

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing on Human Rights in Belarus Today: Political Prisoners and the
Ongoing Crackdown**

**Statement by Jasmine D. Cameron, Esq.
International Human Rights Lawyer, Visiting Scholar at American
University Washington College of Law**

February 3, 2025

Co-chairman McGovern, Co-Chairman Smith, and distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the human rights situation in Belarus, with particular focus on the systematic destruction of the rule of law and independence of the legal profession.

I am Jasmine Cameron, international human rights lawyer, Visiting Scholar at American University Washington College of Law. Prior to this position, I served as Senior Legal Advisor at the American Bar Association's Center for Human Rights, where I worked on judicial independence, legal profession protection, and accountability for human rights violations in authoritarian regimes. Throughout my career, I have focused on the intersection of human rights law, transnational repression, and the rule of law in post-Soviet states.

My testimony today will address two critical areas: (1) the systematic persecution of Belarusian lawyers, and (2) the government's takeover of the bar association.

1. The Systematic Persecution of Lawyers

Since the fraudulent 2020 presidential election, the Belarusian government engaged in consistent, targeted destruction of the independent legal profession. The numbers below speak for themselves:

- **At least 141 lawyers have had their licenses arbitrarily revoked since 2020**
- **23 lawyers have been arbitrarily arrested**
- **At least six lawyers are currently serving prison sentences ranging from 6 to 10 years on fabricated charges**

Between January 2020 and January 2025, the total number of practicing lawyers in Belarus dropped from 2,200 to 1,602—a loss of nearly 820 lawyers, or approximately 1/3 of the entire profession. This represents not merely a numerical decline, but the deliberate elimination of those willing to defend political prisoners and document state abuses.

The reason for this trend of suppression is straightforward – a repressive government identifies lawyers with their clients, when lawyers work on sensitive cases, the government wants to have total control over the legal profession so not to allow opposing voices to have any means to exercise their rights and have legal protections.

However, this repressive trend didn't just appear in 2020, similar patterns took place earlier after 2010 Presidential elections. Repressions of lawyers closely aligned with internal political events and government aims for total control. Then in 2010, 6 attorney were disbarred as a result of their work on sensitive cases

Now, let me put the names to the numbers. The following lawyers remain behind bars today, and they are recognized by international human rights organizations as political prisoners:

Vital Brahinets received an 8-year sentence in February 2023 following a closed-door trial. In December 2023, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that his "arrests and subsequent imprisonment were

arbitrary and based on his political opinion and status as a lawyer for the political opposition."

Aliaksandr Danilevich, a renowned sports law specialist and an expert on arbitration, was arrested in May 2022 after providing assistance to those detained during the 2020 protests and signing a petition against Russia's war in Ukraine. He was charged with "aiding extremist activity" and "aiding the calls for restrictive measures (sanctions)."

Anastasiya Lazarenka, Yuliya Yurhilevich, Aliaksei Barodka, and a **Sergey Khlystov** also remain imprisoned on politically motivated charges, serving sentences ranging from 6 to 10 years.

These lawyers are prisoners of conscience, imprisoned for doing their work of defending their clients and upholding the rule of law.

2. The Government Control Over the Bar Association

In addition to persecuting individual lawyers, the government also aimed to take control over bar associations making them part of the Ministry of Justice. In November 2021, government amended provisions in the Law on the Bar and Legal Advocacy removing the last remaining independent functions of bars. The new amendments included the following:

- All lawyers applying for licenses must be approved in advance by the Ministry of Justice
- The Ministry exercises broad control over the Belarusian Republican Bar Association by approving each candidate for the executive position in other regional bars.
- All practicing lawyers must be employed by regional bar associations controlled by the Ministry of Justice, so there is no option for lawyers to organize independent entities (law firms or work as an individual)

The bar association, should serve as the guardian protecting lawyers from state persecution, has instead become a tool of political control and

repression. The bar association now actively participates in persecution of lawyers. Between 2020 and August 2023, more than 49 (more than 1/3 of lawyers expelled through different kinds of procedures according to Belarusian legislation) lawyers were expelled from the legal profession by the bar associations on groundless accusations. This control also created a profound chilling effect on the legal community by sending a message: if lawyers work on sensitive cases, speak out against abuses, then they would lose their license and/or their freedom.

As a result of this capture, the profession has shrunk by approximately 1/3. Many lawyers have fled into exile, while others refuse to take politically sensitive cases out of fear. It was hard for the family members of prisoners to find and replace attorneys, knowing that any lawyer willing to take their case will likely face persecution themselves. The result is the effective denial of the right to counsel for defendants, a violation of fundamental fair trial rights. The bar association is also becoming a part of government propaganda machine supporting the narratives that lawyers are part of the state and there to

To resist this pressure Belarusian lawyers and civil society representatives continue to push back and work to support rule of law and independence of the legal profession. There are several initiatives and organizations working in exile that important to mention:

1. **Right to Defense - Pravo na Zashchitu** - defendersbelarus.org
operate as independent legal information initiative. The organization works to:
 - inform legal community inside and outside the country on latest legal developments, international human rights standards and ethical frameworks
 - educate and teach young lawyers on existing legal standards and norms

- advocate to sustain and preserve basic concepts of legal independence in an environment designed to turn lawyers into state functionaries.

2. Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers (BAHRL) in spring 2023. The organization works to:

- protect the rights of lawyers to a defense and fair trial
- advocate for legitimate human rights concerns
- document the persecution of human rights lawyers in Belarus

On August 21, 2025, the Belarusian State Security Committee (KGB) designated these organizations "extremist formation." Under Belarusian law, any association with an "extremist formation" is a criminal offense and lawyers who communicate with designated organizations, share its materials, or even express support for its mission can face prosecution.

3. Overall Human Rights Concerns

The pressure on the legal profession occurs within a broader context of comprehensive repression in the country:

- More than 50,000 people have been subjected to political arrest or detention since 2020
- 1,187-1,208 political prisoners remain incarcerated as of late 2025
- Up to 500, 000 people have fled Belarus since 2020
- At least 228 civil society organizations were liquidated in 2024 alone
- By mid-November 2024, authorities had shut down almost 1,200 non-governmental organizations

Of course, we are all very grateful for the release of 123 prisoners including Siarhei Tikhanouski, Maksim Znak and Ales Bialiatski, among others. While any release is welcome, we must be clear-eyed about what this represents. People that were released are without papers, families,

property and overall protections. Politically motivated prosecutions continue, and the total number of political prisoners remains above 1,180.

4. Recommendations

The situation in Belarus demands a comprehensive response that addresses both domestic repression and the systematic destruction of the rule of law.

- **Support for Lawyers and Civil Society** - Increase funding for Belarusian Civil Society Organizations such as Right to Defense, Human Constanta, Viasna, the Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers and similar organizations. As well as US and international organizations that support lawyers, programs like Justice Defenders that provided valuable support to lawyers in Belarus; organizations like Free Russia Foundation that support initiatives such as Belarus' accountability in Russian invasion of Ukraine; international organizations like OSCE that provides public platform to advocate for rule of law and lawyers. Consider legislation specifically addressing the persecution of legal professionals in authoritarian regimes. Support appropriations that include dedicated funding for protection and support of lawyers at risk. Explore legislative mechanisms to facilitate professional recognition of lawyers forced into exile.
- **Continue with individual case advocacy** - the U.S. should publicly call for the immediate release of all imprisoned lawyers, particularly:
 - **Aliaksandr Danilevich**
 - **Vital Brahinets**
 - **Anastasiya Lazarenka**
 - **Yuliya Yurhilevich**
 - **Aliaksei Barodka**
 - **Sergey Khlystov**

- **Use of sanctions** - use the Magnitsky Act and Global Magnitsky Act to sanction judges, prosecutors, and bar association officials responsible for these persecutions
- **Support democratic Belarus** - continue to support for Tikhanovskaya democratic movement
- **Require State Department** to continue reporting and monitoring human rights situation in Belarus

5. Conclusion

Members of the Commission, we are witnessing in Belarus systematic elimination of the rule of law. When lawyers cannot defend their clients without facing imprisonment, when bar associations become political tool of the government rather than professional protection, when the judiciary serves regime interests rather than justice, the very concept of law becomes meaningless.

The lawyers I have described today are not merely victims. They are heroes who chose to stand between their clients and state persecution, knowing the personal cost they would pay. I urge this Commission to maintain focus on the systematic destruction of Belarusian legal profession, to advocate for imprisoned lawyers by name, and to ensure that U.S. policy toward Belarus recognizes that the rule of law is not merely one issue among many—it is the foundation upon which all other human rights depend.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue. I welcome your questions.