

Human Rights in Belarus Today: Political Prisoners & the Ongoing Crackdown

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Today we will examine the ongoing, brutal crackdown on democratic opposition, and indeed on anyone suspected of sympathy for it, or for the freedom and independence of Belarus.

We will also talk about political prisoners—we are grateful for President Trump's success in negotiating for the release of almost 200 prisoners, including Sergey Tihanovski, who will testify in a few minutes.

We will hear frank and shocking reports about prison conditions and the entire political prisoner system run by the Belarusian government. It's been called a "revolving door of repression", by which prisoners are taken in order to intimidate others and treated them as transactional hostages, to be released as new victims are being arrested.

And we'll also talk about what the U.S. government can do on many fronts, to build on the Trump administration's impressive results in re-starting diplomacy with Belarus, and securing life-saving prisoner releases. Congress needs to support the President's effort to get the remaining prisoners released—and at the same time to take apart that "revolving door of repression".

We are honored to have Sergey Tihanovski with us today—in 2020 Sergey was the principal leader of the Belarusian opposition, and its candidate for president of Belarus. He was arrested and imprisoned before the election—his wife Svetlana was then selected to be the candidate. A tremendous popular movement for democracy had been building around Sergey and flowed into Svetlana's heroic candidacy. We know what happened—the dictator Lukashenka was in deep trouble, faked the election results, massive protests ensued, and the dictator responded with a terrible crackdown. Many thousands were imprisoned. Hundreds

of thousands were driven into exile. In June of last year however, Sergey was released from prison as a direct result of the diplomacy of President Trump and wrote in a [Washington Post Op-ed](#) last November:

“If not for Donald Trump’s unorthodox diplomacy, I would not be writing these words today. An unexpected meeting last June in Minsk between the Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko and U.S. Special Envoy Keith Kellogg led to my release after five years in solitary confinement. It was an outcome no one anticipated—and one that reminded me that diplomacy, when pursued creatively, can still change lives...”

“It remains nothing short of providential that Trump survived the assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania, last year. Had he not, the struggle for Western civilization would be in far greater disarray. Trump’s instincts for direct engagement, calibrated pressure, and transactional diplomacy are what the moment requires...”

So thank you, Sergey, for testifying today. You have made tremendous sacrifices for your country. We deeply honor your patriotism, courage and tenacity and that of Svetlana and all the prisoners of conscience.

And we need to hear about the details of your imprisonment—Americans and entire the world needs to know.

Among those freed were also Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, prominent opposition figures Maria Kolesnikova and Viktar Babaryka. Thanks to President Trump’s direct engagement, almost 200 political prisoners have now been released, including several U.S. citizens.

Of course I rejoice with everyone released and their families—today, they are free, and in some cases their lives and health were probably saved by the release.

Full credit should be given to President Trump for this remarkable achievement—his bold diplomacy and personal engagement have delivered life-saving results for innocent people languishing in brutal detention. Now many of them are with their families. I have had the privilege of meeting some of the

released prisoners, and their stories of courage amid unimaginable hardship are deeply inspiring.

We must not forget, and I'm sure the Trump administration will not forget, the more than 1,000 political prisoners who remain behind bars in harsh and often life-threatening conditions. Their immediate and unconditional release remains a top priority.

Likewise, we must not forget that the prisoner releases haven't brought Belarus a single inch closer to freedom or democratic government, or even independence and sovereignty. Belarus has been a dictatorship for over thirty years – but it's gotten much worse since the crackdown began in 2020. The space of independence for private lives and personal opinions has gotten much tighter – the range of acts that are liable to bring punishment has become all-encompassing – and the country becomes more visibly subjugated by Russia. The people of Belarus don't want to see their country subjugated to Russia, and they certainly don't want to participate in Russia's war on Ukraine and its egregious war crimes—including the trafficking of innocent Ukrainian children.

As prime author of four U.S. laws that address Belarus, I have introduced legislation in this Congress that would promote democracy and human rights in Belarus. The Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2025, H.R. 3225, updates and strengthen the earlier laws and is pending before the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The four earlier laws include the landmark Belarus Democracy Acts of [2004](#), as well as those of [2006](#) and [2011](#), and of the [Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020](#), which first passed the House and then was signed into law by President Trump as part of last year's appropriations and pandemic relief bill, have set policies to support democratic and human rights activists and journalists, and to sanction Lukashenka and other bad actors in his government until it moves toward free and fair elections.

My current legislation, [H.R. 3225](#), updates and strengthens the earlier laws. It would:

- Reauthorize the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 for the fourth time following the Government of Belarus' criminal involvement in Putin's

unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, trafficking of Ukrainian children, and opening of Belarusian territory to Russian military operations;

- Expand the list of Belarusian authorities who may be subject to U.S. sanctions beyond the country's senior leadership and security services to include those directly responsible for abducting Ukrainian children, cooperating with Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, and Russian militarization of Belarusian territory;
- State that it is U.S. policy to:
 - refuse to recognize Lukashenka as the legitimately elected leader of Belarus;
 - continue to call for the immediate release of all political prisoners in Belarus, including U.S. citizen Vitali Shkliarov and leading opposition figure Maryia Kalesnikava; and
 - refuse to recognize any incorporation of Belarus into a so-called "Union State" that is under the control of Russia;
- Require the Secretary of State to report to Congress on crimes committed by the Government of Belarus in support of Russia's unprovoked war of aggression in Ukraine; and
- Authorize U.S. assistance to promote democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and sovereignty in Belarus.

So as we discuss the vastly worsened situation in Belarus – the ongoing crackdown - and the prisoner releases achieved by President Trump, we welcome your input on what should be U.S. government policy, including Congress's role and in particular this legislation.

In recent years, the people of Belarus have shown great patriotism. They continue to resist at great price the tightening repression of the Lukashenka dictatorship – which has now been in place for over 30 years. In fact, the resistance is growing – and Congress needs to join the President in staying in it for the long haul with the patriots of Belarus.