

Public **lecture at the Sofia University** “The resistance of the Belarusian opposition to the war in Ukraine and the regime in Belarus”

Dear Prime Minister Denkov,

Dear students of Sofia University,

добре дошли, скъпи ученици,

I'm absolutely delighted to be here with you in the heart of Sofia. I am honored to speak before you, the next generation of leaders, thinkers, and doers, who will shape the future of our region and beyond.

You know it's always a big challenge for me to speak to students. For my short and accidental political career, I learned how to speak to Ursula von der Leyen or Chancellor Scholz, but speaking to students still makes me very nervous

Now, you might wonder, what brings me all the way to this historic place? Coming to Sofia is not just a visit; it's a bridge-building mission.

I came here to restore relations between our nations. It so happened that despite our similar history and geographical proximity, we know very little about each other.

This is due to the dictatorship in Belarus, which led to the isolation of my country for almost 30 years. And my task is to rebuild everything that was destroyed by the regime.

Yesterday, I was in the studio of BNT. The presenter Boyko Vasilev told me that the last time he interviewed the Belarus delegation in Sofia was in 1993.

It was Stanislau Shushkevich, first leader of independent Belarus, just a year before dictator Alexander Lukashenka came to power, dismissed the parliament and established the dictatorship which lasts till now.

It's symbolic that Shushkevich's 29-years old grand-daughter was repressed by Lukashenka's regime, jailed, forced into exile, and now is working in my office. It's symbolic, but also tragic that several generations of Belarusians did not have a chance to live in freedom and democracy.

I know that not only Belarusians are following my visit to Bulgaria, but also Lukashenka's KGB. After today's meetings with the Bulgarian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, I am expecting to see the tweet by Lukashenka's Embassy strongly condemning Bulgaria's "betrayal".

In their eyes – the eyes of Putin's puppet regime – Bulgaria is a part of the Russian sphere of influence. This means that you do not have the right to your own policy independent of the metropole. They live there in the past, and what's more, they drag us and you into the past too.

Bulgarians know very well what it is like to live in the shadow of the Empire. You survived the dark times of Fascist and Communist dictatorships. You survived centuries of Ottoman yoke. You know the price of freedom, how easy to lose it, and how difficult it is to get it back.

For many people in the western democracies, it is hard to understand it. For many, democracy is like an air. Only when it is not there, you start to suffocate.

The political uncertainties (like the one you are facing right now with your government) are also part of democracy. It can be frustrating, but it's part of the process.

And believe me, it's better than a dictatorship, when a decision has already been made for you. And it is my dream that Belarus would also have such heated debates as you have in the parliament. Better that way than sterile silence!

I am also proud that Belarusians contributed to Bulgarian freedom. Two days ago, you celebrated Liberation Day. One of those who liberated Sofia was General Gurko, Belarusian nobleman and officer who fought in Russian Army back then. Here, in Bulgaria, there are monuments and streets named after him.

Another Belarusian freedom fighter fighting for Bulgaria was Nikolai Sudzilouski, known by his nickname Николаас Руссель. Born in Belarus, this outstanding doctor, ethnographer, linguist, and writer fell in love with Bulgaria. And he was one of the organizers of the April uprising against the Ottoman Empire. Unlike other Belarusians fighting for Bulgaria, he survived. And now his name, like Gurka's, became a symbol of Bulgarian-Belarusian friendship.

Our national Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau, who was a soldier during the Second World War, wrote about Bulgaria: "All the most difficult trials that befell the Bulgarian people are close and understandable to the Belarusians, who have also drunk the cup full of centuries of oppression, national extermination, and moral and spiritual enslavement. Needless to say, how this unites us".

I am telling you all this to show not only the ties between Bulgarian and Belarusian people. But also to show that the fight for freedom is not the local one, but a global one. Tyranny is like cancer, if it is not contained – it's growing, and destroying everything in its path.

This is why it is very important to support those who fight against tyranny and dictatorship, no matter where it happens.

This is why it is so important to support Ukraine today, which is fighting not just for its freedom, but the freedom of all the continent. For the very values that Europe is built on.

This is why it is so important to support the Belarusian fight for freedom. It is not only a fight for human rights and justice, but for peace and security in Europe.

Dear friends,

I've touched on this before, but it's impressive to see so many parallels in the history of our countries.

We've got a lot to learn from each other. You know, Bulgaria already made its way to democracy, and now, it's our turn to take that road.

For 200 years Belarus was part of the Russian Empire and later of the Soviet Empire. Many times, we tried to upraise, and many times, our uprisings were toppled in blood.

Finally, in 1991, we became independent. And actually, Bulgaria was one of the first countries to establish relations with Belarus.

But the period of democracy lasted only four years, before a chief of Soviet state farm Mr. Lukashenka was elected president.

With the help of Russia, Lukashenka started to build the dictatorial regime. He attacked Belarusian culture, language, and true history. Probably, he is the only dictator who voluntarily gave up sovereignty of the country.

He was even dreaming to become President of Russia, and everything Belarusian, European was foreign to him.

But three years ago, in 2020, everything changed. It changed for me and it changed for Belarus.

The last drop was that he totally denied the Covid pandemic. The dictator said people should drink vodka for protection. When people started to die, he declared that it was their own fault.

A huge popular movement began to form around new leaders. One of them was my husband Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a popular video blogger. He was a YouTuber, making videos about the real situation in Belarus, about real problems of the people.

At some point, he became so popular that he decided to run for presidency. When he announced it, immediately, the KGB arrested Siarhei, to prevent him from being registered as a candidate.

Frankly, I was shocked. I was not an activist, just a simple mother of two. I dedicated most of my time to raising our children. I never wanted to become a politician.

But I wanted to support my Siarhei, and so I decided to run instead of him. And I did it out of love. To my big surprise I was registered as a candidate.

Lukashenka registered me as a joke. He said that our constitution “was not for women” and that a woman can not be the president. And he was wrong. Belarusian society was really more mature than him.

We quickly united opposition forces. It took us 15 minutes with other female leaders to make the deal. Together, we rallied all over the country, thousands of people went out to support me, and to support democratic changes.

On the day of elections it became evident that Lukashenka was losing. We were winning. Lukashenka was in shock. He ordered his

commissions to destroy the ballots immediately, in order not to allow the recounting of the votes. He declared himself a winner and brought the police out.

People went out to the streets to defend their victory — our victory. The dictator unleashed the most brutal terror against Belarusians since Stalin's times — to defend his power. The police were shooting unarmed people, many got arrested. In prisons, people were tortured and raped with batons. More than 60,000 landed in jails.

Lukashenka built concentration camps near Minsk because his prisons lacked capacity for this many people. All these fascist practices took place in the 21st century in the middle of Europe. Dozens were killed on the streets by the police or beaten to death in prisons.

KGB told me clearly, either I leave the country now, or I will never see my children again. It was not actually a choice.

They brought me to the border with Lithuania, hoping that it would end the protests. But protests did not stop, and the resistance that started back then continues to this day.

Lukashenka's regime would not survive without Russian help. When protests sparked, it was Russia who sent money and people to help Lukashenka. Many employees from state TV quit their jobs, and Russians came on their place.

It seems that already then, Putin was planning the invasion of Ukraine. And if Belarus becomes free and European, all his plans on restoring the big Russian empire will be ruined.

Belarus started to resemble a Russian colony. Putin brought his troops to Belarus. Political parties, NGOs, and the media were banned. Any protest or displaying symbols — illegal.

Even speaking Belarusian language in Belarus became a crime. This is what they are trying to do on occupied territories of Ukraine

too — destroy national identity, and make everyone and everything Russian.

After Putin secured his control over Belarus, with the help of a homegrown dictator, he went for Ukraine. And the first attack on Ukraine started from Belarus territory, because it is the shortest way to Kyiv.

Many Belarusians have been fighting for Ukraine since the invasion. In Ukraine, as volunteers on the front lines, and in Belarus, sabotaging railways to stop Russian army transports.

Thanks to the courage of Ukrainians and also of Belarusians, the Russian plans failed.

The first part of their plan, to subdue Belarus, failed too.

For more than three years now, Belarusians have been resisting the illegal regime that usurped power in Belarus. In the war time, the protest is not so visible as in 2020. You can't see big rallies, it's too dangerous.

In spite of it all, Belarusians still resist. The partisans carried out many sabotage acts, such as a drone attack on the huge Russian military scout plane in February last year. People send information about Russian troops' movements to Ukrainian intelligence. Many honest people within the military, police and even the government keep sending us insider information about the regime.

Those who managed to get out of the country, donate money to our political prisoners. Last summer, we collected half a million euro in just two days, for political prisoners' families.

Many Belarusian volunteers are fighting Russian invaders in Ukraine. About 40 of them gave their lives for the freedom of Ukraine – and Belarus.

The mother of one of the volunteers who died, Natallia, went to Ukraine and became a caring mother for his comrades. They all know that Ukraine's fight is also our fight.

Sometimes I hear from western politicians, that first Ukraine must win this war, and then we'll deal with Belarus. But I believe, that changes in Belarus can happen even earlier.

Lukashenka's regime is unstable, and doesn't have any popular support. If it begins to crumble, it can also open the window of opportunity for Ukraine too.

Changes in Belarus can also spark changes in Russia, as we already saw in 2020, when our protests inspired Russians in Khabarovsk and many other cities.

Belarus should not be overlooked. It is of crucial importance for Putin's war machine, but also it's the weakest link.

Therefore, at my meetings here, in Sofia, I ask Bulgarian politicians to pay more attention to Belarus, and support our fight for freedom, as many years ago, Belarusians supported yours.

Dear friends,

Sometimes, I hear voices who propose to make a deal with Putin and Lukashenka. "Let's give them what they want – they say. – We need to end the war!"

But will it end the war, if you give the dictators what they want?

No! It only emboldens them. You just give them more time to regroup, and strike with double power.

Sometimes I hear about fatigue. Fatigue about war. Fatigue about Belarus... I hear about that so often, so there is already fatigue of fatigue.

Tell about fatigue to people in Lukashenka's KGB cells. Tell about fatigue to Ukrainians in cold trenches. They don't have the right to fatigue. Neither do we.

Sometimes, I see that politicians choose not the most efficient solutions, but the safest ones. Avoiding risk. Avoiding mistakes. Avoiding responsibility.

At the peak of our protests in 2020, I remember that indecisiveness. It took 9 months to adopt serious sanctions against Lukashenka. And it happened only, when the dictator hijacked a commercial flight with a journalist onboard. But the moment was lost.

Sometimes, politicians try to close the issue but not solve the problem. This is what allowed Lukashenka to reign for 30 years. It was easier to close your eyes on human rights, and make business as usual.

Sometimes I hear that the democratic countries don't have enough tools, or institutions. We have them. But what we need now is the **courage** to use them effectively.

This means applying sanctions not just as a symbolic measure, but as a strategic tool. It means making them effective and closing loopholes.

It means supporting freedom fighters, independent media and civil society.

It means providing full support to Ukraine and Belarus, out of a recognition that this is our common fight.

It means launching investigations in international courts to prevent any sense of impunity.

I do believe that Bulgaria can make a difference. Your history, your experience, and your understanding of what tyranny is - is your great advantage. Be our voice on the international stage. And join our fight for freedom.

It's a fight that requires support and solidarity. And I especially appeal to you, dear students.

The Belarusian fight for democracy has been led by young people, who stood up against oppression, demanding change and a better future.

These are young people just like you, who dream of living in a country where their voices matter, where their votes count, and where their rights are respected.

As I said in the beginning, I came here with a bridge-building mission. Help me to build these bridges.

I call on you to establish connections with the Belarusian young people and students community.

Organize Belarusian-Bulgarian events here, in the university. Dedicate some events or exhibitions to Belarusian political prisoners, or our fight for freedom.

In Minsk, many students studied Bulgarian language, perhaps some of you wish to learn some Belarusian? Let's translate literature, and bring our cultures closer.

While Lukashenka and Putin are trying to destroy our national identity and isolate Belarus from the rest of Europe, our connections should become even stronger.

I also call on you to join our Day of Solidarity with Belarus on March 25. It's Belarus Freedom day, when our country got free after century of the Russian Empire. It's equally important for us, as Bulgaria Liberation day is important to you. The day when we celebrate the freedom-loving spirit of our nations.

Let's celebrate Belarusian-Bulgarian friendship. This is the kind of friendship that no dictator, no tyranny can stifle.

As Bulgarians say, **unity makes strength.**

Thank you!