



Statement for the Record

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
“Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus”**

Thursday, May 6, 2021 - 10:00am

Submitted by Freedom House

Dear Chairman McGovern, Co-Chairman Smith:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record. Freedom House has worked with Belarusian civil society for nearly a decade, and has tracked the state of political rights and civil liberties in Belarus since its independence in 1991. We are pleased to offer the following observations.

Since August 2020, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians have taken to the streets in defense of shared democratic values. The Lukashenka regime responded to this movement with the most brutal state crackdown in the history of modern Belarus and, to date, has arrested or detained thousands of people and committed grave human rights violations.

Increasing political imprisonment

Over the last nine months, [370 people](#) have become political prisoners, at least [32,000 people](#) went through administrative arrests, more than [3,000 criminal cases](#) have been initiated, and thousands were tortured and beaten. In these cases, criminal sentences often range from several months to [ten years](#) in prison.

The retaliation of the regime continues even after sentencing. Prisoners are often forced to sleep on metal beds without mattresses, their correspondence repeatedly gets “lost,” parcels with food and medications are regularly rejected by the prison administration, and visits by family members are extremely limited, if allowed at all. Some activists are repeatedly placed in solitary confinement. Being subjected to inhumane treatment for months without any prospects of fast release, many political prisoners are losing hope – hunger strikes and suicide increasingly seeming like their only means of recourse. Bloggers [Ihar Losik](#) and [Siarhei Piatrukhin](#), who tried to hurt themselves to protest the severe injustice and poor prison conditions, are grave reminders of how fragile human hope is behind bars.

Unfolding humanitarian crisis

Since last August, approximately 60,000 people have fled from the government’s tyranny to Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Latvia. Thanks to neighboring countries, many Belarusians have “preventative” visas ready so that they can quickly leave their home in case they come under threat of detention or imprisonment. However, many Belarusian exiles struggle to adjust as they try to recover from physical and mental trauma, become financially independent, and find ways to continue supporting the democratic movement back home, all while navigating the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and competing for the same limited resources as job-seeking citizens of the

host countries. We are facing a humanitarian catastrophe. One that cannot be resolved with short-term, single-use assistance.

Growing attacks on all organized civil society groups

With key opposition figures either imprisoned or forced into exile, organized civic initiatives, which have been on the frontlines of the democratic movement, have now become the regime's primary target. Since the early days of the crisis, the country's civil society organizations (CSOs) have supported Belarusians in exercising their rights to assembly, association, free speech, and political participation. CSOs have worked tirelessly to provide the victims of the crackdown and their families with legal, financial, logistical, and psychological assistance – often at the cost of their own physical and psychological well-being.

These efforts were met with growing state pressure in the form of arrests, house and office searches, unreasonable inspections, and fines, which have drastically intensified during recent months. On one day in February, the security services [raided the offices and homes](#) of dozens of activists across the country, arresting several of them and confiscating their equipment, money, and documents. Amid continuing attacks and growing risks, the work of human rights defenders and journalists, critical to shining light on impunity, is being constantly disrupted. The repression machine has shown no leniency to statutorily protected or vulnerable social groups; the [cases of female journalists](#) Katsyaryna Andreyeva and Darya Chultsova, who were sentenced to two years in jail for live streaming a protest, are emblematic. Another illustrative example include prominent human rights defenders from the *Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, [Siarhei Drazdouski and Aleh Hrableuski](#), who were charged with fraud and put under house arrest and held in detention, respectively.

Resistance continues

Despite the unprecedented assault on all forms of activism, the desire to bring about democratic change that awoke in so many Belarusians last year persists. Belarusian CSOs report the highest level of interest from the public to get engaged. This is also reflected in an avalanche of applications to Freedom House's open call for mini-grants for civic initiatives in late 2020 and early 2021 from Belarus. Established and nascent civic groups continue to engage new allies and implement important civic programs including conducting public discussions and art projects spurring debates on critical sociopolitical issues, running crowdfunding campaigns to support embattled activists and their families, and holding lectures and seminars on leadership and active citizenship. People of all ages and professions are coming up with new, creative ways to support the democratic

movement, from online flashmobs and solidarity campaigns, to boycotting products and services by state-controlled companies, to hanging national white-red-white flags – or their avatars – from windows and balconies. Persecuted and exhausted, the Belarusian people and civil society do not give up and continue their peaceful struggle for the ability to choose the future of their country.

Recommendations to U.S. Congress:

- 1. Increase foreign assistance to Belarusian civil society to at least \$30 million.** Despite the immense pressure and continuing persecutions during the past nine months, Belarusian civil society has remained committed to the cause of bringing about democratic change in Belarus. To continue their important work, human rights defenders who are putting their own freedom in danger to protect victims of the regime need sustainable financial support. Hundreds of emerging civic initiatives by groups located in- and outside Belarus require assistance to address a broad array of critical sociopolitical issues. Belarusian activists who suffered through arrests and torture and fled the country fearing incarceration need resources to adjust to the new environment, recover from physical and psychological trauma, and continue their engagement with Belarus from abroad.
- 2. Allow for flexible assistance mechanisms to support emerging civic initiatives.** To ensure that a wide range of Belarusian pro-democracy civic actors, including former government employees who defected and joined the democratic movement, can continue advancing democratic change, it is crucial that the assistance mechanisms be flexible and adaptable to the rapidly changing context. Flexibility remains crucial as the Lukashenka regime continues to restrict financial flows into the country.
- 3. Commit to long-term investment in transitional justice processes and continuing engagement with the Belarusian people.** Belarus will not become democratic overnight; instead, it will be a long process that will require long-term support from the democratic community. To build a foundation for democracy during the transitional period, the United States should start supporting transitional justice and reconciliation initiatives as well as invest in unilateral people-to-people educational and professional development programs for Belarusians who will ultimately lead the transformation.
- 4. Lead international efforts of pro-democracy allies utilizing all available diplomatic tools.** Despite Lukashenka's ongoing repressions and refusal to engage in constructive dialogue, the determination of the Belarusian people to build a free and democratic country remains unwavering. With its renewed commitment to democracy and human rights, the United States should not just follow its international partners, but lead the international efforts to support the

peaceful movement and its leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and to bring the autocrat to the negotiation table. To speed up the process, additional pressure should be inflicted on the Belarusian regime using all the tools at the United States' disposal, including sanctions against state-owned enterprises as well as additional targeted sanctions on Belarusian and foreign persons backing Lukashenka.

5. **Support political prisoners in Belarus and call for their immediate release.** To support the brave people who have been persecuted for their resolve to advance a democratic Belarus, the United States should continuously raise the profiles of those unjustly imprisoned by the regime. One way to do it is by supporting them through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project – or directly in partnership with human rights organizations and Belarusian CSOs – by sharing their stories, connecting with their families, and advocating for their cause. U.S. elected officials should remind political prisoners that they are not forgotten, thereby putting noticeable pressure on prison and detention center administrators to ensure prisoners' well-being.