

The Washington Post

Imprisoned in Belarus

By Irina Bogdanova, Published: December 21

Irina Bogdanova, a doctor in London, is the sister of Belarusian opposition politician Andrei Sannikov.

A year ago this week, Europe's last dictatorship began a brutal crackdown that left many peaceful protesters injured or imprisoned. Even as democratic change takes root around the world, the government of Belarus persists in crushing the legitimate aspirations of its people. One of the Belarusians marking this sad occasion from a prison cell is my brother, Andrei Sannikov, a presidential candidate in 2010 against President Alexander Lukashenko.

I need your help so that Andrei doesn't spend another year in jail.

On the evening of Dec. 19, 2010, after yet another presidential election that failed to meet international standards, tens of thousands of Belarusians peacefully gathered in downtown Minsk to protest the results. Andrei addressed the demonstrators, calling for new elections and urging them to remain peaceful despite provocations by a handful of individuals at the back of the crowd — individuals now widely believed to have been government agents. Although the demonstration remained peaceful, police violently dispersed the gathering, beating many of the protesters and arresting hundreds.

Police brutally beat Andrei — seriously injuring his legs by pinning him down with a riot shield and then jumping on top of it. They arrested him and his wife, the journalist Irina Khalip, as the couple tried to make their way to a hospital. While they suffered in a KGB detention facility, the Lukashenko government even tried to remove my then-3-year-old nephew, Daniil, from the care of his grandparents.

In actions frighteningly reminiscent of the Stalin era, the government threatened to put Daniil in an orphanage as the child of "enemies of the state." During Andrei's pretrial detention, authorities tortured him physically and psychologically. They denied him sleep and access to a toilet; forced him to stand, naked, in stress positions; and exposed him to extreme cold. Masked men taunted and kicked him repeatedly. A high-ranking security official even made threats against the lives of Irina and Daniil. After Andrei's lawyer publicly expressed alarm about such treatment, authorities prevented them from meeting privately and then disbarred the lawyer, forcing Andrei to find new counsel only one month before his trial.

The proceedings were a farce: The government failed to present any evidence of Andrei's guilt. No matter. On May 14, a judge sentenced Andrei to five years in prison on charges of organizing and participating in a mass riot. The real "crime," of course, was Andrei's legitimate attempt to peacefully demand respect for the basic human rights of all Belarusians. Since his arrest,

authorities have repeatedly transferred Andrei between prisons in a callous attempt to limit his access to the outside world. During the latest transfer, apparently to a prison in Vitebsk, the government denied Andrei food and left him in a cold rail car for more than 24 hours. My brother has not been seen in more than a month. Andrei's disappearance, with no confirmation of his location or well-being, leaves his family chilled over his safety.

Andrei is not the regime's only target. Irina received a two-year suspended sentence and is subject to strict limitations on her liberty, including a requirement to check in with police every day. Dzmitry Bandarenka, a civil-society activist and Andrei's campaign manager, is serving a two-year sentence despite a debilitating back injury for which he has not received adequate medical care. Authorities have sentenced human rights defender Ales Byalyatski to more than four years on fabricated charges of tax evasion.

To its great credit, the U.S. government has followed its condemnation of Andrei's imprisonment with strong economic sanctions targeting the Lukashenko regime, in particular the state-owned petrochemical company, Belneftekhim. While European Union leaders have joined Washington in imposing asset freezes and travel bans, the relatively limited response from Brussels has been a disappointment. It is also woefully inadequate, given the Belarusian regime's continued human rights violations. My brother's life is in the hands of the international community. As the government in Minsk struggles to retain power, the United States must urge its allies in Europe to speak with one voice: The existence of a dictatorship in Europe will no longer be tolerated.

It is not just governments that can play a role. The International Ice Hockey Federation should — as urged by Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) and E.U. Parliamentarian Peter Stastny, himself a member of the Hockey Hall of Fame — suspend plans to hold the 2014 ice hockey championship in Belarus. Such a prestigious international sports event shouldn't be soiled by association with a brutal host.

I have one wish this month: for my little nephew to have his father home for Christmas. The international community can make this happen by matching its words with deeds and imposing coordinated economic sanctions on the Lukashenko regime until it unconditionally releases every political prisoner in Belarus.