

United States Senate

Committee on Foreign Relations

Hearing:

**CRACKDOWN IN BELARUS: RESPONDING
TO THE LUKASHENKO REGIME**

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Madam Chairperson, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to share my experience of the political and social upheaval surrounding the recent fraudulent presidential elections in my country, Belarus. With your permission, I would like to present my story.

My name is Natalia Koliada. I am a Director of the Belarus Free Theatre. I believe that in order to present a complete picture of what is happening in Belarus, I should start with a history of our theater itself, an independent creative company which has become a pariah in its own country.

Our theater

My husband Nikolai Khalezin and I created the theater in spring of 2005. A month later, after a director Vladimir Scherban jointed us, we were able to release the first show, "Psychosis 4.48" based on a play by British playwright Sarah Kane. Even the first performance provoked a squall of discontent on behalf of the power structures, and the next show, "Breathing Technique in a Vacuum" based on a play by Russian playwright Natalia Moshina, led to the prohibition of the theater. In the first months of our existence, we could rent small clubs for the performances. Later, when the theater became known to intelligence agencies and the presidential administration, our managers were visiting on average 30-40 different public spaces, offering to perform for free, but they were rejected every time.

Exercising our right to freedom of expression, we began to show performances underground, using every opportunity. We presented them in the guise of private parties and birthdays in cafes or in private homes, and even under the guise of weddings at a farm in the forest.

The result was that the professional theater company has become a pariah, and members of the troupe

throughout the six years of the theater's existence experienced all possible types of repression: expulsion from the universities, dismissal from their job, denial of residency, beatings, arrests, prison time, and psychological pressure on members of the troupe and the audience. Three members of the group were imprisoned, and everyone has been arrested. One of the most heinous cases occurred in August 2007, when the entire troupe was arrested along with the audience - more than 60 people. Then the mass repression was avoided only through the intervention of international celebrities: British playwright Sir Tom Stoppard and Nobel Laureate Harold Pinter, along with a rapid response of the leading world media.

Pressure on the theater grew in proportion as the company became popular abroad. We presented performances on four continents, traveled more than two dozen countries on tour, receiving brilliant critique in the world's leading publications. But at home in Belarus, we still showed performances in secret: we were not allowed to register the theater officially, rent space, nor sell tickets. The regime continued to pressure not only actors and managers of the theater, but resorted to pressure spectators and family members of the troupe.

In the year preceding the 2010 presidential election, many European politicians were taking president Alexander Lukashenko's claims of liberalization seriously. We have not experienced for a single day of this most notorious "liberalization" ourselves. The pressure on the theater changed its forms, but it has not slackened or faltered for a moment, being amplified after each great success abroad. Talks on the liberalization and flirting with the dictator led to a wave of terror that began on December 19, 2010 and continuing until now.

December 19, 2010

The morning of Election Day did not herald the bloody outcome, which occurred later in the evening. The authorities cornered about 20% of voters on a preliminary vote and all bulletins of those who had voted before the official Election Day were enrolled in Lukashenko's advantage. At 4 p.m. the first exit poll data began to appear. Based on that information it became clear that Alexander Lukashenko gained no more than 32% of the votes whereas the share of the remaining eight candidates had more than 43%. Knowing the Belarusian political situation in which the overflow of the votes from opposition candidates to the dictator is impossible, and taking into account the fact that among the opposition candidates the majority of the votes were distributed between two leaders - Andrei Sannikov and Vladimir Neklyayev - it was easy to understand that the reality of the second round of elections would become absolutely obvious, in which a Democratic candidate would undoubtedly win.

Based on the exit poll data and information from a number of polling stations, the indicative results of the first round of the presidential elections were as follows: Alexander Lukashenko gained 33-40%; Andrei Sannikov - 23-25%. In the second round of voting Sannikov would receive votes from his colleagues in the Democratic opposition - Vladimir Neklyayev (about 12-15%), Yaroslav Romanchuk (10%) and other opposition candidates (about 5-7%). Most likely, the realization of his imminent defeat prompted Lukashenko to radical actions against peaceful demonstrators who had gathered in that evening in the center of Minsk in order to hear the final figures of the results of the presidential elections.

By 8 p.m. at the October Square in Minsk there were about 50 thousand people. They were people of different ages belonging to different social groups. Many came as entire families – even with young children. For the first time in the last ten years, so many people took to the streets. It was a peaceful demonstration – there were no aggressive or intoxicated people in the crowd; any provocations by dressed in plain clothes security officers were stopped by the protesters. On the Square a rally with the presidential candidates, heads of their staffs, and

culture figures took place.

There at the square, it became known that half an hour before the rally security forces attacked a group of members of the headquarters of a presidential candidate Vladimir Neklyayev. The attack was carried out with firearms and light stun grenades. The attackers seized a set of sound-amplifying equipment and took away part of the video and photography equipment from journalists present there. Nyaklyayev himself was brutally beaten, and after the attackers withdrew, he, being unconscious, was moved back into the candidate's headquarters.

After the meeting ended at the square, the demonstrators marched to Independence Square, where the Central Election Commission was located at the Government Building. When about 50-60 thousand people came to the square the final results of the presidential elections, announced by the Central Election Commission, became known. According to the authorities, Alexander Lukashenko had scored more than 79% of the votes.

It was clear that the dictator would not part with his power, even if nobody voted for him.

The rally at the square continued - one presidential candidate after another gave a speech during which they declared their opposition to the fraudulent results that had been announced by the Central Election Commission. At some point, there was a sound of breaking glass – a few unknown people tried to break the glass door in the building that housed the Central Election Commission. Demonstrators surrounded the area close to the doors, and did not let anyone to approach them. Presidential candidate Vitali Rymashevsky, getting to the microphone, announced that it was a provocation of the intelligence services, but suddenly another group of sports-dressed young people appeared there and continued even more actively smashing the glass doors of the Government Building. Only a few days later, with the active help of bloggers, journalists, and, thanks to leaks from law enforcement of audio conversations between special security services, people managed to reconstruct the event completely, and with absolute certainty to establish that the destructions of the doors of the Government Building had been staged by the secret service. Today, all the relevant audio communications can be found publicly on the Internet.

From the audio communications of special services it became clear that the breaking of glass in the door of the building was the signal for the use of the force against peaceful demonstrators. A few minutes later, after the raid leaders ordered the sweep, the area was filled with about 7-10 thousand troops. It consisted of different groups of armed men: from organized riot squads to semi-criminal groups without any recognizable insignia, dressed in black clothes. These groups are part of semi-legal armed forces, carrying out special assignments of the presidential structures. They behaved horribly, screaming obscenities and furiously smashing and brutally beating the peaceful demonstrators.

My husband and I were close, but when a company of riot police struck at the crowd, we became separated on different sides of armed men. I, along with a small group of protesters was shoved aside to a waiting paddy wagon, and we were pushed inside of it. We, the first few people, were more fortunate than others - we mostly avoid the beatings. Riot policemen initially only gave orders, interspersing them with foul language: "Lie on the floor!", "Do not move!", "One move and I'll kill you!" The gentlest treatment was the word "animals." In the car there was absolute darkness. Gradually the paddy wagon was filled with the detained, and eventually 68 people were crammed inside, despite the fact that it is a metal shed measuring about 2 by 5 meters.

The car started to move around the city – the moving lasted about an hour, then we stayed in the car for another three hours. There was not enough air, there was no water and we weren't allowed to go to the toilet. A few

hours later after we arrived at a detention center, which was a jail, where political prisoners sentenced to short prison terms are usually taken; a few groups were convoyed to the toilet. To our question whether it was possible to drink somewhere, the guards replied: "Drink from the toilet." Threats and insults rained incessantly on us. That evening one of the guards told us: "Fascists will look like a fairy tale for you." It was true - it was unbearably difficult to stand the insults, beatings and humiliation for the young people, the vast majority of whom were in that situation for the first time in their life.

Throughout the night more than 600 people were arrested, including six presidential candidates. At the detention center they did not even take us to the cells. We were left standing in the hallways waiting for trials that were due to start in the morning. The guards continued psychological pressure, periodically giving the command: "Form up a file," "Face the wall," "Place your feet shoulder-width apart." It was senseless torture of people throughout the entire night.

December 20, 2010

In the morning they started to take us to the courts. They had to sentence more than 600 people, so all the courts of the city were overcrowded. Trials that were taking place one after another, sometimes took just a few minutes. Police officers were the witnesses, and all protocols were written in the same way: "was in the square," shouted the slogans," "violated the order." Insisting on the presence of a lawyer was futile. Without exception, all the trials were behind closed doors. Lawyers were not allowed in and even the relatives of the arrested could not find out where the trials on their loved ones had been taken place. In the most cases the sentences imposed were of two types - 10 or 15 days of imprisonment. In some cases, mostly for young women with small children younger than 12 years old, they were fined for 30 basic units (about \$400).

In my case a judge was about to pass sentence, but asked me: "Do you feel guilty?" I replied that I did not, and then the judge turned to me with the words "Anna Yegorovna..." I immediately responded to challenge the judge, because my name is Natalia Andreevna, and not Anna Yegorovna. It turned out that I was tried, not only without any witnesses, but also based on a charge-sheet which contained someone else's name. The conflict began to flare up, and the judge decided that the best solution was to stop it, and announced the sentence - a penalty.

The manager of our theater Artem Zheleznyak was not as lucky - he was sentenced to 11 days in jail after being arrested in the editorial office of the most influential independent socio-political website, Charter'97. He had accompanied the website editor-in-chief, Natalia Radina, to her office to help her with the translation of articles into English. Natalia was beaten so badly in the square she got a concussion. That night, the entire editorial staff, including Artem, was arrested. As he confessed to me, he had never experienced anything like that during his entire life. For almost three days he was either in a paddy wagon, or in "a glass" - a tiny concrete cell about 80 centimeters square; less than one square meter. And, above all, he was stuffed in with two other detainees in that tiny cell.

Many of those who had been sentenced for administrative arrest were immediately arrested by the KGB after their release and taken to a KGB jail. These people were charged under the article of the organization of mass disturbances, the maximum penalty for which is 15 years imprisonment.

My husband, Nikolai Khalezin, now is also charged under this article. When we were separated at the Square,

he managed to escape, picked up our youngest daughter, who was with friends, and got home. Early in the morning KGB officers tried to infiltrate into our house, but my husband, parents, and daughter stayed silent and gave no sign that anyone was there. KGB officers returned several times during the morning, but my husband managed to escape from the house.

What began to happen in Belarus on December 20, I would term a true “witch hunt.” Only about two dozens of political activists could escape from the secret service - all others were arrested. From the very morning the all-out searches of the apartments of social activists began, editorial offices of independent newspapers and websites were destroyed, human rights defenders were detained and interrogated. Almost everywhere computer equipment and any information media: flash memory cards, video and photo cameras, CD, DVD, external computer disks was confiscated.

Mobile phone operators provided the authorities with information on all subscribers who were present at the center of town in the evening of December 19. Based on these lists, they started calling in everyone for questioning in the State Security Committee. Queues for questioning by the KGB are still there, and searches and new arrests are continued without interruption. Today we are talking about tens of thousands of people who have been questioned and who will be called for questioning in the nearest future.

The country plunged into a deep depression, not knowing how to resist the total violence and absolute arbitrariness. At the same time, people increasingly began to show their public initiative to help the repressed and their families, disseminating information, creating new professional groups of influence.

Today

We managed to flee the country. On January 3, we were supposed to fly on a tour from Minsk to New York. As it turned out, secret services were waiting for the troupe at the airport, but we managed to escape from the country by other means, but on the very next day our apartments were searched. The main questions they asked our parents were, "Where are they?" and "How could they manage to leave the country?" From the interrogation of our parents, it became clear that my husband and I were incriminated under the same article as everyone else who is still imprisoned in the KGB jail: "organization of mass disturbances." Already three times KGB officers came to a house of Artem Zheleznyak's parents. They also actively search for the President of the "We Remember Foundation," Irina Krasovskaya.

Today number of imprisoned in the KGB jail constantly varies. Weekly the authorities arrest new people whom they impose the same absurd accusations. Lawyers are not allowed to see the suspects; they are deprived of medical care, and denied even the slightest access to information. To date, the lawyers cannot get to see their clients for 29 days.

Depriving prisoners of information and health treatment is the secret service tactic for pressuring them to confess to crimes which they did not commit. Not only do prisoners undergo this enormous pressure, but it extends to their relatives. On the day when I met with the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, intelligence officers in Minsk tried to win over the wife of Dmitry Bondarenko, coordinator of the "European Belarus" movement. She was offered to influence her husband so he would “begin to cooperate with the investigation, and then would receive a prison term much less than Sannikov.”

Vladimir Khalip, father of arrested journalist Irina Khalip and father-in-law of Andrei Sannikov, suffered over the past two weeks three operations on his eyes because of the sudden drop in vision. My father, a professor of elocution Andrew Koliada, now cannot practice his profession – because of the nervous system breakdown a spasm of the vocal cords occurred.

Belarus has now entered the third era in its most difficult stage of life, beginning a decade ago. In 1999-2000, Lukashenko eliminated opposition leaders using a "death squad." Then the militia under the command of Colonel Dmitri Pavlyuchenko kidnapped and killed opposition leaders - Deputy Speaker of the Parliament Viktor Gonchar, former Interior Minister Yuri Zakharenko, Anatoly Krasovski – a businessman who financed the democratic forces, and Gennady Karpenko - another Deputy Speaker of the Parliament and Head of the Congress of Democratic Forces also perished under mysterious circumstances.

Then there was 2006 - the year of the previous presidential election, when European politics essentially denied help to the democratic forces of Belarus. On the eve of the election, when was put to the question "Can the European Union put pressure on Lukashenko?" one of Europe's politicians replied, "Only if they start shooting in the streets."

On September 3, 2010 the journalist Oleg Bebenin, one of the leaders of the electoral headquarters of Andrei Sannikov, was found hanged at his country cottage. Ridiculously staged suicide would be one of the key elements in the upcoming election campaign. The killing led to an international investigation, but European politicians even then turned a blind eye to that death, limiting their intervention by the arrival of two experts to examine the documents offered by the Belarusian authorities.

Unfortunately, today the simple desire of Belarusians to get rid of dictatorship is not enough. Lukashenko has created a huge machine of repression, which has no analogues in Europe. We can resist it only by leaning on the help of those who are able to influence the last dictatorship of Europe from the outside.

Here in America we have many friends in theater. When those people heard about our problems, they, without even thinking twice, began to do everything to help Belarus: Steven Spielberg, Michael Douglas, Tony Kushner, Oskar Eustis, Kevin Kline, Stephen Spinella, Laurie Anderson, Lou Reed, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Olympia Dukakis, Jude Law, Kevin Spacey, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Jay Sanders, Ian McKellen... I can enumerate for a long time names of these tremendous and great people who rushed to our aid and embarked on the protection of political prisoners.

I have a dream that we will be able to pronounce with the same pride the names of American and European politicians who decide to help a country of ten million people that may not have oil or gas, mountains or a sea, but does have great people who live there.

Danik, a son of Andrei Sannikov and Irina Khalip, is only three years old now. His parents are in KGB prison only because they wished well for their fellow compatriots. They may only be released when Danik is 18 years old. It is in your power to make sure that this won't happen. Let's try!