

Women Leading the Way: the Democratic Movement in Belarus

Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee for Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber

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Chairman Keating, ranking member Fitzpatrick, distinguished members of the Subcommittee,

I am deeply grateful for the great honor of addressing you on behalf of the Belarusian people. It is my moral obligation and duty to testify before you about the gross human rights violations and the ongoing relentless political repression by the Belarusian government officials and police.

I am here to give voice to the thousands of Belarusians – women and men – who face injustice, intimidation, and brutality and who still continue to protest daily. It has been more than seven months since Belarusians have united within the peaceful protest movement – the largest and most resilient in Belarusian history.

Amidst the massive assault of the repression machine, the brave women of Belarus became a symbol of hope and resilience for our country. Women became the embodiment of the aspirations of Belarusians, the face of the democratic movement, giving a boost to the peaceful protest in pursuit of justice, democracy, and dignity as the core components of change.

It is ironic that I had been allowed to run for president last year just because the regime saw me as an unlikely competitor, primarily because I am a woman. I had not had the ambition to become a politician and run for office. It was my husband, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, who had such a goal. After he was jailed in May 2020, I decided to restore justice and filed papers to register my candidacy to pave the way for new free and fair elections. I was joined by two admirable, strong women Maryia Kalesnikava and Veranika Tsepkala. Aliaksandr Lukashenka once said: “Our Constitution is not suitable for a woman. Our society is not ready to vote for a woman. Because the Constitution gives a lot of power to the president”. We carry on proving how wrong he was.

Maryia and Veranika represented two alternative candidates, Viktor Babaryka and Valery Tsepkala, who were not allowed to compete for the presidential office, just like my husband. Together we rallied across the country.

Endorsed by independent political forces, we became the voice of millions of Belarusians, united in their desire for change and justice. An incredible number of people supported us and inspired us to

go forward. They were our primary motivation to carry on despite all the challenges and threats from the authorities.

To defend our people, Veranika Tsepkala kept campaigning in the cities and towns even when she was threatened with her children being taken away.

To defend our people, Maryia Kalesnikava tore her passport to pieces to avoid being deported from Belarus. Now my courageous friend is imprisoned, facing 12 years in jail on trumped-up charges. But even behind bars, she remains the symbol of our fight for dignity and freedom.

Our story served as an inspiration for many other women in Belarus who stepped up as true leaders of their community. And their stories have inspired us to go on.

Women wearing white and carrying flowers formed the first human chains – a living human shield for male protesters – in the streets of Belarus after the three nights of violence following the election. Their desire to protect was stronger than their fear of being detained and tortured.

73-year-old Nina Baginskaya represents the perseverance of the Belarusians who want to be heard. She has been protesting against the regime since the 1990's despite the detentions by police and raids on her house.

Miss Belarus 2008 Volha Khizhinkova and basketball star Yelena Leuchanka spent 42 days and 15 days respectively in detention in unsanitary and humiliating conditions for peacefully protesting.

These are just a few of the stories of courage and integrity in the face of the regime's brutality.

We are dealing with a human rights crisis of unprecedented proportions for Belarus, worsening day by day. This crisis is enabled by the complete collapse of the rule of law.

As of today, over 32,000 people have been arrested in Belarus since the 9 August presidential election. More than 2,500 criminal cases have been initiated against journalists, human rights defenders, activists, and peaceful protesters. Over 1,000 cases of torture have been documented by human rights NGOs. There are 287 political prisoners in Belarus. At least eight protesters were killed. Meanwhile, not a single government official has been held accountable for the brutality, repression, torture, and murder.

This is how it all started.

The presidential election of 9 August was a farce. The available evidence speaks volumes: thousands of documented electoral fraud cases – among them photos of ballots, protocols, witness testimonials, audio recordings of manipulations. Despite all the manipulations, Aliaksandr Lukashenka was unable to win the majority of votes, which is confirmed by numerous facts collected by national and international organizations, as well as by alternative vote counting data

(projects "Zubr", "Voice", exit poll data at foreign polling stations). Independent sources show that I received more votes than the incumbent. Therefore I'm speaking not on my behalf, but on behalf of millions of Belarusians.

Following the fraudulent election, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians took to streets across the country and have continued peaceful protests for months.

On 10 August, **Aliaksandr Taraikousky** fell the first victim of police brutality. He was shot point-blank by a police squad in Minsk.

Henadz Shutau was executed by the police officers without any insignia in Brest. In all its absurdity last month he was posthumously found guilty of disobeying a police order, while his killers – real criminals – remain unpunished.

Another peaceful protester, **Aliaksandr Trotsky**, was detained for allegedly hitting a traffic police officer with his car. During the detention, he was barbarically beaten and tortured. While the policeman had been alive and well, Aliaksandr was sentenced to 10 years in prison for driving away while unidentified people in balaclavas were threatening him with guns.

Raman Bandarenka was murdered by the regime cronies in his own backyard for protecting our national symbols. This case shook Belarus while the regime tried to silence the doctor, Artsiom Sarokin, who, under pressure from the regime, declined to falsify the autopsy and disclosed Raman's death's true cause.

Despite these horrifying stories of suffering and injustice, our people persist in their peaceful protest.

Our brave workers united in strike committees and showed that they are the backbone of the economy. On October 26, 2020, we – as a nation that wishes to be heard – have made a collective effort: workers from all over the country decided to go on a strike. While striking, some of them carried on with their responsibilities (work-to-rule), and others didn't (classical strike). Belarusian classical strikers demonstrated commitment: they let their employers know about their intention to strike in advance. The workers faced political repression no matter how essential, or qualified, or irreplaceable: some of them were fired, some – jailed, some – fined.

Our doctors and professors demonstrated remarkable integrity in standing up for human dignity for their colleagues who were fired for their political position. As a gesture of solidarity, professors joined the strike, even though they knew they would face repression. Some of them were fired, some quit, some experienced pressure from the administration. The universities expelled the students who publicly expressed their political beliefs.

Medical workers formed chains of solidarity, demonstrating support to other strikers. The medics could not go on a full strike during the pandemic, and so they found a way to show solidarity

responsibly: they would stand outside of the hospitals in chains for several minutes in non-working hours. The pro-dictatorship media has made it seem as though the doctors tried to abandon their responsibility to make the sick suffer – the opposite of the reality. Thus, the medical workers were also publicly condemned while being completely innocent.

Our professional athletes raised awareness about what is happening in Belarus all over the world and created the Belarusian Sports Solidarity Foundation. They auction their medals, gather donations, promote the foundation to help their politically repressed colleagues in need financially, juridically. They also aid the sportsmen who were forced to leave the country and organize sports practice abroad.

In the wake of the crackdown on peaceful protesters, several state-run media organizations collectively resigned from their work, refusing to broadcast obvious lies that were in complete contradiction with easily observable facts and evidence of mounting police brutality. The regime reacted not by starting to reveal facts but by flying in an army of propagandists from Russia readily willing to lie.

Scores of principled police officers and investigators resigned to form the ByPol organization that united former security forces officers with the goal of putting an end to the impunity of their former colleagues in Belarus. Because of these officers and investigators, the general public received access to documentation of the orders leading to the human rights violations and the overwhelming violence across the country. The release of documents helped Belarusians understand the cruelty and inhumanity of the orders that were given to the armed forces leading to massive outbursts of violence. In one of the leaked audio-recordings Deputy Minister of the Interior Karpenkov explained to his subordinates what to do with demonstrators: *“Maim him, Cripple him, Kill him. Shoot him right in the forehead, shoot him right in the face. As the president said, if he comes at you – you shoot him. Point-blank: to the legs, to the stomach, to the groin. The president got us covered”*.

In autumn and winter, the protest has developed despite the unspeakable repression. Despite the fact that every demonstrator could end up in a prison cell, the protesters have teamed up with neighbors and showed how autonomous they are working in a horizontal and coordinated way. Neighborhood communities have become the place for a grassroots movement to grow and strengthen. I speak to them regularly, and these people’s energy and stamina give me so much hope.

I have this hope despite the crackdown unleashed by the Belarusian authorities.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has issued a report documenting “massive and systemic” human rights violations and calling for those responsible for torture and other abuses to be brought to justice. The UN Human Rights Council has indicated a “long-standing, chronic pattern of systemic violations and impunity”.

Journalists have faced unprecedented persecution and ill-treatment. Two female journalists, Darya Chultsova and Katsiaryna Andreyeva were sentenced to two years in prison for “organizing actions

grossly violating public order”. They were doing their job livestreaming a vigil for the peaceful protester Raman Bandarenka.

There have been several police raids on the offices of independent civil society organisations, among them Viasna Human Rights Centre, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, and Belarus Solidarity Foundation. Dozens of human rights defenders, journalists, and members of independent trade unions were detained. Belarusian authorities also searched the homes of activists and their relatives, confiscating phones, laptops, money and credit cards. They did not spare the feelings of children, pregnant women, and the elderly. Why? Because they could. Lukashenka has placed Belarus on a path to destruction for the sake of his unlimited power.

But he does not have any power over the spirit of those courageous people who are behind bars today.

Ihar Bantser, musician and activist from Hrodna, announced a hunger strike at a court session on March 3, expressing his protest against an unfair trial. He is facing up to three years in prison.

Natalia Hersche, a Swiss-Belarusian citizen who was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for taking off a riot police officer’s mask, is also on a hunger strike protesting against inhuman conditions in prison.

Facing a three-year prison sentence, Ihar Losik, a famous Belarusian blogger, cut his wrists in front of the investigator and announced a second hunger strike. His life is in jeopardy. He is only 28 years old. My heart is bleeding when I think of his wife, Darya who has been courageously advocating for his release.

My country is in crisis, and that is why I urge you to act – you, the elected representatives of the American people.

We value the principled stance the US took in supporting the people of Belarus. We need your support in building a New Belarus. Our demands remain the same: the immediate end of violence and repression, the release of all prisoners, and holding free, fair, internationally observed elections by Autumn 2021. I am bound by the will of the majority of Belarusians to make this happen.

In Belarus, a mob is in power. They are government officials, judges and prosecutors, riot police, presenters, and propagandists on state TV. They are the ones who should safeguard the order, who should provide unbiased information. But in fact, they are the accomplices of violence and repression.

I am proud that our protest remains peaceful. Freedom of assembly and association, freedom of speech are our constitutional rights. This is not a conflict between the state and the opposition. This is a conflict between the state and its citizens, between an illegitimate government clinging to power and the majority of the population demanding democracy.

In cooperation with other democratic forces, my team and I prepared the strategy of victory where we described our priorities and main steps on the way to free and fair elections.

We already succeeded in the delegitimization of Lukashenka and the consolidation of resources of democratic forces. We appreciate the international community's principled stance on the 2020 election, refusing to recognize its officially declared results as legitimate. The US called the elections "fraudulent." The EU concluded that the election campaign was "neither free nor fair" and did not recognise Lukashenka as a legitimate leader. Many other countries have not recognized the legitimacy of Lukashenka's presidency either.

At the moment, the military, the police and secret services, civil servants, and the state apparatus, as well as politically passive citizens, remain the main pillars of Lukashenka's support.

To get out of the zero-sum game we need more resources to mobilize diverse social groups. We are finalizing the development of an inclusive IT-platform "Strategy of Victory". Everyone can join different tasks on this platform to contribute to our peaceful revolution.

We need to bring the rule of law and independent judiciary back to Belarus. This can be done through international investigations and universal jurisdiction to initiate new cases on the crimes against Belarusians. We also created the Unified Crime Registration Book to gather evidence of crimes for sanctions lists and future impartial trials. Rehabilitation programs are also put in place to support arrested and persecuted Belarusians.

Another dimension of our work includes the creation of a positive program of changes for a new democratic Belarus. It consists of a new Constitution with a clear division of powers, the development of roadmaps of reforms in public administration, economy, law, education, the consolidation of civil society initiatives to strengthen local initiatives.

We also aim to ensure an inclusive political process to represent people's interests through digital referenda and virtual public discussion platforms. We work on the expansion of communication channels with civil servants and security forces. Along these lines, the Coordination Council has developed the Concept of National Reconciliation that outlines the steps we will need to take to ensure a smooth transition to a democratic society.¹

Now we must create conditions for national dialogue, reconciliation, and new elections. To achieve this, we need to create pressure on the regime by the international community, including the US.

¹ The concept of law reinstatement and national reconciliation. (2021, March 1). Retrieved March 16, 2021, from <https://rada.vision/en/the-concept>

Since 1991 when Belarus regained its independence, the US has been a staunch supporter of our country's sovereignty. Belarusian independence and sovereignty are in danger now. Supporting democracy and human rights in the world is a longstanding US foreign policy priority. Democracy and human rights are under attack in Belarus. This combination of negative factors requires focused, effective, and consistent policies by the US.

The US was one of the first countries to impose sanctions and visa bans against senior government officials responsible for manipulating the presidential election, human rights abuses, political repression, and the crackdown on independent media and civil society.

Notably, the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020, initiated shortly after the crackdown began, was adopted within just three months with overwhelming bipartisan support in the Congress. It paved the way to broader measures to address the situation in Belarus, including sanctions, assistance for civil society and independent media, and efforts to reveal the scale of financial abuse by Lukashenka and his cronies.

We believe that the United States as the free world leader has an exceptional standing to lead by example and possesses unique leverage to align the positions and coordinate the international community's practical steps regarding Belarus's situation. The international empathy for Belarusians pursuing freedom and democracy is overwhelming and it should be converted into practical measures.

Sanctions are among the most effective measures sending a strong signal to the regime. The US should consider resuming the Treasury sanctions under Executive Order 13405, currently suspended, against specific state-owned enterprises – altogether 9 of them.

Sanctions should also aim at the so-called wallets of Lukashenka – oligarchs who support Lukashenka and in return, directly benefit from their loyalty. Such measures should also target those who have been at the core of the repression machine: judges, prosecutors, investigators, state propagandists, and the management of the Belarusian Bar Association intimidating lawyers who defend political prisoners. Some lawyers – like Maxim Znak – are in prison, others were stripped of their licenses, severely limiting the right of Belarusians to legal defense.

Some countries might want to capitalize on the weakness of Lukashenka by advancing their interests contrary to the will of the Belarusian people. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the United States, along with the United Kingdom, Canada, European Union Member States, and other like-minded nations, would call on the international community not to sign any international agreements with the Lukashenko regime, since doing so contradicts the will of the Belarusian people and undermines the sovereignty of Belarus. Similarly, contracts to purchase Belarusian state-owned enterprises with an illegitimate president Lukashenka, will be reversed.

We call for additional efforts to implement international mediation, including under the auspices of the OSCE, to resolve the political crisis in Belarus. This way, we would welcome a constructive role of all states, including Russia, on the basis of respect for the sovereignty and independence of Belarus.

Belarusians require support, especially the civil society, the human rights defenders, the independent media, the people, and the businesses. All of them have been attacked and/or repressed by the regime. I call on the United States Congress to consider increasing the support for the diversified pressing needs of Belarusians.

As the European Union has drafted a Comprehensive Plan to support Belarus during the transition and after elections, we are calling on the US to join this work in order to start developing a joint Marshall Plan for Belarus.

Based on the experience of the previous political crises in Belarus, it is of utmost importance to maintain consistency in the adopted policy. The US should insist on the full implementation of measures constituting the progress in resolving the ongoing crisis: to stop the violence, to release the political prisoners, to restore the rule of law, and to launch a genuine dialogue between the legitimate representatives of Belarusians and the regime. This dialogue should lead to new free and fair elections under international observation. This would allow Belarusians to rightfully choose their leaders in a competitive process and ensure that the results of the elections are credible and recognized by the international community. Most importantly, Belarusians must accept the results for a peaceful transition of power to open a new chapter in the political life of Belarus.

Thank you.

