



**Sviatlana
Tsikhanouskaya**

Office

**Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's statement for
the Helsinki commission hearing
SEEKING JUSTICE AND FREEDOM IN BELARUS
September 21, 2021**

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a written statement for the Helsinki Commission hearing on justice and freedom in Belarus. It is my distinct honor to address distinguished members of the Commission and participants of today's discussion on this important occasion.

This is not the first time the Commission turns to the situation in Belarus. The US Congress has for decades followed the situation of human rights in Belarus, even before our country regained independence in 1991. I would like to thank American legislators for their consistency and willingness to understand the course of developments in Belarus and its adherence to the Principles of the Helsinki Final Act. This discussion comes at a special moment when the Belarusian people are going through the most significant political crisis since 1991.

In 2020 Belarusians responded firmly to yet another attempt to falsify the elections and preserve the dictatorship in Belarus. By now, this protest continues for more than 400 days. Since then, the regime has degraded itself deep into lawlessness and repressions. It has shown the worst practices of an antipopular rule which is unable to offer to the society any other solution to the crisis but violence. Thousands of my fellow citizens were forced to leave the country. Today, there are more than 650 political prisoners in Belarus, with many facing lengthy prison sentences. This number continues to rise, while you're reading my address.

The conditions in Belarusian prisons are unbearable. I will give you some examples: In June, the activist Stsiapan Latypau, who was accused of setting up independent social media and resisting law enforcement forces, stabbed himself in the neck with a pen

during a court trial after, unable to cope with torture and threats to his family and neighbors. Political prisoner Artsiom Anishchuk swallowed a metallic spoon to avoid physical and psychological violence. Can you imagine how devastated one should have been to resort to these desperate measures?

My country has turned into a big prison where the whole nation is daily abused by a bunch of armed rogues. But our unquenchable desire to live in a free country didn't go anywhere. No policeman's baton can beat this out of us. Belarusians continue to demonstrate their best in them: peaceful protest of all strata of the society, solidarity on all levels, a renewed connection of the diaspora with Belarus, a pronounced desire of people to take responsibility for the country.

At all stages of our fight for freedom, the attention of the international community has been critically important. Therefore, we ask all our friends and allies around the world to keep the Belarusian crisis high on the agenda. Belarusians are on the front line of the struggle between democracy and autocracy and for us to prevail in this standoff we need the support and solidarity of all like-minded nations. Freedom in Belarus is in the interest of not only Belarusians but of all freedom-loving nations around the world.

It is also of critical importance that the efforts of the international community are coordinated and consistent, that they aim to create maximum numbers of pressure points to stop the violence and make the regime recognize the crisis and start working on its resolution. Amid the fight for freedom and justice, our task of fundamental importance is to preserve and protect the independence and sovereignty of Belarus which the illegitimate dictator is recklessly putting up for trade to extend his rule. And on this, we count on the full support of the United States.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the United States Congress for its continuous bipartisan approach to the pursuit of freedom by Belarusians. When I visited Washington, DC for the first time last July, I could sense a genuine interest, and empathy, and willingness to support Belarusians in all possible respects.