

# **Durbin, Bipartisan Senators Launch Free Belarus Caucus**

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## *Bipartisan Caucus to press for democracy in Belarus ahead of first anniversary of fraudulent presidential elections*

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL) joined U.S. Senators Roger Wicker (R-MS) and Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) today to announce the formation of the Free Belarus Caucus, which will advocate for democracy and free and fair elections in the former Soviet Republic that has been rocked by increasing political repression after decades of rule by current President Alexander Lukashenko. The caucus also includes U.S. Senators Thom Tillis (R-NC), Tim Kaine (D-VA), Dan Sullivan (R-AK), Edward Markey (D-MA), Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Chris Van Hollen (D-MD).

“I will never forget traveling to Minsk in January 2011 to meet with the families of opposition candidates jailed by Lukashenko for having had the temerity to run against him in the sham presidential election just the month before,” Durbin said. “And now history has repeated itself once again, with the notable difference that the Belarusian people have had enough. That the Last Dictator of Europe continues to rob his people of the basic freedoms enjoyed by the rest of Europe is a tragedy that must be condemned. This bipartisan Senate caucus demonstrates that the United States Senate will continue to stand with the brave people of Belarus in their hopes for a more democratic country.”

"For decades, the U.S. Congress has demonstrated full support for the aspirations of Belarusians to live in a democratic, sovereign, independent country. We are grateful for the initiative to launch the Free Belarus Caucus in the Senate, which would help respond to the ongoing crisis in Belarus but also to prepare for the future when Belarus joins the family of democratic nations," said Belarusian opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

Among other initiatives, the Free Belarus Caucus will:

- Press for democracy in Belarus, including free and fair elections;
- Fight for a free media and protection for journalists; and
- Support neighboring countries, such as Lithuania and Poland, in their efforts to help the people of Belarus.

Last year, Senators Durbin and Shaheen unanimously passed [a Senate resolution \(S. 658\)](#) condemning the arrest of opposition candidates and calling for a fair and legitimate August 2020 election. In January 2011, [Senator Durbin traveled to Belarus](#) after the stolen December 2010 election, during which time he met with the families of the jailed opposition candidates.

The launch of the caucus follows the [Senators' meeting](#) with Belarusian opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, last month. It also comes on the eve of the first

anniversary of a fraudulent presidential election that installed President Lukashenka to a sixth term amid mass demonstrations and increasing state-sponsored violence against journalists, civil society groups, and protesters. His opponent, Tsikhanouskaya, was forced to flee for her safety to neighboring Lithuania, a member of NATO, after the election results were announced.

Since Lukashenka took power, criminalization of the media has resulted in the arrest and jailing of journalists, ransacking of independent media offices, and detention and abuse of civil society groups and protesters. There are more than 570 political prisoners in Belarus, and the situation continues to deteriorate on a daily basis.

Lukashenka escalated the conflict in May when he forced the diversion and landing of Ryanair Flight 4978 as it passed over Belarusian airspace so that Belarusian authorities could arrest 26-year-old activist Raman Pratasevich, an outspoken critic of Lukashenka. The act of piracy and transnational repression illustrated that the Lukashenka regime is a threat not only to the people of Belarus, but to regional partners as well.