



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus**

**Thursday, May 6, 2021  
10:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon  
Virtual via Cisco WebEx**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good morning. I join Co-Chair Smith in welcoming the public to this Human Rights Commission hearing on Belarus and I thank the witnesses for joining us today.

I extend a special welcome to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya who is playing an historic role in her country's history and whose husband remains in prison today.

The events of the past year in Belarus have captured the attention of the world.

First, an election so obviously unfree and unfair that the “official” result — another five years in office for a man who has already ruled for 26 years — was quickly condemned by governments around the world and across the political spectrum.

Then, reacting to the electoral fraud, an explosion of street protests, led by women, that inspired people everywhere and allowed us to imagine that change was coming.

The Lukashenko government's predictable but tragic response was a brutal crack down on the protesters. That earned him the formation of the largest mass opposition movement seen in Belarus since independence in 1991.

Now, 8 months later, more than 32,000 Belarusians have been detained and imprisoned. At least 200 and possibly more than 300 of those detained are political prisoners. At least 10 demonstrators have died or been killed under suspicious circumstances.

As we will hear today, journalists have been especially hard hit.

Belarus has become the most dangerous country in Europe for journalists, according to Reporters Without Borders. More than 400 journalists have been subjected to repression during and after the presidential election, including arbitrary detentions and beatings, fines and prison sentences, raids of their homes and offices and revoking of their credentials. A dozen remain jailed.

One of those still jailed is Ihar Losik, a 28-year-old blogger and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty social media consultant. Another is Katsiaryna Barysevich, a correspondent for an independent news website. I call for both of them, and all other imprisoned journalists, and all political prisoners, to be released immediately and without conditions.

Things have reached the point that Belarusians are being detained or fined for any display of the red and white colors of the historical Belarusian flag. A man was recently detained for storing a TV box with red and white colors on his balcony.

That kind of extreme measure suggests the government knows its hold on power is tenuous. But that does not mean change is around the corner.

In many countries today governments are keeping themselves in power using authoritarian measures.

Political transformations can take a long time – much longer than any of us may wish. And the primary drivers are usually internal.

So it is important for those who want to support change that is pro-human rights and pro-democracy to take our signals from the organizations and movements on the ground.

It is important that we not impose our read of reality on those who are living through social and political upheavals first-hand.

It is important to recognize complexity and not oversimplify the narrative.

On this point I remember something Ms. Tsikhanouskaya said early on: that Belarus' democratic revolution was neither pro-Russia nor anti-Russia, neither pro-European Union nor anti-European Union.

I take that as a reminder that we should not impose an outdated Cold War framing on the homegrown political movement in Belarus.

Congress has already acted to support the democratic aspirations of Belarusian people.

Last December Congress passed the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights and Sovereignty Act of 2020 and the House recently passed H. Res. 124 which called for new elections, the release of political prisoners, and dialogue to ensure a peaceful political transition.

What I hope to hear today are recommendations as to how to implement these measures, together with like-minded allies, in ways that strengthen and support the popular movement. Part of helping is to make sure we do not inadvertently do damage.

Thank you and I yield back.