

# THE TIMES

## Free the prisoners of Europe's last dictator

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By Andrei Sannikov

Exactly two years ago, I joined tens of thousands of my fellow Belarussians in Minsk to demand respect for our rights and, most importantly, our right to choose our own government. That day I had stood as a candidate in a presidential “election” against Alexander Lukashenko, widely known as Europe's last dictator.

Faced with the same kind of popular, non-violent movement that has felled so many despots this century, the regime's response was swift. In a scene that belongs to Europe's past, police moved in and attacked peaceful protesters. I was severely beaten and hundreds were arrested, including my wife and other presidential candidates.

I was thrown into the notorious Amerikanka prison, run by the security service that still calls itself the KGB. My knee had been smashed by the police, but the guards refused me treatment; my physical condition worsened as I was subjected to humiliating strip searches in freezing cells. The pressure continued as I was moved from prison to prison further to isolate me from the outside world.

Although most demonstrators were released within a few weeks, some of us — mostly journalists, activists and opposition candidates — were charged with inciting or participating in a riot. For exercising my rights, I was sentenced to five years in prison. But in April this year, after 16 months in jail, I was released and compelled to seek political asylum in the UK.

My wife, the journalist Irina Khalip, received a suspended two-year sentence. Despite claims by Lukashenko himself that she is free to join me, police still prevent her, and my son, from leaving Minsk. She is subject to a curfew and is regularly harassed by officers late at night, which frightens our boy.

The Belarussian Government continues to hold political prisoners, including the human rights defender Ales Bialatski and Nikolai Statkevich, another presidential candidate, who is now two years into a six-year prison term for participating in the post-election demos; and

the youth leader Zmicer Dashkevich. These brave men are only some of the 14 political prisoners in Belarus today who suffer unbearable conditions behind bars.

Mild sanctions were imposed against the regime after the 2010 crackdown, but more can be done. As we mark two years since that brutality I urge my fellow Europeans to do what it takes to secure the release of prisoners of conscience. It shames the democratic world to have such a brutal dictatorship in Europe. Belarussians deserve better, and we need your help and solidarity.

*Andrei Sannikov is a Belarussian opposition politician and former diplomat.*

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