



Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The situation in Belarus and the FCDO's response, HC 336

Tuesday 15 June 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 15 June 2021.

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Andrew Rosindell; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer; Claudia Webbe.

Questions 1-30

Witnesses

[I](#): Victoria Fedorova, Head of Legal Initiative, Belarusian Human Rights NGO, and Professor Philippe Joseph Sands QC, Professor of the Public Understanding of Law, Faculty of Laws at University College London, Samuel and Judith Pisar Visiting Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, and British and French Lawyer at Matrix Chambers.

[II](#): Dr Nigel Gould-Davies, Senior Fellow for Russia and Eurasia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and Andrius Kubilius MEP, Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs at the European Parliament.

[III](#): Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Leader of the Belarusian Opposition.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Victoria Fedorova and Professor Philippe Joseph Sands.

[Audio loss between 14:32 and 14:37.]

Q1 **Chair:** [Sound loss.] Are you worried about Roman Protasevich and his current detention?

Victoria Fedorova: Yes. We believe Roman Protasevich is a hostage of Lukashenka. It is not ethical to discuss or comment on what he says in interviews, because state propaganda used him for a third time to show some kind of—I can't even comment on those words. First of all, his girlfriend Sofia Sapega was detained with him and criminal charges were also brought against her. Secondly, the regime openly declared that the state will co-operate with the so-called law enforcement bodies of the unrecognised entity that is the Luhansk people's republic. Roman Protasevich is well aware that such interrogations or extradition are highly likely to be extrajudicial execution. I believe that he is under pressure through some kind of physical or psychological torture, so we cannot comment on his words.

Q2 **Chair:** Professor Sands, I remember when we had to do the mandatory laws of war training in the armed forces, one of the things we were constantly told was, "You're not allowed to film prisoners of war or use them for propaganda purposes." Surely it is a human rights violation to use a prisoner or detainee, as Roman Protasevich is, as an instrument of state propaganda.

Professor Sands: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all the Committee. It is significant that you are choosing to use this afternoon to put the spotlight on what is an important issue.

I have obviously followed Belarus for some time. I am the president of English PEN, and in that capacity I cannot say too much for reasons that I have explained to your colleagues and staff working on. English PEN has been in contact with many of the writers from PEN Belarus and is acutely aware of some of the things that are going on. A multitude of human rights violations are taking place in relation to what was effectively the hijacking of the plane, which was in gross violation of the International Civil Aviation Organisation—in particular, article 3 *bis*. That is effectively a kidnapping of a passenger on a civil airliner flying over a country. It is flatly prohibited. It violates numerous provisions of international law and it violates his rights and his partner's rights.

Ms Fedorova has described what is going on. As I mentioned to Jonathan Hibbert, I have just received this morning a letter from someone who is among the detainees, describing in graphic detail what it means to be held in one of these camps. We can come back and say a little bit more about that. These are serial violations of human rights that are taking place.

I just want to react to one thing that Ms Fedorova has said. It does seem to me that there is here a manifest violation of the 1984 convention



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against torture, which the United Kingdom has played a leading role in promulgating and in supporting. There are options available to a state party that wishes to put the spotlight on that issue. International human rights law is not so replete with opportunities of things to do, but there are possibilities and the British Government have been doing their bit in waving some of those possibilities around.

Q3 **Chair:** Perhaps we could build on that point. We were going to come to it, but now you have led into it. What are the legal options for the UK? What are the legal options for the European Union, and indeed for any other partners, to take actions against state officials or the leadership of the regime for kidnapping, a form of piracy and serious human rights violations?

Professor Sands: I take it we don't have three hours for a legal seminar on all the treaties and all the options.

Chair: I am afraid not, but we may ask you to write in afterwards.

Professor Sands: And I would be happy to do that.

Let's just talk briefly about two matters. One is the détournement—the grounding of the airliner in overflight. That would appear to give violations to the 1944 ICAO convention, and that is in train at the ICAO governing council, which is looking at that.

There are also options under various other conventions. Under the 1971 Montreal convention, you can't send false information from the ground to an aircraft causing it to change direction and threatening it. The facts are not yet clear, but there may also be options available under the 1970 convention on the suppression of aircraft in flight, known as the hijacking convention. That is a bit more complex.

One of the things to be aware of is that, in relation to the latter two examples, Belarus has opted out of the options for, if you like, judicial remedies. There may be a back door in through an obscure 1999 convention that Ukraine has used quite successfully against Russia in relation to certain events in the Donbas region. There are options, but they are not easily available.

The one that is more easily available and is the one that I would commend your Committee to think about is under the 1984 convention against torture, which has a provision on disputes concerning interpretation and application, which includes the responsibility of the head of state, of public officials and others. That convention has a provision which allows states to invoke dispute settlement—basically, arbitration. If parties can't agree on arbitration, the possibility exists of going to the International Court of Justice.

That is worth mentioning, because it has recently been invoked for the first time in that way by the Netherlands against Syria, in relation to certain allegations of torture in Syria. That is significant, because that is



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the first time that I am aware of, that a third state has invoked the protections of the torture convention in relation to its non-nationals.

You are aware, Mr Chair, that I am involved in another case that does a similar thing under the genocide convention. We are not here concerned with genocide. The Gambia has brought a case against Myanmar in relation to the mistreatment of the Rohingya. That was a first; that took place in 2019.

It seems that the door is gradually opening to the invocation of these international conventions. Of course, I read with very great interest the New Atlantic Charter, signed by President Biden and Prime Minister Johnson, which very fully and powerfully articulates the need to enforce and apply these instruments. There is a possibility there, going beyond sanctions and diplomatic pressure, if a country wants to open that door.

Chair: Okay, so there are options available. Perhaps I can pass on to Stewart McDonald, who wanted to come in on similar themes.

- Q4 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Professor, you've gone over my first two questions to you quite robustly. Let me put this to you, then. What would be the potential pitfalls of pursuing a legal remedy, thinking of some of the conventions and treaties that you mentioned?

Professor Sands: That—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Another three hours, I am guessing.

Professor Sands: No, I'll give it to you in three minutes or less.

When you are asked to advise on these cases, you look at the potential downsides. Of course, the one that is most significant is: would the bringing of action bring existing people at risk to even greater risk, and other people to even greater risk? That is not an area that I have expertise on. That is for Ms Fedorova and others, who can form a view on that.

I do know that the experience in the Rohingya case has been absolutely fascinating, because contrary to expectations, Myanmar, before the coup d'état, participated fully in the proceedings at the International Court of Justice. Remarkably, Aung San Suu Kyi herself turned up at the International Court of Justice to defend the military of Myanmar. I sat within a few feet of her—it was a remarkable experience. It has subsequently participated as the Court has imposed orders of reporting requirements. I think it can be said—I don't want to be too optimistic here—that the full extent of the horror has been toned down slightly, and there is now a great deal of public scrutiny. That is the upside.

For the downside, I would want to be reassured that no one is being exposed to greater risk because such an action is taken. That is really a question for Ms Fedorova and others, who are much better placed than I am.



Q5 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Ms Fedorova, perhaps you can speak to that issue. Is there a danger that if legal remedies are pursued, the people who would bear the brunt of this are people in Belarus, detained or otherwise?

Victoria Fedorova: First, I should say that at the national level, we don't have any remedies for victims of torture and victims of killings. We still, since August, don't have any open criminal cases.

The situation for civil society organisations, including human rights organisations, is very dangerous, of course. For example, in February, 90 searches were carried out on human rights organisations and human rights activists' and journalists' apartments in connection with some criminal cases. Now, six human rights defenders are in prison just because of their legitimate human rights activities. Many human rights defenders have faced such a level of repression that they have left the country. Since March, my organisation has faced an unprecedented level of repression just because we documented torture cases. Of course, it is quite dangerous, but we don't have any other means at the international level to have any possible mechanism to provide justice for Belarusian citizens.

For this reason, we welcome any initiatives of the international community—for example, a UN fact-finding mission and an international accountability platform for Belarus. Criminal cases under universal jurisdiction will be started in Lithuania and Germany. There is also a submission to the International Criminal Court regarding the persecution and deportation of people from Belarus, including President-elect Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Of course, for us it is the only hope for justice.

Chair: Claudia, you wanted to come in.

Q6 Claudia Webbe: This is a good opportunity for us to look at this issue very clearly, and thank you to the panellists who are going to present to us today and our witnesses here. I just wanted to ask a bit more about the human rights abuses. Perhaps I could ask this of Victoria: what is your assessment of the actions taken in the Human Rights Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights?

Victoria Fedorova: Thank you for this question. As I said earlier, we welcome any initiatives, and of course, it is very important that the Human Rights Council keeps Belarus on the top of the international agenda. But of course, let's be honest: we all understand that all of these mechanisms are quite advisory, and they cannot force the regime to respect human rights, to stop violence, or to have new elections. That is why what is now more important is real steps on political levels, economic sanctions, and criminal cases in different countries under universal jurisdiction, which can show those people who commit such crimes that they will be responsible for those crimes. But, of course, we welcome any initiatives, if we are talking about the Human Rights Council and also the Office of the High Commissioner.

Q7 Claudia Webbe: Do you think that the actions are sufficient? Do you think there is more that they could do?



Victoria Fedorova: I do not think that in accordance with international law, the Human Rights Council can do more. Of course, we know about the UN Security Council, but we cannot apply this mechanism because of Russia's support of Lukashenka. With this situation, let's be honest: some mechanisms are advisory or recommendational, and some have real power, but we cannot use them.

Q8 **Claudia Webbe:** What are your thoughts on any new action that the UN might be able to take, in terms of bringing pressure to bear on the regime and improving the human rights situation in Belarus?

Victoria Fedorova: First, I think this UN fact-finding mission is very important, to collect and preserve all evidence of these mass human rights violations. However, of course, if we are talking about dream measures, it is the creation of an international tribunal with a mandate to prosecute those who are responsible for these crimes—prosecution, and justice for the Belarusian people.

Q9 **Claudia Webbe:** Professor Sands, is there anything you want to add?

Professor Sands: I follow this discussion with great interest. I am with Victoria, in the sense that the moment you engender something that is more formally legal, you open all sorts of doors and possibilities. Curiously, it was the Spanish prosecutor's opening of an investigation of Senator Pinochet that led eventually to change in Chile and, of course, a new constitution adopted there or voted for very recently, a few weeks ago.

There is the catalytic effect that it has, and one of the things that we noticed in the Myanmar proceedings at the International Court—which were based very heavily on the work of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights—was that we would not have been able to bring that case without all of the material that had been gathered. Even though Victoria is right that that material does not catalyse immediate change, it provides a base to go to the next step, and that material produced by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was used in the proceedings at the International Court of Justice, which led to a remarkable unanimous decision of the International Court ordering injunctive measures, which to a very large extent Myanmar has complied with.

But the main thing that it has done is allow new information to emerge, which is really significant, including the individual responsibility of certain actors. The thing about the convention against torture is that it goes right to the very top, and the Pinochet case before the House of Lords, as it then was, established the proposition that there is no immunity even for a former head of state in relation to the crime of torture. So I am not starry-eyed about legal measures. They will not suddenly be the magic bullet that changes everything, but over time they can open doors. That is one of the reasons to think very seriously about them, alongside the diplomatic, political and economic—not alone, of course, but alongside.

Q10 **Chair:** Perhaps I can just ask a question about who our partners are. Who can we work with in the international community who would be



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willing partners in this? You mentioned The Gambia in Myanmar, and there are presumably others. You also mentioned the Netherlands in Syria. Are there natural partners for the UK to work with to bring such charges?

Professor Sands: One country that immediately comes to mind that is becoming increasingly active on this is Canada. It has a Foreign Minister right now who is extremely interested in these issues. They are joining with the Netherlands in intervening in the Rohingya case at the International Court. They have announced that publicly. European partners are extremely important, and if the Netherlands wants to join, that would be great. There is a solidarity in numbers and broadening it beyond. Right now, Australia is not so inclined in that direction. I would think it is also worth exploring with the new Administration in the United States who have placed the rule of law and the protection of fundamental human rights centre stage in their new foreign policy, at least for the next three to four years. Those are the kinds of partners to go for.

Also, in an ideal world—What was remarkable about The Gambia case was that The Gambia is an African country, very distant from Bangladesh and Myanmar, and it had a remarkable Minister of Justice and Attorney General who happened to visit the camps at Cox's Bazar. He was so appalled by what he saw that he persuaded his Government to bring proceedings. By coincidence, he had been a prosecutor at the Rwanda tribunal. So there is an opportunity to broaden the base, and I think that is a very useful way to think about this.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I am extremely grateful to both of you. As you rightly said, Professors Sands—I am sure the same is true of you, Ms Fedorova—we could have gone on for a lot longer. I hope you will forgive me, but we are going to move on to the second panel. If you have points that you feel we have overlooked or, as you are listening later, there are areas where you would like to add and don't get the chance to, I would personally be very grateful if you would drop us an email or write and let us know where we should look further. Thank you to both of you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Nigel Gould-Davies and Andrius Kubilius MEP.

Q11 **Chair:** We now move on to our next witnesses. Please introduce yourselves briefly for the record. Dr Gould-Davies first.

Dr Gould-Davies: I am Nigel Gould-Davies, senior fellow for Russia and Eurasia, and editor of *Strategic Survey* at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. I am also a former British ambassador to Belarus.

Andrius Kubilius MEP: I am Andrius Kubilius from Lithuania, which is in the neighbourhood of Belarus. I am now a Member of the European Parliament, leading Euronest in the Parliamentary Assembly and also the Eastern Partnership, including Belarus. I am also a rapporteur on Russia. Before that, in Lithuania I was in politics since 1990 and I was two times Prime Minister.



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Q12 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. May I start with you, Mr Kubilius, and ask what the implications are for Belarusian sovereignty that might arise from Russian support of the regime?

Andrius Kubilius MEP: That's what we're witnessing. All those meetings of Mr Lukashenka with President Putin in Sochi and somewhere else usually also touch upon the so-called creation of a union state. That is the whole dream of President Putin. Of course, from the other side, what we can see is that President Lukashenka survives only because of Putin's support, and that is what we need to raise as a very clear question. That was what we were seeking when we discussed a resolution in the European Parliament. President Putin's support to Lukashenka should be targeted by EU policy and EU sanctions, if that continues, because that is support to what we can call not only an authoritarian regime, but a terrorist regime, after the recent actions of Lukashenka when he hijacked the plane, and now when he is sending migrants to the Lithuanian border.

Secondly, we need to announce very clearly that if this crippling annexation of Belarus is continued by the criminal authorities, they will face sanctions in the same way that they faced sanctions after the Crimea occupation.

That is what we can do now. We also need to speak in very clear legal language that Lukashenka has no legitimacy and any agreements that he may be pushed by Putin to sign will not be legal.

Q13 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Dr Gould-Davies, do you have any thoughts?

Dr Gould-Davies: Yes. The Belarusian and Russian authorities are locked in a close and dysfunctional embrace. They have been for some time. In principle, they should be on very good terms, as should Putin and Lukashenka personally, because they are both leaders of authoritarian eastern Slavic regimes with no interest in western values or a better relationship with the west.

In practice, they have long been adversaries, and the main reason for that is that for Putin nothing is ever enough. He has not been content with the services that Lukashenka has provided for him in terms of keeping Belarus reliably anti-western. He has sought over recent years to turn Belarusian economic dependence on Russia into Russian political control, and that has been the story—that tussle—over at least the past decade.

Incidentally, it tells us something interesting about Russia that Putin has a terrible relationship with a country and a leader with whom he should naturally have a good relationship.

Lukashenka up till now has been largely successful in preventing Russia from extending its de facto reach over Belarus. There have been very difficult moments that the friction has created, but he has largely maintained the relationship broadly on his terms. From time to time, he has tilted or at least pretended to tilt towards the west, as a kind of counterbalance. That story was always oversold to the west. Lukashenka

never had any fundamental interest in more than tactical, limited and easily reversible improvements with the west.

What is different now is that even the pretence of that has been decisively dispelled, both by the appalling events within the country since last August, and by Belarus presenting itself as an international threat now, not only a threat to its own people, in the wake of the forcing down of the plane.

Lukashenka finds himself in a weaker position domestically and internationally than at any time since he became president in 1994. That is a situation that Russia is looking to exploit. There is more to say about that. That would include, for example, gaining air-basing rights within Belarus—a long-standing demand of Russia.

I think it is important not to be deceived by any argument that we should be soft in our response to the events in Belarus and Belarus's own actions, for fear that that might allow Russia to reel in Belarus. I think that is a false and broken logic.

- Q14 **Andrew Rosindell:** I am grateful to our panellists this afternoon. It is a tragic situation in Belarus. I went there myself in 1997, and things don't seem to have got any better. It seems to me that Belarus is becoming—or has become—nothing more than a satellite of the Russian Federation. What do our panellists feel that the international community should be doing to limit Russia's ability to continue to extend its influence over Belarus and Belarusian sovereignty? Are we doing enough, or have we just turned a blind eye to the issue?

Dr Gould-Davies: I would be a bit careful about describing Belarus as a mere satellite, which implies—at least to me—a relationship of full and compliant subordination to Russia. I don't think that is the case. I think that is what Russia aspires to, and it has fostered the kind of economic dependence that it hopes to turn into political influence. But Lukashenka has largely resisted that. When he has co-operated, it has been for quite specific ends, some of which should worry us, including security service co-operation between the KGB and the Russian FSB. Russia's game plan is more ambitious than the one they already have at the moment. They aspire to a much more comprehensive degree of control.

Ultimately, the best preventative for that situation is a Belarus that chooses its own Government. This, of course, is the overriding demand of the enormous national upsurge of protests and demands for change that we saw last August. A people with the right to choose how they are governed will want to decide for themselves what their foreign relations are, and not be dominated by any other. It has been wise and helpful that those who have led these protests have made clear that this is not about east or west—it is not a geopolitical matter, but a matter of, again, having the right to choose how they are governed. Any people that is free domestically will also want to be free internationally and to avoid subordination and satellite status.



Andrius Kubilius: If I may add a few sentences to a very good answer, I think that first of all we need to see the clear difference here in Belarus: what does it mean for Lukashenka, who is forced to be a subordinate to Putin, and what is the opinion of the Belarusian people? The Kremlin's strategy and tactics for Putin's goals are backfiring, like they backfired in Ukraine. After the Crimean occupation and military intervention in the eastern part of Ukraine, Putin lost the Ukrainian people, and that was what created a pro-western Ukrainian nation. If you look into opinion polls in Belarus, we can see the same.

At the very beginning, the leadership of what we call democratic Belarus—Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya—were avoiding speaking in geopolitical language. With Putin's support to Lukashenka over the months and all the atrocities and things like that, people in Belarus are starting to be much more negative at least towards Putin and the Kremlin and towards their support for Lukashenka.

Here in the European Parliament I was pleasantly surprised—I do not know where it will lead—that Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team started to speak openly about joining the so-called associated trio of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which have association agreements with the EU and so on. With his friendship with Lukashenka, Putin is pushing the Belarusian nation closer towards the European Union and European countries.

With his friendship with Lukashenka, Putin is pushing the Belarusian nation closer towards the European Union and European countries. Of course, that is not happening and the differences are not so clear for the moment, but nevertheless we can see that Putin is repeating the same mistake that he did with Ukraine.

Just to conclude, in some way I see some historical tendencies. Still we are facing Russia's last empire on the European continent, which is still going through some kind of long period of collapse and mentality change. New countries that belonged to the Soviet Union are leaving that influence, like Ukraine did and like Georgia in some way did, and Moldova is now leaving. Belarusian people want a change, and that is what perhaps in the future will diminish Kremlin influence on Belarus.

Q15 **Andrew Rosindell:** What is different about Belarus? When all the other countries in eastern and central Europe over the last 30 or so years have become free and democracy has gradually taken hold, why is Belarus so different from all the rest? Is it purely because of Lukashenko and his control over the system, or is there some difference with Belarus compared with the other countries in that part of Europe?

Andrius Kubilius: Very briefly, I don't know, despite our common history back in medieval times and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and so on. I am not a big specialist on the mentality and character, but you are absolutely right. Unfortunately, Belarus got this misfortune with Lukashenka, who established his authoritarian regime in quite an effective way. Secondly, the Belarusian people suffered very heavily during the second world war, and a quarter of the nation was destroyed.



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Lastly, Belarusian people are some way from their character. We saw it during big protest events last year. They are very loyal. I don't know if you have seen pictures or photos from the protest meetings in Minsk. When they wanted to see what was happening, they were standing on benches. They were removing their shoes to stand on the bench and to see what was happening. Loyalty is one of their mentality features, but I see that the Lukashenka regime lost the loyalty of the people, and Belarusian people were clear. We saw before everything started that more than 60% demanded big change. We can ask ourselves what was the reason why people lost this loyalty to the Lukashenka regime. Perhaps it was the economy, social symptoms and similar things. But, once they moved, they moved in a very effective way, and we saw the protests.

Dr Gould-Davies: If I may add to that, first to Andrius's earlier point, I entirely agree and I would put it this way: the Belarusian opposition made it clear that they wanted a good relationship with Russia, but Putin made it equally clear that he did not want a good relationship with a free Belarus.

On the matter of why Belarus has not followed the rest of Europe, and why it is the last unfree part of the continent, it is worth remembering that there was a moment—more than a moment—of freedom in the 1980s and early '90s. That great upsurge of change also took hold of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, as it was. Indeed, it was in Belarus that the agreement to dissolve the Soviet Union was signed in Belavezhszkaya Pushcha. It was on that transition path until 1994, when Lukashenka took office in the first and only free election he has conducted. Very briefly, the path back towards harsh authoritarianism was a consequence both of his own cunning and his extreme lethal ruthlessness, particularly in ordering the killings of some key individuals in the late '90s.

Since then, there have been two factors. One is his control of elites. This is an exceptionally personalistic regime, even by the standards of authoritarian systems. There are no party structures or anything like that to incubate factions. Lukashenka moves the members of his core elite around regularly. He has done that even since last August. Secondly, Russia's financial support and subsidy has managed to stave off a crisis in this still substantially unreformed economy. It is those two factors that have enabled him until now.

I entirely agree with Andrius that Lukashenka has lost legitimacy and will never regain it.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed to both of you.

Q16 **Royston Smith:** Can I touch on the international community, please? Has pressure from multilateral organisations influenced the behaviour of President Lukashenko or any of the Belarusian elites?

Andrius Kubilius: Belarus is very isolated from all the different international organisations. There is really quite a limited possibility to use those international organisations to push Lukashenka and his elite to do anything. They are not members of the Council of Europe. Of course, they



are members of the United Nations and the OSCE, but both those organisations also have Russia as a member, which perhaps makes them not so effective in resolving the issue.

That is why I think that in looking for a solution to get out of this crisis, we first of all need to look not only to Lukashenka, but to President Putin and how we can put pressure on him or make convincing arguments to him to abandon Lukashenka. If we look at it more strategically, Putin's support for Lukashenka is playing against the Kremlin's interests in the longer term.

The second problem is not so much to do with the international organisations, and this is perhaps where Great Britain can play a more important role. What I see as an issue—I spoke about this openly about in the Parliament here in Brussels—is the lack of leadership from the western community. I cannot name anybody who is taking any kind of personal leadership, either in the EU institutions or in the leadership of member states. Who is looking at how to resolve this Belarusian crisis?

From my experience and understanding of how other international problems were resolved, that is one of the challenges that we still do not have clear ideas how to move forward on. The Gambia case against Myanmar has been mentioned, for example. The personal name of the Justice Minister was mentioned, and so on. I cannot mention anybody when I speak about Belarus and how to resolve that crisis.

In addition, the European Parliament has proposed that one solution could be to organise a special high-level international conference to find proper instruments to resolve the crisis. But for the time being, because there is a lack of this leadership, and knowing British experience and the fact that now you are free from any European regulations, maybe you can take that job and that responsibility now, and help the Belarusian people to get out of this crisis.

Q17 **Royston Smith:** Dr Gould-Davies, do you want to add anything to that?

Dr Gould-Davies: Yes. I will make the general point that international pressure, at least until last August, has generally been fairly limited. Yes, there have been episodes when western countries have imposed sanctions, and there has been a more or less predictable rhythm over the years: there is repression in Belarus, with political prisoners and so on; the west imposes sanctions; Lukashenka then begins to release the political prisoners; sanctions are eased again and so on and so on. It is almost a kind of mechanism.

But those sanctions have typically been limited, personal and individual in nature. They have not targeted institutions or financial flows to any significant degree. There are clear ways in which sanctions could escalate significantly, and of course now we are in a situation where the reasons for doing so are new. It is a matter of sanctioning not only the way that the Belarusian authorities treat their own citizens, but Belarus's international behaviour.



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I want to emphasise that in recent weeks, it is not only the forcing down of the Ryanair jet; there are a number of other very deliberate and specific things that the Belarusian authorities have done to its three immediate EU neighbours, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, to make their life more difficult, in addition to that Ryanair event. They are escalating the amount of trouble and difficulty they are causing for the west.

Royston Smith: Thank you—excellent answers from both of you.

Chair: Thank you very much, Royston. Graham, you wanted to come in with some more questions connected to the European Union; now would be the time.

Q18 **Graham Stringer:** Yes. Those answers lead nicely into the questions I was going to ask. Mr Kubilius, you have partly answered this, but what is your assessment of the EU's response to the situation in Belarus? Have some members of the EU been more active than others, and, if so, which are they?

Andrius Kubilius: Thank you for the question. Of course, we the neighbours are more active than some other countries. Lithuania and Poland are very active, and so are the other Baltic states, since we are neighbours of Belarus. Lithuania and Poland had a common history at times, so there are some feelings of solidarity that come from that.

Of course, for us Belarusian developments and the hope that Belarus can come back to democracy is an issue of national security, because to have a democratic neighbour and not to be a country whose capital is 30 km from an authoritarian country led by Lukashenka is our dream. That is what motivates us to support Belarus, to help the Belarusian opposition and to have Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team in Vilnius. That is what we are doing. As members of the European Parliament and other European institutions, we are also trying to push an agenda for how the EU could be more effective in trying to resolve this crisis and to bring back to the Belarusian people what Lukashenka has stolen—free elections and the possibility of choice.

Now, on the EU response, I would not be very critical, but I would be a little bit critical. First, I do not see real leadership. I cannot name anybody who is spending time 24/7 on the Belarusian crisis. I praised the Council President Charles Michel when he took personal leadership to resolve a much smaller political crisis in Georgia. I don't know if you were following that, but that was some issue.

Now it is time for Charles Michel to take leadership to try to find a way to help resolve the Belarusian crisis. For the time being, things are not moving. Maybe, with the hijacking of the plane, the whole situation is moving from what I call the authoritarian behaviour of the Lukashenka regime towards what we can call terrorist behaviour. That is a wake-up call for the EU also.

The talks about much more painful economic sanctions are going on. As we understand it, the EU institutions are also negotiating with the US



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Administration on those sanctions. Those sanctions could be really very painful on industry, such as the refineries, potash industries and so on—those state-owned industries that are bringing in revenue to Lukashenka. I hope that that will really bring change to the whole situation.

Q19 **Graham Stringer:** I will have to go after this question—I apologise for that. Thank you for your interesting answer. I will try to wrap up my last two questions in one.

You have mentioned sanctions as a way of putting pressure on Belarus. Is there anything beyond sanctions that the EU and other states can do? Is the real division within the EU, which stops a more united and energetic response, really about geographic location—you said about the Baltic states, and there is Germany's future dependence on Nord Stream 2? Is that the division within the EU?

Andrius Kubilius: I would not say that there is a very big division. I would speak more about the fact that, unfortunately, we as democracies, as the European Union, are facing the challenge of what to do when in our neighbourhood we are facing an autocracy that is really moving into a terrorist regime, and all the instruments we have are sanctions, personal or economic, or nothing. It would be very good, as we heard before, to have, for example, some kind of international tribunal established, sooner rather than later. When we look back into history, usually tribunals are established when regimes have collapsed.

We do not have a lot of instruments to change the situation. When I was speaking about leadership, it is not that somebody is opposing leadership. It is simply that nobody is moving into that leadership position. We need some brave Ministers or Prime Ministers or leaders of institutions. Those who will take the leadership will face clear challenge. There are no easy instruments to change the whole situation and to resolve the problem. We need to find a way to convince them, to convince Putin. We know that this is not an easy task.

Dr Gould-Davies: I think the most difficult moment for the EU in applying sanctions to Belarus was the temporary decision of Cyprus to stall it because of its own desire to get EU support on an unrelated issue concerning Turkey. There is the whole question of the consensus principle of the EU, and the extent to which that hinders things sometimes. That apart, I have been impressed by the strength, emphatic nature and speed of the EU response, at least rhetorically, but there is a need, I think, for all outside parties concerned about Belarus to escalate their measures now.

On what other things can be done, I think this requires a complex approach. Part of the answer is sanctions. Part of it is support for civil society, difficult though that is in this extremely repressive environment. The international accountability board, which the FCDO helped set up, is a welcome development. Medical support for trauma victims who have been forced out of the country is also welcome and important. Finally, there are the things on the home front. This is territory familiar to connoisseurs of the "Russia" report, and it also applies to Belarus. Hindering the use of the



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UK to launder money and to facilitate financial flows and the assets of those who support the regime is very important as well. To go back to a Russia analogy, the co-ordinated expulsion of KGB officers from Belarusian embassies would be an important step that we should consider taking with partners, too.

Graham Stringer: That's really helpful; thank you.

Q20 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. You both have different experiences of sanctions regimes, and I would like to follow up the last question for you both by asking how we could make sanctions on individuals more effective? Is that possible or, indeed, desirable? Dr Gould-Davies, do you want to start? And then we will go to Mr Kubilius.

Dr Gould-Davies: Individual sanctions can be extended to a wider number of individuals. Beyond that, it's not clear how much more effective they can be. It is the moment to think about moving beyond individual sanctions. They are smart and targeted, yes, but if you have a situation where Lukashenka really dominates the elites, there is a limit to the impact that they will have. That said, trying to persuade a critical section of the elite that its future does not lie with the status quo is very important and, ultimately, significant change will require that, I think. But more broadly, I think it's a matter of looking at institutional sanctions as well. It's a case of looking more systematically at how we can target how the regime works, not only individuals within it. What about the repressive security structures and the enablers—the implementers, brutally, on the streets? The Belarusians call them "cosmonauts" because of their helmets, visors and so on. Why not be more ambitious in our aspirations?

Andrius Kubilius: I agree absolutely. Personal sanctions are definitely important. We have now the Europe-wide Magnitsky Act to sanction those who are violating human rights, but I am not so sure what the impact is of those personal sanctions, and how much they can change the regime's behaviour. Maybe experts can investigate that. Also, at EU level at least, I see a problem with how those sanctions are made and implemented. It's really quite a bureaucratic business. We are looking at how to make that much more speedy and effective, and maybe even having some kind of automaticity in initiating sanctions. Those who are committing crimes need to know for what crimes they will be sanctioned immediately.

Then, of course, in the EU there is the problem that, as with everything in foreign affairs, you need to have unanimous agreement, and sometimes it is not an easy task to achieve that. As was mentioned, Cyprus, for example, was asking for sanctions on Turkey, and it was for some time delaying sanctions on Belarus. That is how things are here in Brussels. But I think that personal sanctions should be at least targeted at much wider numbers of those who commit crimes in Belarus.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, both of you, for your time. I am extremely grateful for your insights and your perspectives. As I said to the previous panellists, if there are things you think that we should add, or points that you wish to correct or make, please feel free to write to us.



Examination of witness

Witness: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

Q21 **Chair:** Good afternoon, Ms Tsikhanouskaya. It is a huge pleasure to have you here, virtually anyway, in the British Parliament, and to welcome you to speak to us today. It is extremely kind of you to give us the time. Can you briefly introduce yourself for the record?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Hello, everyone. It is an honour to be with you for the discussion and questions; thank you. I am Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and I am the leader of democratic Belarus.

Q22 **Chair:** We all watched with horror last year when the elections in Belarus were so viciously stolen by the current incumbent, the current leader of the regime—we don't use the term "President"—in Minsk. Can you give us an update on what has been going on since the protests that we saw on the streets over the past few months? What impact is that having on the Belarus regime, and how is it responding?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Last summer, the Belarusian people showed the regime that we are not ready to stay with the dictator anymore. People said a definite no to the regime. After further interactions, they went out on to the streets to protest peacefully against stolen votes. The regime answered with cruelty, brutality and torture. Since August, more than 35,000 people have been detained in Belarus. At the moment, there are 481 political prisoners, and this number is growing every day.

Now there are no organised demonstrations on the street, only because of the violence and torture, not because people just decided not to continue. The detentions are continuing, and about 1,000 people are being detained every month. People are scared to be in their houses or on the streets because they can be kidnapped at any moment. They always have to think about who, if they are kidnapped, will be with their children or take care of their old parents. People are frightened, scared and always under stress.

In Belarus, borders are closed and it is very difficult to escape from persecutors, but despite all the violence and the brutality of the regime, people are not giving up. People are continuing to fight. People have to be more creative in the fight. We have a very small window of opportunity for people to struggle to fight back. People use every inch of this opportunity to continue this uprising.

A lot of initiatives are arising in Belarus. For example, workers are organised in strike committees. They launched a labour movement, where all those who do not agree with the regime are gathering; workers are prepared for a national rights strike at the appropriate moment.

Also, there is BYPOL, through which law enforcement people who have come over to our side but are still in the regime give us inside information—documents, videos or audio recordings. They are telling us about moves inside the regime.



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We have a very wide range of volunteers who spread samizdat to those regions that don't have access to the internet, or to old people, to show them the reality and all the atrocities of the regime, because propaganda works so well. They show fake things on TV, and our old generation watch it. We need to open their eyes.

Also, there is a system of local communities—so-called neighbourhoods—that are going out for small rallies and putting up flags and symbols to show that we are still here, that we have not given up, and that we are continuing to fight. Everything irritates the regime. They are scared of all those people; they want everybody to be silenced, which is why so many are imprisoned every day.

It is very difficult to be on the ground. We see that the regime is escalating their violence. We saw the evidence of this when Lukashenka and his cronies hijacked this plane to kidnap a journalist and his girlfriend, and we suppose that this action was because of a feeling of impunity. Lukashenka's strategy is to show to the democratic countries that there are no more people who are fighting, that this uprising is over. Since December, there have been no sanctions on the regime. There were no conferences, roundtables or discussions about Belarus. That is why Lukashenka felt this impunity and crossed this red line, and now not only Belarusian people, but people from Europe are under threat. It is a difficult situation, but we do not have the right to stop, because we who continue to fight feel responsibility for those who are in jails, those who are suffering, and those who gave their lives and health to give us the opportunity to continue this uprising.

Q23 Chair: Thank you very much for that update; it is extremely welcome. Following up on that briefly, what is your view on what the UK is doing in terms of assistance? Is it helping? Is it not?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Since August, I have had two calls with Foreign Secretary Raab, and my office and I are engaging with the all-party parliamentary group on Belarus. We really appreciate the United Kingdom's refusal to accept the fraudulent results of the August 2020 presidential elections in Belarus, and we appreciate that the UK has sanctioned members of the Belarusian regime, including Alexander Lukashenka, for human rights violations in Belarus, as well as the UK having joined the EU sanction list. The UK has doubled its financial support to human rights groups, independent media and community groups in Belarus. Also, the UK Government has established the International Accountability Platform for Belarus. It is crucial to develop this platform and to help its effectiveness.

We are also thankful for the G7 countries' statement urging the punishment of those responsible for the Ryanair incident and the conduct of free and fair elections, but of course this is the highest moment, when all countries should unite and put more pressure on the regime. We have to use this moment, when all attention is turned to Belarus, to help the Belarusian people bring our country to new elections.



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First of all, on how to assist our fight, there are three pillars. The first pillar is pressure on the regime. Further sanctions are really welcomed. That is not my demand or—I don't know—the democratic leader's demand; it is the people's demand, because people are so tired of this regime. People are so scared that they want everything to end as soon as possible.

I urge you to impose new sanctions, and not only on civil aviation officials because of this Ryanair incident; they should also target those who support the Lukashenka regime, because this incident with the flight cannot be treated separately from the overall situation. Sanctions have to be implemented against the Belarusian state-owned enterprises fuelling the regime, including products of the petrochemical industry, first of all. Sanctions also have to be implemented against individuals who support and help to sustain the regime—businessmen and oligarchs. Belarus's sovereign debt can be sanctioned—primary or secondary. It is currently traded at the London Stock Exchange. It is also possible to send a signal to Russia that any agreements with the illegitimate Lukashenka might be recognised.

Our objective is to conduct free and fair elections this year, so together with its allies and partners, the UK could initiate a preliminary discussion in an international high-level political conference on resolving the crisis, and invite representatives of the Belarusian regime and Russia. We also want to keep up the momentum in informing the world about the situation in Belarus, and to consolidate the position of Belarus's friends in the EU, the US, Canada and the UK. The UK can keep bringing up Belarus in the UN and the OSCE. It is crucial that the UK brings up the Belarusian issue at the G20 summit in October. We believe that, after Brexit, the UK's role in international affairs has increased considerably. You can lead on the efforts to align a joint position on Belarus.

There is a risk of abuse of the mutual legal assistance with the UK by the current Belarusian authorities. To protect individuals in the UK, we urge you to suspend mutual legal assistance and block the regime from using Interpol and other international organisations.

The second pillar is support for civil society. You are already doing a lot, so just continue to support human rights defenders, media workers, students and medics in Belarus. It is essential to support people right now, because they are suffering a lot. One more thing that the UK can do separately is expand the coverage of Belarus by the BBC, and make sure enough resources are given to it—extra staff could be dedicated to Belarusian matters. One solution could be to create a Belarusian desk, for example, with dedicated staff members.

The third pillar is justice in Belarus. There is absolute lawlessness inside Belarus, so we have to look for law abroad at the moment. The UK can launch cases under universal jurisdiction, as Lithuania has done. Many other countries have tried; some have been successful and some have not. We need to continue to use every opportunity to collect evidence of crimes and try to investigate them further.



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Chair: Thank you very much indeed. You have covered a lot of ground there, for which we are extremely grateful. Stewart, did you want to come in? You wanted to cover a few questions.

Q24 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Thank you for joining us. I was going to call you the President-elect, but you call yourself the leader of democratic Belarus, so I will stick to that title. May I ask specifically about the European Union and the steps it has taken to support you and democracy in your home country? Which country has stood out for you as one that has given great support and shown real leadership within the EU?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Thank you. First, we really appreciated the very strong step after the fraudulent elections—the EU did not recognise the election results of Lukashenka’s presidency. It was very powerful and gave inspiration to Belarusians that we were on the right way.

Thank you for the adoption of three packages of sanctions after September, though I have to say that those packages were more moral than influential with the regime. We are also grateful for the comprehensive plan for the future of Belarus, because it is important to give a prospect for the future. We have so much negative news now—we are talking about sanctions and the suffering of people—but we have to show that after Lukashenka life will restart.

For 26 years, Lukashenka’s message has been that nobody needs Belarusians—“You are alone. Only I can defend you”—but it is not so. With this plan, the European Union showed it was interested in the new democratic Belarus and that you are ready to assist us in future. A big help was given to civil society, media, and small and medium-sized businesses, just to support the first steps.

We see that the regime is still keeping power thanks only to violence in Belarus. It is necessary to continue that assistance and even to widen it, because so many people are in jail and so many have had to flee the country, and the media is destroyed in Belarus. We have to recover all that stuff that was destroyed by the regime.

We now see that the regime does not understand diplomatic appeals. We demanded new elections through peaceful negotiation. We want to solve this crisis in a civilised way, peacefully and through dialogue. We prepared a platform for those negotiations. We were looking for mediators for them. We took so many steps to show that we were open to discussion, but we did not get any response from the regime, so we have said maybe the only leverage left now to put pressure on the regime is sanctions and political isolation.

That is why I have told people already that I am looking for the fourth list of sanctions. We hope that it will be wide and that personal sanctions will include judges, prosecutors, and those involved in atrocities and rigged elections, to show that it is immoral to stay with the regime. Economic sanctions are more powerful leverage, because that is a hit on the regime.



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Now, we have started to talk about sectoral sanctions—first, petrochemicals, potash, steel and wood—because those state-backed enterprises are monopolised by the regime and that would influence their attitude to the situation. We have experienced this before, and we remember that in the past only sanctions gave the opportunity to release all political prisoners and to stop violence. As we understand it, that will work now as well.

This package should be really big, because if the European Union does this in small groups, or step by step, the regime will get accustomed and adapt to all this—they will find ways to avoid the sanctions. We see now that all the diplomatic mechanisms do not work. We really do not see another way out. Propaganda sends the message that people will suffer and maybe we should not impose those sanctions, but people are already suffering, people are being fired from their jobs, people are prosecuted, people are forced to flee their country. There is no stability in Belarus. People are afraid. People really want strong steps from the European Union because we are looking at you.

We understand that the European Union, the UK of course, and the USA, are powerful countries. You really can do much more than you imagine, but you have to have a stable position. We want to urge countries not to trade political prisoners, because we have also had that experience when some political prisoners were released and the democratic countries lifted sanctions. Sanctions should be conditional now: release all political prisoners, stop violence and conduct new elections. It is as simple as that.

When the regime says, “Look, they are calling for sanctions”, yes, we are calling for sanctions because thousands of people are in jails. If the regime wants to avoid sanctions, it is easy to prevent all the consequences of them: just do what the European Union demands, do what the Belarusian people demand, and everything will stop and together we will start to build a new Belarus. It is as easy as that.

Q25 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: You have answered so many of the questions that I have here. On the Ryanair flight incident and the detention of Roman Protasevich and his partner, were you shocked by that? I was shocked by it; my fellow Committee members were shocked by it; the world was shocked by it. How shocked by it were you, or were you not shocked at all?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Of course I was shocked. First, I could not believe that because of the sense of revenge against one person, the regime managed to cause this international conflict. It was awful, the thought that one more person was in their hands. We are sure that Roman was tortured and humiliated physically and morally there.

I think it was a really big mistake by Lukashenka. I think that he is also scared by the situation, so he stopped thinking strategically and started to think emotionally. To kidnap one person, he caused this scandal. That drew attention to the Belarus question again. Lukashenka wanted



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everything just to stop, to stop discussions in the international arena, but he has again raised the question of Belarus.

Moreover, I could also have been the person who they kidnapped, because a week before that flight, I flew to Vilnius with the same flight, so we really do not feel safe at the moment—no activists, no one in Belarus, and no one abroad. We could not imagine that it would happen in the 21st century.

Q26 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: When you say that no one feels safe when they are abroad, does that include you and your team?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Yes, we do not feel safe, but I have to say that I have not felt safe since the day I gave documents to the central election commission. Of course, we do not know how long the arms of the regime are. We see that they use Interpol, which they ask to extradite people from other countries. Again, we have to urge countries not to let a regime misuse Interpol in this persecution.

Chair: There are clearly several follow-ups, but Henry, you wanted to come in on various areas. Why don't you come in now?

Q27 Henry Smith: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you for joining us today; your evidence is very valuable indeed and much appreciated. Obviously, Lukashenka is increasingly looking towards Moscow. I would be grateful for your perspective on how this may be further trying to pull Belarus away from the European sphere of influence and indeed further taking away what influence and power the people of Belarus have as an independent nation. What sort of relations does democratic Belarus have with Russia as well? Is there any solidarity there at all?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: The Russian people support the Belarusians in this fight. The Kremlin from the beginning supported Lukashenka, but I personally think that it happened because the Kremlin did not expect such a huge uprising of the Belarusian people. Nobody was ready for this. That is why at the beginning they supported, and continue to support, Lukashenka on a diplomatic level, which means that the Kremlin is supporting violence and atrocities in Belarus.

We are really sorry for this, because a democratic Belarus for sure will be a reliable partner of Russia, and we want a clear and transparent trade relationship with Russia in future. We have tried many times to contact representatives of the Kremlin since August. Our attempts failed, but we started to send open messages to Russia that our fight is not geopolitical. It is not about the relationship between Belarus and Russia; it is only about the regime. We are not anti-Russian; we are anti-dictatorship.

Now we do not have any official communication with representatives of the Kremlin, but we have tried many times to send messages through leaders of other countries. For example, Mr Kurz called Mr Putin a couple of times and raised the question of Belarus. There were some more attempts, but there was no answer to them. I think that we have to start to communicate because it is evident that the crisis in Belarus is



deepening, and the only way out of this crisis is new elections. We would welcome Russia, the same as Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland—our neighbouring countries—and those who are interested in these negotiations, to a roundtable and discussions of the way out.

Q28 Chair: I am interested in the fact that you think that President Putin may have misjudged the response in Belarus and in Minsk. What did you take away from the photographs of him on his yacht outside Sochi with Lukashenko?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: I think that the President of Russia and the ex-President of Belarus have a rather interesting relationship. It is no secret that they are not real friends; they are only of use to each other. They have been in power for such a long time. They know how to communicate and how to trade with each other. All those pictures are very important for Lukashenka to show, "Look, we are communicating, we have wonderful relationships". But nobody believes in this, because nobody knows what is going on behind the curtains, or what they are undersigning, or what they are dealing about—I do not know.

People in Belarus, in the European Union and in the UK say that our sovereignty is under threat, because, for diplomatic support from the Kremlin, Lukashenka will have to pay with something. And we are really afraid that he will pay with our enterprises and maybe even with our independence. But we always underline that our independence and sovereignty are not for trade, and we ask democratic countries—strong countries—to be our guarantors that all statements or deals that are undersigned between Belarus and any other country should be reviewed or cancelled until new elections, because Lukashenka is illegitimate. He cannot sign any documents on behalf of the Belarusian people.

Q29 Chair: Please forgive me; there is a Division bell going in the Commons at the moment. Ah, there we go—it's stopped.

Does your description of the difficult friendship between President Putin and Mr Lukashenko give you hope that whoever was to lead in Belarus would be able to manage a co-operative relationship with Moscow as well as a good relationship with European Union member states and others?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: I am sure that the new President of Belarus will manage to have a transparent and open trade relationship and political relationship with Russia. Russia will always be with us; they are our neighbours and 40% of our trade is with Russia. And Lukashenka will leave anyway, sooner or later.

Of course, Russia also understands this and the Kremlin has to look for opportunities to assist in this inner conflict if they can. We have to act in a civilised way. It is possible to work with each other, without interfering in the political issues of Belarus.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. You have covered so many areas in your answers that I feel we have been very lucky. I just want to see if anybody else wants to come in. There are two more. In that case,



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Claudia, over to you, and then I will come to you, Stuart.

Q30 Claudia Webbe: You have indeed covered a lot of ground and it is quite inspirational, actually, to listen to your input. It is on that notion of inspiration that I want to ask you this question. You have become the face of Belarus, of democracy and of opposition, at great risk to your own life. How safe is it for you now in terms of the leadership that you are portraying?

Secondly, you have said a lot about sanctions and about sanctions being a route forward, but what ultimately do you think will end the crisis that Belarus is in now? When and how do you think democracy will be achieved?

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: About my safety, I have already said that I have not felt safe since I gave documents to the election commission. I understand that my life is under threat, but I also understand that the lives of those thousands of people in jail in Belarus, and millions more in Belarus, are under threat, and I cannot betray all those who cannot fight any more because they are behind bars.

They sacrificed their health and freedom to give me and millions of people the opportunity to fight further, and we have to use this opportunity to think about not only ourselves, but, first, those who are already in jail. They do not have a way out. They do not have the opportunity to fight, so we have to fight. Even when I feel unsafe, even when I am tired and even when I am ill, I think, "Not now. Move forward to rescue those people."

What will bring us to democracy? First, we have to stay on our peaceful level. We do not have to stoop to the regime's level of violence. People now understand what democracy is. Democracy is responsibility, and now everybody feels that they owe responsibility for those who are behind bars, for new elections, for negotiations, and for doing even small things that will bring us to new elections. That is already democracy. Having experienced what we went through during this difficult fight—and nobody knows what other difficulties we will face in the future—people will study how to live in a democracy very quickly. We are sure that, after new elections, people will value the price we paid for this and do everything possible to develop in a democratic way. Democracy needs to be studied. We lived for 26 years under a dictatorship, when one person told us what to do, and we have maybe lost the understanding that we have to participate in the life of the country by ourselves. It is our responsibility. New elections are a real way to have democratic change in Belarus.

Claudia Webbe: Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you very much, Ms Tsikhanouskaya. I am extremely grateful for your time this afternoon. I hope it is clear to you that the democratic parties that are arguing for the freedom of Belarus enjoy very great support in the Parliament here in the United Kingdom, and you also enjoy very great support from us. I am sure that we will follow this closely in coming weeks and months, and we are looking forward to the day when Mr Lukashenko will leave the presidential office that he now occupies



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illegally as a squatter. We hope very much that you will come back to us after new and fair elections—perhaps successful elections for you, but that is up to the people of Belarus; it is not up to us. Thank you very much indeed for your time this afternoon. I am very grateful indeed.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya: Thank you very much. Do not forget how powerful the UK is and how strong your voice is. Do not forget about this. Thank you for your support and assistance.