

Call to the EU: “Assist Belarusians Seeking Democracy and Human Rights. Do more”

- *Reform movement facing crushing regime violence*
- *THE EU AND ITS MEMBER STATES NEED TO DO MORE, The Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe and Human Rights Without Frontiers say.*
- *Other NGOs requested to join their call to the EU. Send an email to secretariat.brussels@hrwf.org with the sentence*

“BELARUS: THE EU AND ITS MEMBER STATES NEED TO DO MORE, I SUPPORT”

FOREF/ HRWF (20.11.2020) – Two international human rights organizations appealed to authorities in the European Union and the United States to assist the pro-democracy movement in Belarus, which they said was being “subjected to increasingly harsh brutality by the dictatorial regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka.”

“The citizens and leaders of democracies cannot allow security, police and prison officials of a European country to ruthlessly detain, torture and even beat to death peaceful demonstrators who want nothing more than the internationally-guaranteed right to a free and fair election,” wrote the Forum for Religious Freedom–Europe and Human Rights Without Frontiers.

“They must do whatever it takes to convince Lukashenka, and those who support him from abroad, to listen to and respect the Belarusian people’s demand to embark on needed political reforms, starting with a new, honest election.”

Since protests began in August, massive numbers of Belarusians from all walks of life have been arbitrarily detained, ill-treated, jailed or fined.

The OMON, or Special Purpose Police Force under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, assisted by police troops and even civilian regime employees have become more and more savage. Eventually, six young men have been killed, of whom at least two were beaten to death in the street or right outside their homes. It is believed that Lukashenka himself gave strict orders to use all means necessary to make the protests stop, thus sanctioning unrestricted violence.

According to the Viasna Human Rights Center, an independent monitoring group (<http://spring96.org/en>), as of 15 November, **25,800 persons had been detained; on 15 November alone, 1,127 persons were detained. Approximately 24,000 of those detained had been sentenced to short prison terms («administrative arrests») for up to 15 days and/or fined.** The state has initiated approximately **900 criminal cases against protestors.** Hundreds have already been tried and sentenced to years in prison.

More than four thousand (4,000) complaints about torture and other grave abuses by the police and prison staff have been filed. Not one was investigated. Lukashenka told the country’s

prosecutors on 9 September that, in times like these, **“We don’t care about the law.”**
(<https://nashaniva.by/?c=ar&i=258800&lang=ru>)

But as violence against peaceful demonstrators has increased, international attention has decreased, a vector that serves repression not only in Belarus, but in other autocratic lands as well. With the integrity of democracies, and indeed democracy itself on the line, robust support for the reform movement is of utmost urgency. **While Lithuania and Poland strongly support the Belarusian movement against the dictatorship, Western governments and the EU need to do more.**

Background: One Stolen Election Too Far

For 26 years, Belarus (population: 9.8 million) has been ruled with an iron fist by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who has kept many Soviet institutions (including the KGB) and an essentially Soviet economic system in place. For many years Belarus has had no forceful opposition, since those who could have threatened the president’s position have disappeared or been forced into exile in the late 1990s.

The country has been able to survive economically by maintaining strong ties with Russia, which has in effect subsidized Belarus’ economy and thus kept the president in power.

Elected in 1994, former state farm manager Lukashenka held a referendum in 1995, after which Soviet symbols were resurrected; Belarus is the only post-Soviet state that has kept the former Soviet flag and coat of arms. The referendum also effectively ensured that the national language, as during Soviet times, retained an inferior status vis-a-vis Russian.

In 1996, Lukashenka held a second, fraudulent referendum, which gave him literally unlimited, powers. Every official in government, the health system, the education and cultural institutions, in industry, military, police, and even the courts is appointed by Lukashenka, making him a bona-fide dictator. He openly refers to himself as the people's »Daddy,« to whom all are indebted. Lukashenka has built up a large security apparatus to repress freedom and change. The police, especially the riot police (OMON) and the internal security forces (the armed forces of the Ministry of the Interior) are very large in size and also armed and equipped as if the country were facing an imminent danger of a major civil war.

Lukashenka was reelected five times, each time claiming a larger percentage of the electorate than the previous one. In the run-up to the election on 9 August 2020, as expected, all potential serious competitors were sentenced to lengthy jail terms. But then these candidates' wives registered themselves as candidates, a strategy not seen as a serious threat to Lukashenka's continued rule, because the candidates were women.

In the event, the opposition rallied behind one candidate, Sviatlana Cihanouskaya. The day following the election, the Central Electoral Commission announced that Lukashenka had won with 80 percent of the votes, a Soviet-like margin, which only

reinforced the conviction of a majority that fair elections, and democracy itself, do not exist in Belarus.

Hundreds of thousands of voters, assisted by the »Golos« (Vote) website (<https://belarus2020.org/home>), which was able to produce statistically significant data, immediately reacted; large crowds, most of them women, took to the streets to protest this gross injustice, demanding Lukashenka's resignation, as well as fresh, honest elections.

Since that time, marches of similar size have shaken the capital city of Minsk. They have been mirrored in all towns and even villages. The largest protest march was on 23 August with approximately 250,000 people taking part (www.DW.com). Almost the same number was again achieved on 25 October (www.RFERL.org), the day after the president-elect, Sviatlana Cihanouskaya, presented the regime with an ultimatum to leave or face countrywide strikes and civil disobedience.

Numerous workers at large and small government owned industries went on strike, in spite of threats of dismissal and even criminal charges. These strikes, and also »work slow« or »work by the rules« actions, present a real danger to the regime, given its chronic economic weaknesses.

Unprecedented are the marches of senior citizens, with tens of thousands of participants, the marches of grandmothers, and those of women and girls. The latter, in order to avoid being beaten or detained, began walking in small numbers carrying flowers rather than traditional white-red-white flags or dresses in those colors.

Also remarkable were the marches of disabled persons and their caregivers. Disabled people (e.g. in wheelchairs) are a rare sight in Belarusian streets, but now they, too, wanted to do express their desire to live in a free society.

The OMON arrested hundreds of participants at the large Sunday marches, and kept them in police lockups and pre-trial detention facilities (SIZO). The first wave of prisoners were tortured and kept in inhuman conditions. They were beaten with batons and kicked with heavy boots, insulted and humiliated. They were kept in cells overfilled to 4-8 times their regular capacity, and denied drinking water and sanitary facilities. Their families were denied information about their whereabouts.

One of the most famous cases was that of a woman basketball player, Yelena Leuchanka. She was eventually released and described the conditions in the prison: 19 women in a six-cot cell were deprived of mattresses. The sewage was cut off. She had a chance to meet the warden and asked what the reason was for making the lives of the detainees miserable, and who had given that order. The warden replied that he had given the order himself, to make sure that the detainees for the future refrain from actions that would send them back to prison. (<https://charter97.org/ru/news/2020/10/31/399039/>)

Yet, the huge marches have continued unabated, while the number of arrests and detentions has increased. There were more and more »security« forces deployed in the streets. Most of them wear black SWAT uniforms with no identification marks. All wear balaclavas to mask their identity. Eventually, water

canons, some with orange-colored water, were employed. Scores of overfilled police busses took those arrested to the detention facilities, in which conditions have gradually worsened. Hundreds of relatives stood for hours on end in lines at the prison gate to give food and essential hygiene wares to their jailed loved ones.

All categories of citizens have protested in the streets. Many of those who held important functions in society like physicians, university professors, lawyers, journalists, musicians, and top athletes were detained. Their sin: having taken part in an »unauthorized mass event« or »carrying unauthorized symbols« (meaning the traditional white-red-white flag). Some have been even arrested for gathering in their court yards to listen to music and sing and dance.

For more information:

Dr. Aaron Rhodes, President, FOREF – aaronarhodes@gmail.com

Mr Peter Zoehrer, Executive Director, FOREF – office@foref-europe.org, Phone: +43 (0)6645238794

Mr. Willy Fautre, Director, HRWF – w.fautre@hrwf.org