



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

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

**February 3, 2026 – 2:30 p.m.  
2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

**Statement of Vytis Jurkonis  
Director of Freedom House in Lithuania  
Freedom House**

**Introduction**

Co-Chairman Smith, Co-Chairman McGovern, and esteemed members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, thank you for organizing this important hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Commission on behalf of Freedom House.

I will focus my remarks on the use of political imprisonment in Belarus, the conditions faced by those released, and the broader implications this regime has for regional stability and U.S. policy objectives.

**Political Imprisonment in Belarus**

Belarus is one of the most repressive countries in the world, receiving a 7 out of 100 in its respect for political rights and civil liberties in Freedom House's annual *Freedom in the World* report. Political imprisonment is systemic. More than a thousand political prisoners are detained in Belarus's jails, most of whom have languished there since challenging the result of the fraudulent 2020 election, when dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka fabricated his own victory. Political prisoners are treated more harshly than the general prison population. They are routinely denied medical care, held in prolonged solitary confinement, and denied access to legal counsel or family contact. According to the Belarusian human rights organization

Viasna, nine political prisoners have now died in custody, and the number of politically motivated convictions since 2020 has ballooned to over 8,000.

As individuals are released, new political prisoners are detained on a regular basis, creating a revolving door of repression. These developments occur in parallel and should be understood as part of a single, continuous strategy of control. In 2025, diplomatic efforts – including commendable work from the Trump administration – contributed to the release or pardon of approximately 360 political prisoners, including 143 in December alone. During the same period, Belarusian human rights organizations documented the detention of at least 509 individuals recognized as political prisoners. The Belarusian authorities rely on arrests to deter dissent and spread terror to ensure compliance. They rely on selective releases to manage external pressure or to extract concessions and sanctions relief. This pattern has been consistent for decades and has not meaningfully changed.

### **When Political Prisoners Are Released**

And yet, every political prisoner release matters. Every life saved is essential, but it is important to clarify what release entails. Many individuals who are freed from prison are not permitted to remain in Belarus but are rather forcibly displaced. In many cases, their passports or identity documents are confiscated, limiting their ability to travel legally, work, or reunite with family members. These practices amount to forced deportation and represent an additional rights violation following unlawful detention. For many, there is no indication in their records that they were pardoned or that their charges and politically motivated labels as extremists were removed. U.S. diplomats and their allied partners have worked to mitigate these harms where possible by trying to convince Minsk that people must have a right to choose whether to stay or leave – though these commendable efforts unfortunately don't address the full scope of challenges these freed individuals face.

The Belarusian regime does not provide any consular services abroad, thus enforced deportation effectively gives the released individuals the status of a stateless person. These individuals cannot marry, cannot sell their property in Belarus, or make financial transactions. All of them are unable to see their loved ones in Belarus or visit the graves of their parents who died during their imprisonment. Even after release, many of the former prisoners report that they continue to experience harassment either online or through pressure campaigns targeted at their family members who remain in Belarus.

Health and trauma-related needs are common. Among those released are elderly individuals, including people in their eighties. Some of the released individuals require medical procedures that were unavailable during detention and many experience lasting psychological effects related to isolation, abuse, and prolonged uncertainty. While some former prisoners are more easily able to rebuild their lives and integrate successfully, others face ongoing challenges, including exposure to exploitation and elevated mental health risks.

High-profile diplomatic releases like that of Siarhei Tsikhanouski are important and welcome, but they represent only a portion of the broader population affected by political imprisonment. Each month, an estimated 20 to 30 individuals complete their sentences and are released without international attention. Their release is often conditional and often resembles probation. Former political prisoners are often required to report regularly to local police and can be remanded to house arrest. These interactions with security services are often accompanied by ongoing threats of renewed criminal prosecution on fabricated and politically motivated charges. In combination with curfews, movement restrictions, and other surveillance tactics, these measures limit their ability to re-integrate into communities or find employment. Their needs persist regardless of whether their cases were part of diplomatic negotiations.

The impact of Belarus's repression extends beyond its borders. More than 300 former Belarusian political prisoners currently reside in Lithuania, with many others in Poland and neighboring countries. Many arrive without personal belongings or financial resources; some arrive directly from prison. They require housing, food, medical care, legal assistance, and psychosocial support. Civil society organizations and host governments shoulder much of this responsibility despite limited resources – something which I see firsthand.

When political prisoners are released, the regime often takes them to the border between Belarus and Lithuania, and Freedom House and Belarusian human rights defenders are there to greet these individuals and support them as they adjust to a life in exile. In our work, we have literally given former prisoners the shirts off our backs, found them housing, fed them, helped them set up new phones. This work takes time and resources, but we are committed to helping every single individual we can.

## **Implications for the Region and the United States**

Too often it is the case that repression against one's own people is a precursor for foreign aggression. The Belarusian regime is unaccountable and does not negotiate in good faith. In addition to domestic repression, the authorities facilitate Russia's sanctions evasion and, in doing so, enable Russia's unprovoked and ongoing war against Ukraine. Lukashenka has facilitated and weaponized migration toward the borders of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia as a means of political pressure. The 2021 hijacking of a Ryanair flight further demonstrated the regime's willingness to violate international norms to pursue political objectives. The Ryanair incident is a prime example of transnational repression, whereby regimes reach across their borders to silence dissent among diasporas and exiles – and according to longstanding [Freedom House research](#) on this issue, Belarus is among the top 10 perpetrating governments behind this phenomenon.

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, where Belarusian territory was used to support the initial stages of the invasion, has reinforced these concerns. Freedom House has also collected evidence that Belarus, at the behest of Russian authorities, has taken at least 2,219 Ukrainian children into Belarus and is indoctrinating and militarizing the children. This reality has reshaped how neighboring states assess security risks, border controls, and engagement with Minsk. It has also highlighted the limitations of treating repression in Belarus as a purely domestic human rights issue.

In practice, political prisoners function as bargaining chips for the Belarusian authorities. Detentions and selective releases are used to extract concessions – as soon as the regime secures its aims, it jails more people offering a brighter future for Belarus. As one group is released, more people are imprisoned. The releases are transactional gestures designed to manage pressure without altering the underlying system.

This approach is often paired with deliberate escalation of the security environment through hybrid provocations, including migration pressure and border destabilization, followed by partial retreats that are then presented as concessions. The result is a cycle in which Belarus appears to offer cooperation while retaining full control over the timing and scope of any so-called goodwill measures. While international actors are occupied managing manufactured crises and seeking

limited concessions from Belarus, Lukashenka continues to wage a massive campaign of domestic repression against his people and Russia is able to continue its war against Ukraine, including sustained attacks on civilian targets.

## **Recommendations**

Based on Freedom House's research and operational experience, I would offer the following recommendations.

First, **democratic governments should reaffirm and strengthen support for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya**, the legitimately elected leader of Belarus, ensuring that she and the democratically elected forces are recognized as the true representatives of the Belarusian people.

Second, **the United States should treat political imprisonment in Belarus as a continuing condition, not a series of isolated cases.** This means maintaining consistent attention to arrests, detention conditions, releases, and post-release treatment. Releases of high-profile prisoners, while they matter, do not absolve of the regime of responsibility for the thousands of others who remain behind bars. Moreover, US policy should not only continue to call for the unconditional release of all political prisoners, but also the dismissal of all politically motivated charges and guarantees that those released are able to remain in the country rather than being forced into exile.

Third, **U.S. engagement with Belarus should recognize that releases alone do not change the underlying system of repression.** Sustained consequences, applied consistently and in coordination with partners, are the only way to compel meaningful reform inside Belarus so long as Lukashenka clings to power. Targeted accountability measures should also be applied with greater regularity and predictability. Irregular or symbolic use of these tools weakens their deterrent effect and encourages the perception that pressure can be waited out.

Fourth, **burden sharing with European allies is essential, particularly with countries directly absorbing the effects of Belarusian repression.** Lithuania, Poland, and Latvia carry a disproportionate share of the responsibility for former political prisoners who are forced into exile. U.S. policy should include direct support for civil society organizations providing housing, medical and dental care, legal assistance, and psychological services.

**Fifth, addressing the system also requires confronting Belarus's role in enabling Russian aggression.** This includes the removal of Russian military personnel and nuclear assets from Belarusian territory and the establishment of automatic consequences such as the reimposition of sanctions should such forces return. Belarus cannot be treated as a neutral or secondary actor while it continues to serve as a training ground for domestic repression and Russia's military aggression abroad.

**Finally, U.S. policy should account for how engagement with Belarus is read beyond Minsk.** Moscow and Beijing closely watch how the United States responds to regimes like that of Lukashenka. When such regimes are able to secure sanctions relief or other concessions without fundamental reforms, we risk signaling that political imprisonment and subsequent releases are a useful bargaining chip to curry favor with democratic governments. A policy approach that applies sustained pressure and attaches clear consequences is less likely to be exploited or misinterpreted.

## **Conclusion**

It is often said that a political prisoner's greatest fear is to be forgotten. Among those who have been released, another concern has emerged: whether what was traded for their freedom made any difference to those still inside Belarus. This does not diminish the importance of securing releases but as long as the revolving door of imprisonment continues, we are treating the symptoms rather than the cause. Thank you.