

Testimony of Gulnoza Said
Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator
Committee to Protect Journalists

Hearing on “Democracy and Human Rights in Belarus”
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
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Let me begin by commending Co-chairs Jim McGovern and Chris Smith, and other members of the Commission, for holding this important hearing on the state of democracy and human rights in Belarus, and for inviting the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) to testify. My name is Gulnoza Said and I lead CPJ’s work in Europe and Central Asia. The Committee to Protect Journalists is an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide and defends the right of journalists to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal. CPJ protects the free flow of news and commentary by taking action wherever journalists are under threat. I will focus my testimony on the state of press freedom in Belarus.

Since becoming an independent nation in 1991, Belarus has been one of the most restrictive countries for journalists and media. Unfortunately, thirty years after its independence, the press freedom situation in Belarus last year grew even worse. In 2020, CPJ [documented](#) more attempts to limit press freedom than in previous years. This was primarily the result of the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 being an election year, which motivated authorities to tighten restrictions on the news the public could access.

Each December, CPJ publishes its [annual report](#) on imprisoned journalists. Interestingly, Belarus has not been featured in our annual reports for several years -- not because it is free and open, but because of the smart tactics authorities have used to suppress independent reporting. Law enforcement usually detains journalists before a protest or another prominent event, keeps them in detention for a few hours, and releases them -- sometimes after trying them on bogus charges and imposing significant fines. The fines can be so high that the journalists and their media outlets struggle to pay them off, which leaves them in financial crisis.

It is a simple and yet efficient way for the Belarusian authorities to prevent a journalist from getting to a protest site and reporting on it.

But in 2020, and especially as elections grew near, CPJ documented an increasing number of longer detentions of journalists.

The first such case happened in March 2020, when Belarusian authorities detained a journalist, [Siarhei Satsuk](#), over his reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. Authorities kept him in detention for 10 days and released him pending investigation only after the statement from CPJ and other organizations. It was the first time in several years that a journalist in Belarus was detained for more than a few hours.

Satsuk's case is one example of the broader trend. Since the summer of 2020, CPJ has documented various means the authorities have used to muzzle free reporting -- [detaining journalists, blocking websites, disrupting the internet, restricting distribution, revoking press credentials](#), and even [deporting](#) foreign correspondents. As a result, Belarusians and the world are further in the dark about ongoings in the country.

The contested presidential elections of August 9, 2020 did not change the dominant paradigm in the press freedom environment in Belarus. The authorities' approach -- of an iron fist towards critical media outlets -- has been used as long as Lukashenka has been in power. He has never tolerated any form of dissent or independent voices. Only one narrative is allowed -- the one that doesn't challenge his authority.

In fact, since the 2020 elections, Lukashenka's regime appears even more [determined](#) to suppress all critical reporting. This may be because authorities were scared of the scale of protests. It is true that the protests were unprecedented. Even journalists who have covered protests in previous elections told CPJ that they were surprised at the scale of protests and the determination of the Belarusian people to demand their rights to be respected.

But that's precisely why journalists needed to be there. Major events like protests surrounding elections must be covered and reported out to the public. The Lukashenka regime does not want that because it poses a threat to their power.

Because of this desire to crush independent reporting, when CPJ published its annual report on jailed journalists, Belarus was featured for the first time in several years, with [10 journalists](#) behind bars.

It should be noted that this does not necessarily reflect the whole picture. CPJ measures the number of the journalists in jail on December 1. But these numbers are constantly changing. Our partner organization in Belarus -- the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) -- has documented more than 400 detentions of journalists over the course of 2020. It continues to be a "revolving doors" situation: some journalists have been detained and released several times since August 9.

But some have not. The imprisonment of [Katsiaryna Andreyeva](#) and [Daria Chultsova](#) represents one such case. They [are serving](#) a two-year sentence for reporting on protests. They were detained in Minsk in November 2020 while reporting live from protests. They represent the first case where authorities have gone beyond sentencing journalists to administrative arrest, and started using criminal charges against them.

Recently, Katsiaryna's husband Ihar Ilyash, who is also a journalist, wrote on Facebook that on that day in November, Katsiaryna and Daria had a chance to leave, and escape the arrest. But they decided to stay because they believed in the importance of delivering truthful information to Belarusians.

Another such case is Katsiaryna Barysevich, a journalist from Tut.by, Belarus' largest media outlet. She is [serving](#) a six-month prison sentence because her reporting on the death of a protester Raman Bandarenka provided information Lukashenka didn't like.

Journalists and press freedom advocates from the Belarusian Association of Journalists and the Press Club are [facing serious charges](#) too. In January, authorities [arrested](#) at least five employees of the Press Club Belarus along with an independent journalist who had participated in an event at the Club under the guise of a tax evasion investigation.

So are journalists with the U.S. Congress-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). They told CPJ that their social media consultant Ihar Losik, who has been [in detention](#) since before the elections, is facing 15 years in jail.

Many journalists have been forced into exile in recent months. Some of them are trying to find ways -- and funding -- to continue their journalism from abroad. But there are also many who need time to recover from [sustained](#) physical injuries as well as emotional trauma.

Despite this grave situation, authorities persist in their attacks on press freedom. Just a few days ago, the upper house of the Belarusian parliament [adopted](#) a raft of legislation that will stifle press freedom even further. Among them are amendments that ban livestreaming from protests, and allow the government to block websites without court rulings. They are yet to be approved by the Constitutional court and signed by President Lukashenka, but they make it clear that authorities want to wipe out independent media and outlaw journalism.

We may also soon see Belarus replicating Russian government tactics and branding independent media outlets as foreign agents.

The ultimate goal is blanket censorship. The space for free reporting is shrinking day by day.

It's fair to say that as long as Lukashenka stays in power, we can expect to see even more long-term imprisonments of journalists, more closures of media outlets and press freedom organizations, and more journalists fleeing from prosecution.

But that's precisely why governments -- and especially the U.S, given its unique role in the world -- must take action. This includes a wide range of activities. In particular, we urge U.S. government authorities to:

- Engage all international bodies, such as the UN, to ensure maximum pressure on Belarusian authorities. The world must condemn attacks on the press and push back against them. Coordinated and united global action is important.
- Speak out. The Lantos Commission co-chairs' March 2021 [statement](#) on the case of Ihar Losik is a good example of what should be done any time a journalist comes under attack in Belarus. The Lukashenka regime must know that both the administration and members of Congress are paying attention.
- Ensure U.S. staff on the ground in Belarus are actively tracking and advocating on cases and other press freedom violations. Ambassador Julie Fisher's [meeting](#) with Belarusian journalists on World Press Freedom Day was welcome. It sends a clear signal that the U.S. is listening, and watching.
- Support journalists, especially those under threat. Journalists and media organizations in Belarus need help to pay for lawyers, to cover fines or buy new equipment to replace seized equipment so they can keep reporting. And when they need to flee Belarus due to threats against them, they benefit when they can receive a foreign visa quickly.
- Investigate. Belarusian authorities have used technologies purchased from companies based in developed democratic countries to block the internet and censor news. U.S. authorities should [investigate](#) such cases and ensure that surveillance and censorship are not done with the help of western technologies.
- Employ targeted sanctions against violators. In this case, the U.S. should ensure that the full range of sanctions -- whether [specific](#) to Belarus, or broader in nature like the Global Magnitsky Act -- are used against Lukashenka and other officials within his government responsible for press freedom violations. Such sanctions allow the U.S. to target violators without hurting the society on which they prey, and send a strong message that violations will not be tolerated.

Lastly, there is one more thing we here in the U.S. can do. And it is simple. One Belarusian journalist recently said that a single click on their content, a visit to their

website, a view of their video, or sharing of their work on social media helps them -- by showing them that their work is needed and valued.

Journalists in Belarus are working in one of the most restrictive press freedom environments in the world. It is imperative the U.S. do all it can to help them, and ensure Belarusians have access to independent, reliable information.

Thank you