

## United States Mission to the OSCE

### **Recent Developments in Belarus**

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires, a.i Courtney Austrian  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
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Thank you, Madam Chair.

As we approach the one-year anniversary of the August 9 fraudulent presidential election in Belarus and the subsequent violent crackdown by the Lukashenka regime, our thoughts are with Belarusians who continue to peacefully demand that their human rights and fundamental freedoms be respected. One year ago, the world witnessed the incredible strength and courage of the Belarusian people as hundreds of thousands gathered in squares across the country to peacefully protest authoritarianism, call for new free and fair elections, a facilitated national dialogue, and the release of all political prisoners.

In order to cling to power, Lukashenka instructed his security forces to viciously suppress the protests. In the initial three days following the fraudulent election, there were thousands of arbitrary arrests, at least 1,500 reports of torture of protesters under detention, and other severe abuses. As news of the regime's violence spread, Belarusian civil society responded to the brutality with bravery and resolve, and the pro-democracy movement emerged, which eventually formed the *National Coordination Council* of Belarusian democratic opposition forces.

Last week, the United States was honored to host Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya in Washington. She and her team were welcomed by Secretary Blinken, National Security Advisor Jacob Sullivan, Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development Samantha Power, Congressional leaders, and many others. During the meetings, the U.S. officials and legislators from both political parties emphasized the United States' solidarity with the Belarusian people and steadfast support for their democratic aspirations. In this respect, Ms Tsikhanouskaya represented Belarusian democratic forces fighting for justice from within Belarus and in exile, as well as the many political activists and leaders behind bars in Belarus's prisons.

Over the past year, the Belarusian people have engaged in peaceful demonstrations, strikes, and other forms of civil disobedience, which the Lukashenka regime has met with increasingly brazen and repressive measures designed to silence dissent through force and fear.

The forced diversion of RyanAir flight FR 4978 and the arrest of journalist Raman Pratasevich on May 23 were an appalling effort to intimidate the Belarusian population. That intimidation continues unabated. This month, authorities raided the headquarters of an estimated 40 civil society organizations, opposition parties, and media outlets. No less than 28 individuals, including at least a dozen human rights defenders, were arrested in the course of four days alone.

The political prisoner list now surpasses 580 individuals, and the very human rights defenders from the NGO *Vyasna* who maintain the ever-growing list of political prisoners were themselves detained. Among the political prisoners whose ranks they join: is presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka, who was jailed for simply daring to run for office; Journalists like Katsyaryna Andreeva and Dariya Chultsova, jailed for reporting on protests; Lawyers like Tatiana Kouzina, jailed for defending clients against politically motivated charges; and Students, jailed for demanding a brighter future.

These are very dark days for Belarus, but the Lukashenka regime will face consequences for its unconscionable actions. In the May 28 White House statement following the forced diversion of the RyanAir flight, the U.S. government previewed the release of a new Executive Order designed to increase our ability to impose costs on the Lukashenka regime and its support network. We will coordinate with likeminded allies and partners to ensure that those who engage in repression and serve the venal interests of a morally bankrupt regime will pay costs for doing so.

We renew our call for the Lukashenka regime to accept the OSCE's offer to facilitate a national dialogue leading to free and fair elections under international observation, and we demand the immediate, unconditional release of all political prisoners.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

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