

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on

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

February 03, 2026 - 02:30 p.m.

Statement of Sergey Tihanovski

Former political prisoner,

Belarusian
leader.

opposition



Short bio:

Sergey Tihanovski, a Belarusian political activist and former presidential candidate who was imprisoned in 2020 for opposing Alexander Lukashenko. Spent five years in solitary confinement, of which about 2.5 years were in an incommunicado regime. He was released in 2025 through U.S.-brokered diplomacy. He is not a member of any political parties or organizations. He pursues an independent political policy.

2020 Sakharov Prize laureate and recipient of the 2025 Magnitsky Human Rights Award as an outstanding opposition politician.

Chairman, members of the Commission,
Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Sergey Tihanovski.

I am a former political prisoner of Belarus. I spent almost five years in prison and was released only six months ago — thanks to American diplomacy. If not for that diplomacy, I would most likely not be alive today.

I understand the tradition of hearings like this.

I know that I'm expected to begin by describing what I went through in prison. To speak about suffering, about conditions, about pain. I'll be honest with you — I don't particularly like to talk about these things. But I respect the rules. And I will follow it.

So I will describe my experience with clinical precision.

I spent almost five years in a Belarusian prison in solitary confinement, of which about 2.5 years were in an incommunicado regime. Sometimes the cell was less than six square meters, including a hole in the floor instead of a toilet. There was no meaningful contact with the outside world. No conversations. No news. Often no books. Time stopped having shape.

Daily life was reduced to routine: cleaning the cell, standing in the cold, trying to sleep, trying not to get sick. Medical care was almost nonexistent. There were no examinations, no real treatment — only basic pills, if you were lucky. Meetings with doctors, lawyers, or priests were routinely denied.

Punishment cells were a regular part of this system. Cold, damp, without a mattress or a blanket. The cold constantly causes your limbs to cramp. Total isolation. I was lucky, because I only spent six months in that punishment cell. One of my neighbors spent four years in such conditions. And he's there right now.

This is what prison looks like in Belarus. I went through it.

But this is not the most important thing I want to tell you today.

The most important thing is that my story is not unique — and that focusing only on stories like mine risks missing the real danger.

More than a thousand political prisoners are still in Belarusian prisons today. And among them are people Lukashenko will deliberately hide from you. People he does not want to release under any circumstances. People whose sentences are so long that they were never meant to be served to the end.

These are former judges, investigators, security officers, officials — people he considers traitors. People who took the highest risk. They are subjected to the most brutal torture.

I want to name one person. Vladimir Kniga. A former special forces officer. A man of honor. He spent almost five years in punishment cells. He needs to be rescued as soon as possible, if he is still alive.

The sentences these people receive range from 15 years to life. **Not for crimes, but for refusing to commit crimes.**

For helping protesters. For refusing to look away from abuse. For behaving like people with a conscience. There are many like him.

And if no one insists on remembering them, they will be left behind — serving sentences they may simply not survive.

That is why I want to be very clear about this. Our task is to get everyone out — not only those Lukashenko is willing to hand over.

So there are only three possible ways to free the remaining hostages:

1. A foreign military invasion.
2. Taking hostages from the regime abroad to force a swap.

3. Coercive diplomacy led by President Donald Trump.

As a realist, I strongly support the third option.

Lukashenko needs President Trump far more than President Trump needs Lukashenko. That gives enormous leverage to the United States and to Special Envoy Mr. Coale.

We have already seen this leverage at work. Lukashenko was among the first to sign into the newly formed Board of Peace. Watching Belarusian propaganda struggle to explain this moment was almost surreal: a small-time dictator who has rigged every election since 1996 suddenly trying to look like a global peacemaker.

Lukashenko is a very sensitive political animal. He understands who holds power today. He understands that the American concept of Peace Through Strength leaves little room for criminal regimes like his. His conversations with his “friend” Maduro are still fresh in his memory.

Lukashenko believes he has something to sell. And it’s not just hostages.

According to our information, he is trying to attract U.S. business interests — national airlines, potash mining, and data centers powered by the Belarusian nuclear plant. He believes the current U.S. administration is transactional—and he is betting on it.

He also wants to present himself as a middleman to the Kremlin, or even as an informal envoy in dealing with other autocratic regimes.

All of this gives the United States tremendous leverage — if used wisely. I will not presume to advise President Trump on the use of coercive diplomacy. We should all be learning from him.

But what I can say is this: Mr. Coale has the cards.

If there is political will in Washington, not only can all remaining hostages be released, but you may even be able to insist on stopping political repression altogether.

I do have additional recommendations, but they are better discussed in private, not at a public hearing.

I ask you: please do not stop.

You have already saved doctors, politicians, bloggers, and even a Nobel Prize laureate.

But more than a thousand people remain behind bars.

Diplomacy saves lives.

I am living proof of that.

Thank you.