

United States Mission to the OSCE



The Lukashenka Regime's Continuing Disregard for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

As delivered by Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Elisabeth Rosenstock-Siller to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 16, 2021

We condemn the politically motivated conviction and shameful sentencing on September 6 of Belarusian democratic opposition figures Maria Kalesnikava and Maksim Znak. Ms. Kalesnikava was given 11 years in prison for her courageous public support for candidates who peacefully challenged an election. Mr. Znak, a lawyer for opposition leader Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya who participated peacefully in the political campaign process, was given 10 years in prison. Both Ms. Kalesnikava and Mr. Znak had already endured nearly a year in pre-trial detention in unjustifiably harsh conditions. They join the ranks of more than 660 political prisoners currently held by the Lukashenka regime—a heartbreaking number that has ballooned over the past year.

These sentencing are further evidence of the regime's total disregard for the human rights and fundamental freedoms guaranteed to the people of Belarus by the Belarusian constitution. As an OSCE participating State, Belarus has committed to respect the right to a fair trial by an independent and impartial tribunal, as well as the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Ms. Kalesnikava and Mr. Znak deserved a transparent judicial determination of the bogus charges levied against them, which they did not receive in their closed-door trial. Like every citizen of Belarus, Ms. Kalesnikava and Mr. Znak are entitled to the rights enumerated in the Belarusian constitution and to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent, and impartial tribunal established by the law, in accordance with Belarus' international human rights obligations.

Meanwhile, the crackdown on independent media in Belarus continues at a disturbing pace. On August 27, authorities dissolved the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the country's largest independent media organization and one that has done notable work to ensure access to information for the Belarusian people. New politically motivated arrests and charges against individual journalists send a chilling message to independent media workers who dare to continue their professional activities. Belarusians are also cut off from a growing number of online informational resources. Since the start of September, the regime has blocked the websites of at least three additional independent media outlets.

The harmful effects of the Lukashenka regime's reckless policies extend to neighboring countries and beyond. The regime continues to intentionally facilitate large-scale irregular migration across Belarusian borders, instrumentalizing and potentially endangering thousands of vulnerable persons.

The Lukashenka regime must end its irresponsible international behavior and its internal campaign of repression against the people of Belarus. We call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, including Ms. Kalesnikava and Mr. Znak. We stand with like-minded

partners in support of the Belarusian people's aspirations for a democratic, prosperous future in a free and independent country. We again urge the Belarusian authorities to accept the OSCE Chair's offer to facilitate a genuine dialogue with the democratic opposition and members of civil society leading to free and fair elections under OSCE observation.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

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