



March 16, 2023

The Honorable Karl Nehammer
Chancellor of Austria

The Honorable Alexander Schallenberg
Federal Minister for European and International
Affairs of the Republic of Austria

Dear Chancellor and Federal Minister,

We, organizations, movements and initiatives representing the citizens of the Republic of Belarus, being united into “Belarus Democratic Forum”, are working to find a solution to release all political prisoners in Belarus.

As you are aware of, for the past three years more than fifty thousand people have been imprisoned for political reasons in Belarus. As of March 2023, there were more than 1 450 people on the list the Viasna Human Rights Centre keeps of Belarusian political prisoners, including the Sakharov Prize and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, courageous people who challenged Lukashenko in the 2020 presidential election Siarhei Tsikhanovsky, Viktor Babaryka, Maria Kalesnikava, Mikola Statkevich, etc. At least 2 900 people who have been convicted in politically motivated criminal cases. Among them are hundreds of journalists, trade union leaders, teachers, doctors, musicians, workers, students, and even elderly and disabled people are currently imprisoned in Belarus for political reasons. 215 print media outlets were shut down, and more than 1 000 NGOs have been liquidated in Belarus since 2020. Lukashenko continues to publicly threaten the abductions and elimination of political opponents in exile. The dictatorship in Belarus threatens the international community.

In past years Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly taken political hostages, and then bargained with Europe and the U.S., releasing people in exchange for the easing of sanctions or loans. This is a dead-end road.

There is a unique opportunity now to release all political prisoners and put an end the terror in Belarus. Everything depends on a will of democratic countries. The European Union, USA, UK can together issue a collective ultimatum to Lukashenko demanding the release of all political prisoners. If the political prisoners will not be released within a week, the borders of Belarus with the European Union must be closed to all freight trains.

The humanitarian disaster in Belarus requires an appropriate approach. It is necessary to forget about cash flows and business interests of certain individuals in a situation of humanitarian catastrophe and the real chance to save people. Otherwise, the European Union will show its helplessness in confronting the dictator Lukashenko, who has defied the international community.

We are grateful to the governments of Poland and Lithuania, which have already partially begun the procedure of closing the border for cargo. Alexander Lukashenko does not accept the language of diplomacy. It is necessary to talk to him exclusively in the language of ultimatums, which he

understands. In Nicaragua, 222 political prisoners were released in February, and about 22,000 protesters were pardoned in Iran in March. It became possible because of the principal stance of the international community.

We ask you to discuss the release of political prisoners in Belarus at the next EU summit.

We therefore urge you to:

1. Issue an ultimatum to Mr. Lukashenko to release all political prisoners, or else all cargo traffic from Belarus to EU countries must be blocked.
2. Take immediate and exhaustive measures to ensure the safety of hostages and, if necessary, arrange for their evacuation to safe countries.
3. Include the release of all political hostages in Belarus on the agenda of the next meeting of EU foreign ministers. Invite representatives of democratic forces in Belarus, including Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Veronika Tsepkalo, two of the famous "female trio" together with Maria Kalesnikava (in prison), who promised at the 2020 presidential election to release political prisoners and organize free and fair elections, and experienced diplomat and 2010 presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov and others, to speak at the meeting. Include the release of all political hostages in Belarus on the agenda of the next meeting of EU foreign ministers.

For our part, we are ready to provide all necessary support.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Valery Tsepkalo,

First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (1994-1997), Ambassador of Belarus to the United States (1997-2002), Director of the Belarusian High-Tech Park (2005-2017), Candidate for the Presidency of Belarus (2020) and other Candidates of the 2020 election who are now in prison as well as other participants of the Belarus Democratic Forum