, torture, and attack journalists should face repercussions. In the case of Belarus, there should be international investigations into the targeting of journalists and documentation of their cases and those involved in their brutal treatment.

Even as independent media outlets, including RFE/RL, are being threatened as never before across this vital region, Russia and China are expanding their information operations across our broadcast area and investing significant resources. Our work in many languages provides an alternative to their state-controlled narratives in countries and pushes back on misinformation using facts and live footage that show first-hand the truth about what is happening on the ground in Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Central Asia, and the Balkans. **Meeting this challenge will require sustained investment at a time when our competitors are committing significant resources.**

RFE/RL needs ongoing support from Congress to ensure that our editorial independence and that of our fellow congressionally funded broadcast networks is respected and protected. That independence is codified in the International Broadcasting Act but turmoil over the last year at the U.S. Agency for Global Media has raised concerns amongst some of our audiences and our journalists about the limitations of these protections.

Most of our journalists are in-country locals, working to provide journalism as an essential service for their communities. They are patriotic citizens of their countries, working side by side with our audiences and facing hostile governments that try to paint them as intelligence operatives or agents of a foreign power. While the early months of

the Biden administration have led to reassuring moves by the Acting leadership of the Agency to reaffirm our editorial independence, **it is important for Congress to continue to make clear that you fund our journalism not because of a desire to spread U.S. propaganda to the world but because you understand the important role that a free press plays in the functioning of democracy.**

### *Conclusion*

Since 1995, RFE/RL has been based in Prague in the Czech Republic. We were invited there by Václav Havel, who as an activist and dissident listened to our Czechoslovak Service. Havel wrote eloquently about the notion of "living in truth" and how powerful and revolutionary it is when citizens suffering under an authoritarian regime decide to "live in truth."

RFE/RL's bond with our audience has always been grounded in our adherence to and respect for the truth. It is what drew families to gather around the radio to search through the static for the one radio frequency the authorities did not jam during decades of darkness. It is what draws audiences to us to this day, using VPNs and circumvention tools or submitting digital content to us surreptitiously to be shared with their fellow citizens.

The Belarusian people have been "living in truth" since last August. Hopefully they will continue to inspire those elsewhere, including in Russia, but also those of us living comfortably in democracies who already benefit from the bravery of those who came before us.

Thank you for your attention.