



United States Mission to the OSCE

On the Moscow Mechanism exposing Systemic Human Rights Abuses and Violations by the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Michael Carpenter
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 11, 2023

Thank you, Professor Ascensio, for joining us today and for your detailed report.

The images of hundreds of thousands of Belarusians peacefully demonstrating in the streets, everywhere from small villages to the boulevards of Minsk, to protest the Lukashenka regime's theft of the August 2020 presidential election can never be forgotten. The regime has certainly not forgotten. People are still routinely prosecuted for their role in the demonstrations because of the regime's fear of its own illegitimacy. That is why Belarusian authorities have embarked on so-called "reforms," an Orwellian term, which as your report notes "form a coherent whole...[of] politically motivated repression." Just this week a Belarusian blogger, Mikalai Klimovicz, died in prison near Vitebsk after being denied medication for his heart condition. His crime? Publishing a satirical cartoon of Alexander Lukashenka on social media.

In fora such as the OSCE, Belarus frequently claims that its internal affairs are nobody else's business. But that's not what it signed up to. Indeed, in the 1990 Copenhagen document, all participating States concurred that the "protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms is one of the basic purposes of government." And as a member of the United Nations, Belarus is expected to respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet, the numbers tell a different story. With some 1,500 political prisoners as of today and more than 120 complaints against Belarus sent to the UN Human Rights Committee in the last two years, Belarus receives *the most complaints of any country* under the ICCPR Optional Protocol.

Dr. Ascensio's compelling report found systemic human rights abuses and violations occurring on a regular basis, including the regular use of torture against detainees; inhuman and degrading prison conditions; impunity for abuses and violations; and the lack of an independent judiciary and fair trials. Such conditions are widely reported as being more severe for political prisoners, many of whom are unable to obtain basic medical care.

In today's Belarus, nothing can be taken at face value. Just speaking Belarusian on the streets is reportedly enough for one to be stopped by police and arrested. As the report notes, Belarus has a law on countering extremism that is interpreted so broadly that dissidents and peaceful political activists are routinely targeted and arrested as "extremists." The report details that at the end of March 2023, there were 2,637 individuals on the government's list of persons involved in "extremist activities." This list has now grown to over 2,755 people. It

will come as a shock to no one that the bulk of this list is comprised of political analysts, journalists, political activists, human rights defenders, heads of non-profit organizations, and trade union representatives. Taking a page from the Kremlin's propaganda, Belarus also tries to repress dissenting ideas and the opposition movement by falsely equating them with Nazism or fascism. This is a clear indication of how afraid the regime is of any criticism.

Also taking a cue from Russia's actions in Ukraine, the recent so-called "constitutional reforms" put obligations on parents to prepare their children for "socially useful work," and penalizes their failure to do so with the threat of taking away their children. The May 24, 2021 law on mass events prohibits journalists from reporting on unauthorized demonstrations and treats them as participants in such events, further eliminating independent media. This law is applied to any political gathering, and in the last two years, no permission to demonstrate was granted to associations or movements advocating pro-democratic ideas or perceived by the regime as being political opponents. The report notes that, in sum, these legislative changes provide the government an "unprecedented arsenal of legislation designed to prevent any form of opposition or, more simply, any alternative."

For those suspected of holding independent views, the report notes that police officers used forceful methods to enter their homes and used threats of sexual violence or the loss of parental custody to force people to provide passwords to their phones. These searches and subsequent arrests and detention appear to be all part of Lukashenka's stated goal of completely "purging" – that is completely eliminating – civil society.

The Lukashenka regime also inflicts barbaric conditions of detention on Belarusian dissidents, and forces them to wear a distinctive sign in prison. Take the case of Viktor Barbaryka, a former presidential candidate whose current location remains unknown after he was rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery after showing signs of being beaten in an isolation cell. The United States calls for the authorities to allow his family and attorney immediate access to Mr. Babaryka. This underlines our concerns with the deplorable, inhumane conditions in which political prisoners are detained – and in the aforementioned case of Mikalai Klimovicz, die in detention. Belarusian authorities must adhere to their international obligations and commitments and those who violate these commitments must be held accountable.

We similarly decry the sentencings last week of three NEXTA media outlet creators and editors, Raman Pratasevich, Stsyapan Putsila, and Yan Rudzyk, who received from 8-20 years imprisonment simply for carrying out their journalistic duties. Who can also forget that in brazen violation of international law and aviation safety, in May 2021 Belarusian authorities diverted a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius with the sole purpose of arresting Pratasevich and his companion Sofia Sapega.

If any further proof was needed that there is no rule of law in Belarus, its very own constitutional revisions adopted on February 27, 2022 introduced a new provision that Belarus "shall exclude acts of military aggression against other states from its territory." The cynical introduction of this provision as Belarus was stabbing its neighbor Ukraine in the back is further proof that internal repression and external aggression are two sides of the same coin. While thousands of Belarusians have taken to the streets to protest their government's involvement in the Kremlin's war, more than 1,500 of them have been arrested.

Sadly, the Lukashenka regime has descended even further into pariah status. For a proud country that suffered so much during the campaigns of World War II and under Soviet rule, and for a society that so bravely expressed its national identity and civic consciousness, it is simply heartbreaking to see how ordinary citizens have been crushed under the boot of Lukashenka's police state. The regime's efforts to eliminate any traces of independent civil society or of independent thinking bring the country back into the darkness of the past rather than into the bright future it could have if its people's wishes were respected.

Mr. Chair, in conclusion we call on the Lukashenka regime to implement the report's recommendations to immediately release political prisoners; ensure decent conditions of detention, and immediately provide medication and access to health care for all persons in places of detention; respect fair trial guarantees and other applicable legal protections and reduce the use of closed trials and of non-disclosure agreements intended to prevent families and the public from learning about the cases; and uphold Belarus' own constitution by ensuring that Belarus "shall exclude acts of military aggression against other States from its territory." We also call for accountability for all those who have abused the human rights of their fellow citizens.

Mr. Chair, I am convinced that Belarus' democratic forces, led by Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, will peacefully pave the way for a more humane, democratic future for their country. One day Belarus will be free. The question is how many people will have to suffer before that day comes?

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