



# Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya

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Opening remarks of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya  
Leader of the democratic Belarus

Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Hearing: "U.S. Policy on Belarus"  
Wednesday, June 9, 2021, Washington, DC

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of millions of Belarusians seeking democracy and freedom. I am here to share my story and to illustrate how Lukashenka's regime has outgrown its borders and became a threat to international peace and security.

My personal story started a year ago when my husband, Siarhei, announced that he was running for president, challenging the incompetent rule of the dictator. The security forces have kept Siarhei arrested ever since.

To stand up for my husband's rights, I entered the race instead of him. Other strong candidates - Viktor Babryka and Valery Tsepkalo - were either arrested or forced to flee. Ultimately, the three campaigns united forces, and I became the main opposition candidate, campaigning together with Veranika Tsepkalo and Maria Kalesnikava.

On August 9, 2020, the dictator blatantly falsified the vote and tried to steal the victory from the people.

Through intimidation, the regime forced my children and then me to leave Belarus. My 5-year old daughter still thinks that "prison" is some kind of an interesting place -- something similar to a work trip. Her 11-year old brother avoids explaining what it actually means. So do I.

Not a single day passes without her asking when her daddy is coming home. Not a single day passes without me asking the same question. This is what life has been like for at least 470 families of political prisoners.

This number continues to grow as Belarusians are protesting every day, unwilling to give in, insisting that the dictator must go and that new elections must take place. The nation reacted massively to Lukashenka's attempt to steal elections. But the regime's only response has been violence. 35 thousand detentions, 3000 politically motivated criminal

cases, thousands of cases of beatings and torture. There have been at least 10 protest related deaths.

The last deaths were just three weeks ago: Vitold Ashurak (Вітольд Ашурак), a political prisoner aged 50, died in a prison camp from a supposed heart failure. His wife said Vitold never had heart problems. 18-year old Dzmitry Stakhouski (Дзмітрый Стахоўскі), an orphan, committed suicide, unable to endure relentless harassment from the investigation committee.

The regime is also trying to conceal the truth by repressing the media. Just last month, the security forces closed down Tut.by, the most popular media outlet in the country, and arrested 15 of its employees on trumped up charges of tax evasion. The next local elections are to be postponed till the end of 2023.

The response from the international community to the crackdown against pro-democracy protests has been principled but gradual, sporadic, often symbolic, and diminishing. This helped the regime to adjust and to develop a growing sense of impunity.

As a result, on May 23, the dictator reached a turning point: he ordered a military jet to force the landing of a commercial Ryanair flight over Belarus to arrest journalist Raman Pratasevich who was on board. Those reckless actions put the lives of 126 passengers at risk to satisfy the dictator's uncontained impulse to capture an opponent.

New reports reveal that six other commercial planes flying over Belarus on that day were forced to change their routes, putting the lives of many more people at unnecessary risk.

This entire incident and the disregard of Lukashenka for people's lives are shocking to international audiences. But Belarusians have been subjected to this kind of lawless treatment every day for the last 10 months and on a broader scale - for 26 years already.

With this decision Lukashenka has crossed the line and became a threat to international peace and security. Hence, the international reaction has finally been swift and effective: imposing practical measures and starting an ICAO investigation.

However, the international reaction must not be limited to the Ryanair flight incident. The entire situation in Belarus deserves a comprehensive and unwavering response. Otherwise, we all will face such situations in the future, as Lukashenka is turning my country into a North Korea of Europe - non-transparent, unpredictable, and dangerous.

The United States, acting together with its partners in Europe and with other like-minded nations, has the power to put a stop to this trajectory.

I urge the United States to:

- Expand the sanctions against Lukashenka's cronies who finance the regime, including enterprises like Belaruskali and Mazyr Oil Refinery, identify sources of foreign funding for the regime and target them.

- Discuss the crisis in Belarus during high-profile international events like the G-7 summit, NATO summit, US-EU summit and US-Russia meeting and invite Belarusian democratic forces to participate.
- Support EU in launching a high profile international conference on the resolution of the crisis in Belarus involving main stakeholders.
- Develop a U.S. aid package building up on the EU Comprehensive Plan for democratic Belarus to assure Belarusians that they will have help when the change comes and to prepare steps to stabilise and reform the economy. The U.S. can also participate in the associated Donors Forum and Investors Meeting contemplated by the EU.

There are other suggestions, and I would like to ask to add to the record an expanded list of suggested steps on the situation in Belarus by the U.S. and other nations.

These actions would help build up the momentum to launch a transition to elections - exactly what Belarusians demand. Otherwise, Lukashenka and other dictators around the world will feel impunity to freely break international norms to crush their opponents.

Thank you for your attention.

I am looking forward to your questions.