

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

Hearing on

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

STATEMENT OF DZIANIS KUCHYNSKI

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Chairman Smith, Co-Chairman McGovern, Members of the Commission

Thank you for convening this hearing and for your steadfast bipartisan leadership on Belarus. The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission—co-chaired by Representative **Chris Smith** and Representative **James McGovern**—has long been a moral compass in Congress on the cause of freedom in my country.

I appear before you as Dzianis Kuchynski, Diplomatic Advisor to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, President-Elect Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who is the democratically elected leader of Belarus, who speaks on behalf of the millions of Belarusians who voted for change, who marched peacefully in 2020, and who have endured years of state terror for demanding a simple right: to choose their government.

Today, Belarus remains a country where truth is punished, compassion is criminalized, and freedom is treated as extremism. Political prisoners are tortured by cold, isolation, and silence. Families are blackmailed. Lawyers are disbarred for doing their jobs. Journalists are imprisoned for reporting facts. Priests, workers, teachers, doctors, students—entire communities—are forced to choose between obedience and exile.

And yet Belarus is not only a domestic tragedy. Under Aliaksandr Lukashenka, Belarus has also become an exporter of instability: a platform for Russia's war against Ukraine, a hub for sanctions evasion, and a launchpad for hybrid attacks against our neighbors.

Your hearing asks three urgent questions:

1. What is happening to political prisoners in Belarus today—especially after the releases negotiated in the last 18 months—and what are the prospects for future releases?
2. How should the United States approach these negotiations without legitimizing dictatorship or incentivizing hostage-taking?
3. How can Congress and the Administration best support Belarusian democratic institutions—the Transitional Cabinet and the Coordination Council—and the broader strategy for a free Belarus?

I will address each directly and conclude with actionable recommendations, including strong support for H.R. 3201, the “Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2025,” introduced by Chairman Smith to update and strengthen America's policy tools for Belarus.

I. Belarus Today: An Institutionalized System of Repression

In the last few years, Belarus has undergone a transformation in plain sight—from authoritarianism into a fully institutionalized system of repression. This repression is not episodic. It is systemic, legalized, and permanent. It targets all social groups—people of all ages and professions—and any form of dissent.

Since 2020, **more than 65,000 people** have experienced politically motivated detentions. According to Belarusian human rights defenders, **4,339 people** have been officially recognized as political prisoners since the start of the protests. As of today (*January 30, 2026*), **at least 1,158 political prisoners** remain behind bars (other monitoring projects put this number even higher—up to **1,194**), including **171 women**.

Civil society has been almost entirely dismantled. Since 2020, **at least 1,989 NGOs** have been liquidated, along with all opposition political parties.

Independent media have been destroyed or forced into exile; journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders are imprisoned simply for doing their jobs.

The regime's so-called fight against "extremism" has become a central tool of repression. By the end of 2025, **6,127 people** were included in the official "extremist" list, and more than **1,399 individuals** were labeled "terrorists." Inclusion on these lists means loss of employment, banking services, communication access, and basic civil rights.

More than **500,000 Belarusians** have been forced into exile. According to UN estimates for 2024, **nearly 800,000 Belarusians—around 8.7% of the population—now live abroad**. Even returning home is dangerous: **at least 98 people** have already been convicted after returning from exile, and **39 remain imprisoned**.

What has changed recently is not repression itself, but its **visibility**. The regime has deliberately made repression harder to track. Court schedules are hidden. Access to judicial databases is blocked. Relatives are intimidated into silence. Communication with human rights defenders is criminalized. Observers of trials are persecuted. This concealment is not accidental. It is state policy designed to hide the true scale of repression.

II. Political Prisoners: Not "Cases," but Lives — and Conditions Are Worsening

Conditions for political prisoners in Belarus are **worsening, not improving**. There is no evidence of any systemic change in the regime's behavior. Despite the fact that **around 360 political prisoners were pardoned or released in 2025**, repression has not slowed. In the same year, **at least 509 new people** were recognized as political prisoners. In December 2025 alone, human rights defenders documented **more than 80 new episodes of politically motivated persecution**, despite growing secrecy.

Just recently, many political prisoners were reclassified inside prisons as "dangerous criminals." This reclassification automatically leads to placement in **III30 (punishment isolation cells)**. At the same time, Belarus is experiencing winter temperatures of around **-20°C**, and there are credible reports that these isolation cells **lack heating**. Cold is deliberately used as punishment.

One of those targeted is Artsiom, the son of Anatol Liabedzka, an advisor in Ms. Tsikhanouskaya's Office and someone well known to Chairman Smith. In these conditions, people are not "serving sentences." They are being broken—physically and psychologically—by design.

Some prisoners are held **incommunicado** for months or even years. As of today, people such as **Uladzimir Kniha (since September 2023)**, **Andrei Navitski (since April 2024)**, **Mikalai Bankou (since December 2023)**, **Aliaksandr Frantskevich (since November 2024)**, and **Mikalai Statkevich (since September 2025)** have been completely cut off from lawyers, family, and information.

At least **39 people** are currently undergoing **forced psychiatric treatment**, often for "insulting Lukashenka." This practice echoes Soviet punitive psychiatry and is used to break people psychologically.

Those who have been released compare prison conditions to the Stalin era, describing not only harsh conditions and torture, but also systematic humiliation and degrading treatment by prison administrations at all levels.

III. Women Political Prisoners: A Separate Emergency

Women political prisoners face particularly cruel and degrading treatment. As of today, **171 women** are officially recognized as political prisoners in Belarus. This includes female journalists and public figures, elderly and near-retirement women, mothers separated from their children, and women with serious health conditions, including pregnancy.

Women in prison are routinely denied necessary medical care and basic necessities, and the sentences imposed on them are often exceptionally harsh.

Recently released journalist **Maryna Zolatava** shared urgent concerns about the most vulnerable women who remain behind bars. Her message was clear: attention must focus on those who have been imprisoned the longest, those facing very long remaining sentences, elderly women, women with serious health conditions, and women punished for acts of solidarity that should never be crimes.

One such case is **Iryna Melkher**, a 70-year-old woman with severe health issues, who has been imprisoned for more than five years and was reportedly sent to a punishment cell despite her age and medical condition.

An especially cynical pattern has emerged: older women are being sentenced to real prison terms simply for sending parcels or money transfers to detainees in pre-trial detention. Many of the detainees they tried to help have already been released—yet these women remain imprisoned for “extremism.”

IV. Releases in the Past 18 Months

Let me turn to the issue of recent releases—because releases save lives.

Over the past 18 months, a series of negotiations, including direct U.S. engagement, has resulted in the release of several hundred political prisoners. According to human rights monitors, more than 300 people were released between mid-2024 and early 2026. This is a significant achievement by the U.S. Administration and deserves recognition.

I want to state this clearly for the record: **I personally participated in all five groups of releases last year.** I saw what freedom looks like after torture. I saw people with **broken teeth, untreated injuries, severe weight loss, chronic infections, and deep psychological trauma.** I saw disorientation, shaking hands, fear of speaking out loud. People stepped into daylight like survivors of a shipwreck—alive, but deeply wounded.

And I also saw what Lukashenka tries to do even as he “releases” people. Many are **forced into exile**, expelled from their own country. Many are **cut off from families** who remain inside Belarus. Many are released under conditions that allow the regime to **continue pressuring relatives**, confiscating property, or threatening re-arrest.

While hundreds were released, **the overall number of political prisoners has not meaningfully decreased.** As of early 2026, **around 1,200 political prisoners remain behind bars**, while **new arrests continue every week.** In 2025 alone, human rights defenders documented **an average of 35–40 new**

political prisoner cases per month, meaning that releases are often offset—or exceeded—by new detentions.

Lukashenka treats political prisoners as hostages and bargaining chips—using them to seek sanctions relief, recognition, and political concessions.

On the one hand, he releases some prisoners. On the other, he arrests **twice as many** to replenish the “exchange pool.”

On the one hand, he speaks about improving relations with the West. On the other, he **takes new hostages**, escalates repression, and creates deliberate crises.

On the one hand, he markets himself as a “peace maker” On the other, he remains a **full accomplice in Russia’s war against Ukraine**—providing territory, infrastructure, weapons production, and sanctions evasion.

This is why the central principle must be clear and firm: the release of political prisoners cannot be an isolated gesture. It must be accompanied by a real end to repression and lead to systemic de-escalation and lasting democratic change.

We understand that such change cannot happen overnight and often requires step-by-step progress. In this context, the United States has taken a justified humanitarian approach—first and foremost, to save lives. But the next necessary step is to ensure that all those released can return home safely and live without fear of renewed persecution. And no new prisoners are being taken.

V. We Appreciate U.S. Role and Professional Cooperation

I want to express my sincere gratitude for the work of American officials who have approached this issue with **seriousness, urgency, and professionalism**. We deeply appreciate the engagement of the **White House and the U.S. State Department**, as well as the openness and transparency with which the U.S. Administration has coordinated with the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the United Transitional Cabinet.

In particular, I would like to recognize:

- **Special Presidential Envoy John Coale**, for sustained and focused engagement aimed at securing the release of political prisoners and

addressing urgent humanitarian cases.

- **Deputy Assistant Secretary Christopher W. Smith**, for leadership, coordination, and principled oversight of the Belarus policy portfolio.
- The **Belarus Affairs Unit** and the dedicated interagency team working on Belarus, including colleagues operating from the region through the U.S. presence in **Vilnius**, who have maintained close and professional communication.

Discussions about the release of political prisoners began within the framework of the Belarus–U.S. Strategic Dialogue between the U.S. Administration and the Belarusian democratic forces, led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. This dialogue has been in place for several years. It was there that the idea of a humanitarian track first emerged.

I welcome the fact that the current administration has made this issue a priority and appointed a Special Envoy on Belarus to advance these efforts. I sincerely hope that this strategic dialogue will continue under the current administration and remain a key channel for addressing both humanitarian and political challenges related to Belarus.

VII. The Humanitarian Track: Saving Lives After Release

We see U.S. efforts on Belarus primarily as a **humanitarian track**, and we applaud these efforts.

However, **humanitarian track** includes not only secure people's release; but also ensure care and support after their freedom. Many released political prisoners arrive with **severe dental damage, broken bones and other untreated injuries, chronic illnesses worsened by neglect, serious psychological trauma, loss of documents, long-term separation from children and families, and constant fear that relatives who remain in Belarus will be punished.**

Here, we rely on a network of Belarusian human rights defenders and international partners, but **resources are insufficient** for the scale and severity of these needs. Most of these organizations rely on EU and US assistance.

That is why I urge Congress and the Administration to treat support for emergency assistance as **humanitarian assistance**, not “foreign aid.” This is not about funding a government. It is about helping **victims of torture and political persecution** rebuild their lives.

In this spirit, we need sustained support for organizations capable of delivering rapid and accountable assistance, including **Freedom House’s emergency assistance programs** and the **National Endowment for Democracy**, among others. Freedom House supports large numbers of at-risk defenders every year through emergency mechanisms, while NED continues to play a crucial role in sustaining embattled civil society and strengthening the resilience of the democratic movement in Belarus.

I also want to express our deep gratitude to Poland and Lithuania for hosting released prisoners, as well as to the humanitarian initiatives based there, for providing safety, access to medical care, and a place to begin again.

Finally, we must ensure that the families of those released are protected. The regime routinely retaliates against relatives who remain inside Belarus. This must be treated as an integral part of the political prisoner issue, not as a secondary concern. I also know that the U.S. Embassy in Vilnius, including the Belarus Affairs Unit, takes this issue seriously and consistently raises it with the regime in Minsk.

VIII. The Political Track: Humanitarian Progress Must Lead to Systemic Change

The humanitarian track is urgent—but it is not sufficient. Releasing political prisoners is only the first step. The goal is not a slightly “softer” dictatorship. The goal is to **end repression completely**, achieve de-escalation, and begin a **democratic transition**.

As long as Lukashenka remains in power, Belarus will remain:

- a source of regional insecurity,
- a platform for Russia's aggression,
- a tool for hybrid operations against neighboring states, and
- a hostage-taking regime capable of restarting mass repression at any moment.

Belarus cannot be treated as an afterthought in European security. Any serious U.S. policy—especially any vision of stable peace in Europe—must address Belarus as part of the solution, **not as a “consolation prize” to Moscow.**

A free Belarus would reduce pressure on NATO's eastern flank, eliminate a key launchpad for Russia's military operations, and sever an important link in the wider authoritarian network that includes Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China.

That is why we believe that, after completing urgent humanitarian steps, the political track must be intensified to: end repression, restore basic freedoms, enable the safe return of those forced into exile, ensure accountability for crimes, and bring Belarus back to the international community.

Free, safe, peaceful Belarus is also a matter of direct security interest for **Lithuania, Poland, and the entire region.**

IX. The United Transitional Cabinet and the Coordination Council: How the United States Can Support Democratic Institutions

It is in the long-term interest of the United States to have a democratic and sovereign Belarus. While engaging with the regime on the issue of releasing political prisoners, it is crucial to continue—and intensify—engagement with Belarusian society.

Over the past several years, the Belarusian opposition has consolidated into a **viable, structured, and operational alternative** to dictatorship. Despite exile, repression, and limited resources, we have built institutions that represent the will of the people and are capable of governing. Three institutions are central to this effort.

- **The Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya**, who won the presidential election but was denied the right to assume her lawful office, operates in exile and speaks on behalf of millions of Belarusians who voted for her.
- **The United Transitional Cabinet** functions as an executive body. It coordinates key policy areas, including national security, international engagement, justice and accountability, support for civil society, and assistance to political prisoners and their families.
- **The Coordination Council** serves as a representative body of the Belarusian democratic forces. It brings together political, civic, and professional groups and provides democratic legitimacy and pluralism under conditions in which free elections are impossible.

These institutions are not “opposition clubs.” They are a viable alternative **to dictatorship**, built under extraordinary conditions of repression and exile, and designed to prepare Belarus for a peaceful democratic transition.

The United States can play a decisive role in strengthening these institutions. In particular, Congress and the U.S. Government can:

- **Sustain political recognition** and structured engagement with Belarusian democratic institutions, it will mean the US vision on Belarus is strategic and long-term.
- **Continue the Strategic Dialogue** and deepen it into practical working tracks, including political prisoners, sanctions design, accountability mechanisms, transnational repression, and security.
- **Support societal capacity-building:** governance expertise, strategic communications, resilience against disinformation, and secure channels to reach people inside Belarus.

X. Sanctions and Leverage: Carrots, Sticks, and Guardrails

Recent prisoner releases clearly demonstrate that sanctions work. They function both as pressure and as leverage. Without sanctions, it is unlikely that any prisoners would have been released.

It is evident that the Belarusian regime is interested in lifting or softening sanctions, and this is precisely why it has agreed to release political prisoners and make limited concessions.

It is important to distinguish between **U.S. and EU sanctions**, because they were imposed for different reasons and therefore serve different purposes.

- **Most U.S. sanctions were imposed for human rights violations.**
- **EU sanctions were imposed primarily for Belarus's involvement in Russia's aggression against Ukraine.**

This distinction allows for a **calibrated and strategic use of sanctions**.

- **Any U.S. sanctions relief must be strictly tied to tangible, verifiable improvements in human rights**, including: the release of political prisoners without replacement arrests, a measurable reduction in repression.
- **European sanctions should remain in place as a safeguard for systemic and irreversible change**, because EU economic leverage is broader, deeper, and structurally more impactful. These sanctions are essential to preventing the regime from stabilizing itself while repression and military cooperation with Russia continue.

When engaging with a dictatorship, **contingencies are critical**. Any sanctions relief must be: reversible, conditional, and linked to clear benchmarks.

Sanctions should be softened **only when measurable and verifiable change occurs**—and must be immediately reimposed if repression resumes. Without such guardrails, sanctions relief risks strengthening the regime without improving the lives of Belarusian citizens.

XI. H.R. 3201 and the Need to Update and Pass the Belarus Democracy Act

All of the challenges I have outlined today point to one conclusion: **U.S. policy toward Belarus must be updated to reflect the reality of 2026**. That is why we strongly welcome **H.R. 3201, the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2025**, introduced by Chairman Smith. This legislation is a critical step toward reauthorizing and strengthening America's commitment to human rights, democracy, and sovereignty in Belarus.

We urge Congress to advance and pass an updated Belarus Democracy Act framework that fully reflects today's realities, including:

- **Institutionalized and permanent repression**, embedded in law and enforced through courts, prisons, and security services;
- **Transnational persecution**, including intimidation of exiles, pressure on families, financial blacklisting, and abuse of international mechanisms;
- **Belarus's direct role in Russia's war against Ukraine**, including military infrastructure, logistics, and sanctions circumvention;
- **Sanctions evasion networks** that undermine international pressure and finance repression;
- **The urgent need for humanitarian assistance mechanisms** for victims of torture, political imprisonment, and forced exile;
- **Sustained support for democratic institutions**, including the United Transitional Cabinet and the Coordination Council, as the legitimate representatives of Belarusian society.

Passing H.R. 3201 would send a clear message that repression, hostage-taking, and complicity in war will not be normalized—and that the United States remains committed to a free, democratic, and sovereign Belarus.

XII. What We Ask of Congress and the Administration

I will conclude with clear, actionable recommendations for Congress and the Administration.

1) Continue humanitarian efforts to secure the release of all political prisoners and end repression.

The U.S. Administration has the tools and leverage to push for the release of all unjustly detained individuals and to prevent the taking of new hostages. This goal should remain a top priority and must serve as a pathway toward systemic change inside Belarus and a genuine improvement in the political climate.

2) Expand humanitarian assistance and support for Belarusian society programs.

Strengthen rapid-response mechanisms for medical care, rehabilitation, relocation, documentation, and family reunification for released prisoners and their families. This support should be delivered through trusted and accountable partners, including Freedom House, the National Endowment for Democracy,

and other established mechanisms. It is also essential to continue supporting independent media and the core institutions of the Belarusian democratic movement, including the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the United Transitional Cabinet, and the Coordination Council.

3) Support frontline states hosting released prisoners.

Enhance coordination and assistance for Lithuania and Poland as frontline democracies that provide refuge to released detainees while facing ongoing hybrid attacks and pressure from the Belarusian regime.

4) Sustain and deepen the Strategic Dialogue with Belarusian democratic forces.

We urge that this dialogue continue under the new administration as a structured, results-oriented process—not limited to consultations, but expanded into dedicated working groups on political prisoners, sanctions design, accountability, transnational repression, and security.

5) Pass updated Belarus legislation, including H.R. 3201.

Congress should act promptly to ensure that U.S. policy instruments reflect the realities of Belarus in 2026: systemic repression, hostage-taking, transnational persecution, and the continued struggle of the Belarusian people for freedom, sovereignty, and democratic change.

XIII. Conclusion

Dear members of the Commission,

Aliaksandr Lukashenka wants the world to believe that Belarus is “calming down.” In reality, repression has not ended—it has been concealed. Mass terror is being replaced with routine, bureaucratized repression designed to attract less attention and avoid accountability.

We must not allow violence to be hidden behind paperwork. We must not legitimize dictatorship. We must not normalize what is fundamentally abnormal.

At the same time, we must act responsibly and decisively to save lives whenever possible. When pressure creates openings, they must be used—not only to secure releases, but to advance irreversible change.

The United States has a unique role to play—not only as a defender of human rights, but as a strategic actor shaping the future of European security. A free and sovereign Belarus would mean fewer risks to NATO's eastern flank, reduced leverage for Moscow, less space for authoritarian influence, and one fewer regime contributing to war and instability in Europe.

Belarus is not a peripheral issue. Belarus is a test—of resolve, of values, and of whether freedom still matters in the 21st century.

Thank you for your principled leadership and for standing with the Belarusian people. I look forward to your questions and to continued partnership until every political prisoner is free, repression ends, and Belarus returns to democracy.