



United States Mission to the OSCE

On Political Prisoners in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Michael Carpenter
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 26, 2023

As we start a new year, the number of political prisoners in Belarus continues to grow and now numbers well over 1,400. Politically motivated arrests, prosecutions, and imprisonments are part and parcel of the regime's systemic crackdown on the exercise of freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly -- all essential for Belarusian civil society and independent media to operate freely.

Those incarcerated for, in the words of the Helsinki Final Act, "knowing and acting upon their rights," include leading political opposition figures Syarhey Tsikhanouski, Viktar Barbaryka, Mariya Kalesnikava, and Maksim Znak, whose cases illustrate the Lukashenka regime's repression of legitimate political discourse. The unjust detention of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalists Ihar Losik and Andrei Kuznechyk is part of the regime's effort to suppress truth. And the regime's unjust incarceration of Ihar's wife, Dariya Losik -- who was convicted of engaging in "extremist activities" and sentenced to two years in prison for speaking to journalists about her husband's plight -- is a sinister act of retaliation. The Losiks' four-year old daughter has been cruelly separated from both her parents due to the regime's repressive policies.

The Lukashenka regime's heavy hand of repression even reaches beyond Belarus' borders. We recall the brazen act of transnational repression against innocent civilians including Sofia Sapega and journalist Raman Pratasevich, who were arrested after the regime violated international law by diverting a Ryanair flight to land in Belarus. This month, the regime enacted a law that will strip citizenship from those in exile it accuses of so-called "extremist-related" crimes -- a list that now includes more than 2,000 individuals. This appears to be nothing more than an attempt to eliminate opponents from the democratic process and further harass and intimidate those who stood up for their rights, but were forced to flee the country, rendering them stateless.

More than two years after the fraudulent 2020 presidential election, the Lukashenka regime continues to flout the will of the Belarusian people and their democratic aspirations, including through the politically motivated trials in absentia of democratic opposition leader Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya and several other democratic activists.

We must remember all those unjustly incarcerated in Belarus: they are not just numbers, but real people, deprived of their liberty; separated from family; often without access to information or attorneys, with many reportedly held in conditions endangering their health.

These brave individuals reflect the breadth of Belarusian society --peaceful protesters, union activists, human rights defenders, lawyers, entrepreneurs, students, and everyday Belarusian citizens. Among them, 2022 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Ales Bialiatski; human rights defenders Marfa Rabkova and Andrei Chapiuk; student Artsiom Bayarski; activist Stsiapan Latypau; and trade union representatives Henadz Fiadynich, Vasil Berasnieu, and Vatslau Areshka. They all suffer repression at the hands of a government that fears truth -- a government that flouts the will of its own people. The United States will use all appropriate tools to promote accountability for the Lukashenka regime's egregious abuses and violations of the rights of its own people. We call for the unconditional release of all those unjustly held in Belarus. And we will continue to support a democratic, prosperous, and fully sovereign and independent future for Belarus.

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