

Bonner Querschnitte

Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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ISHR delegation visits President in exile Tsikhanouskaya

(Bonn, 16.09.2025) On August 9, 2025, was the fifth anniversary of the democratic election of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as President of Belarus, after which she had to run for her life for Lithuania. For the anniversary the Secretary General of the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR), Matthias Bohning, and ISHR President Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Paul Schirmmacher met with the Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Together, they discussed the current situation of the Belarusian diaspora in Europe and the challenges facing democracy movements in exile. Tsikhanouskaya emphasized the importance of international support:

“Raise the issue in your own country. Ask your government: What are they doing to support Belarusians? What steps are they taking to help free political prisoners and address the humanitarian issues? Are they cooperating with the democratic forces of Belarus? It’s essential not only to spread awareness about the situation in Belarus but

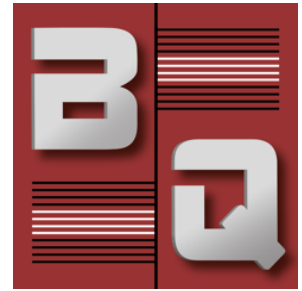
also to prepare new professionals and future leaders for a democratic Belarus. Democracy is different from dictatorship. In a democracy, initiative is needed—you won’t be punished for speaking up or taking action. We, Belarusians, had to understand how democratic structures function. So, we studied that, built our own democratic structures and are now learning how to collaborate within them. What your organization (ISHR) can do is the following: if you have exchange programs, we have a strong youth wing in our movement. If there are opportunities for them to learn from your experience and also to share theirs, that would be a fantastic first step. Even a small engagement can make a difference.”



Thomas Schirmmacher and Matthias Bohning meet with Belarusian President in exile Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in Vilnius © Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya

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Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was a Belarusian opposition leader and political activist, born on September 11, 1982. She became widely known during the 2020 Belarusian presidential election when she ran against longtime authoritarian president Alexander Lukashenko after her husband, who was initially a candidate, was arrested and barred from running. Tsikhanouskaya campaigned for constitutional reform, free and fair elections, and pledged to step down once those reforms were implemented.

Following a widely disputed election marked by allegations of fraud, she was forced into exile in Lithuania, where she established an opposition government and continues to advocate for democracy, human rights, and sanctions against Lukashenko's regime. Lukashenko has not met any leader of the opposition for more than three decades. She has become a symbol of peaceful resistance and strong female leadership, meeting with world leaders and receiving international recognition for her activism. Tsikhanouskaya has also spoken out against Belarus' support for Russia in the war on Ukraine and has helped organize Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukraine. In 2023, she was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison by Belarusian authorities.



Thomas Schirmacher with the exiled President of Belarus, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, in Vilnius © Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is the head of the *United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus*, a government-in-exile formed in August 2022. The Cabinet was established by Belarusian opposition forces to coordinate efforts toward a democratic transition in Belarus following the disputed 2020 presidential election. The cabinet is dedicated to:

- Defending Belarus's independence and sovereignty,
- Working toward de-occupation and restoration of constitutional legality,
- Facilitating the transfer of power from dictatorship to democracy,
- Preparing conditions for free and fair elections.

The Cabinet operates from exile (Vilnius, Lithuania) and works internationally to gain recognition and support for democratic Belarus. Tsikhanouskaya represents the Belarusian people's democratic aspirations on the global stage, meeting foreign leaders and advocating sanctions against the Lukashenko regime. Her role as National Leader is recognized by the European Parliament and other international bodies as the legitimate representative of Belarus until free elections can be held.

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The U.S. Congress says about Tsikhanouskaya: “Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is the leader of democratic Belarus and a human rights activist, who challenged and by many accounts beat the autocratic president Aliaksandr Lukashenka at the 2020 presidential election. She stood in for her husband, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, in the presidential election after he was jailed for his political aspirations. The election was fraught with



Thomas Schirmacher during a minute's silence at a large demonstration for Belarus on the Römerberg in Frankfurt in 2021 © Martin Warnecke

widespread fraud and followed by unjustified violence. Tsikhanouskaya has become the symbolic leader of Belarusian protests and has contributed greatly to promoting positive change in Belarus both through her domestic and international engagement. Following her forced relocation to Lithuania by Belarusian authorities, she met with global leaders to coordinate joint international efforts against the authoritarian regime to ensure the voices of Belarusians are heard. The European Parliament recognized the fight of Belarusian people for democracy and freedom led by Tsikhanouskaya by awarding her, among other leaders, the prestigious annual Sakharov Prize. She has also received a series of international awards for her courageous struggle against the authoritarian regime of Lukashenka (GLOBSEC Freedom award; 2020 Prize of the Platform of European Memory and Conscience; Politiken Freedom Prize).”

Downloads and Links:

- **Photo 1** and **photo 2**: Thomas Schirmacher and Matthias Böhning meet with Belarusian President in exile Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in Vilnius © Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya
- **Photo 3**: Thomas Schirmacher with the exiled President of Belarus, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, in Vilnius © Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya
- **Photo 4**: Thomas Schirmacher during a minute's silence at a large demonstration for Belarus on the Römerberg in Frankfurt in 2021 © Martin Warnecke
- **Photo 5**: A book published by ISHR Belarus in 2019 with a contribution by Thomas Schirmacher © Thomas Schirmacher
- **Photo 6**: Thomas Schirmacher giving a guest lecture in Brest (Belarus) in 2014 © Thomas Schirmacher

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- The U.S. Congress about Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya:
<https://congress.gov/117/meeting/house/111344/witnesses/HHRG-117-FA14-Bio-TsikhanouskayaS-20210317.pdf>
- Wikipedia entry on Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sviatlana_Tsikhanouskaya
- “ISHR delegation visits Tsikhanouskaya: Solidarity with Belarus in exile”:
<https://ishr.org?p=20864>

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