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The Rt. Hon. Dominic Raab MP
Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
London
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[By email only](#)

28 August 2020

Dear Foreign Secretary,

Re: urgent diplomatic steps required to end violence and repression in Belarus

I write to request you to intervene to protest the ongoing violence and repression in Belarus and to pre for the release of political prisoners and the holding of free and fair elections.

Founded in 1884, the Society of Authors ('SoA') is an independent trade union, which exists to protect the rights and further the interests of authors across the UK. We have over 11,300 members, who are professional authors spanning all areas of the profession, including novelists, broadcasters and scriptwriters to textbook writers, illustrators and translators. The European Writers' Council (EWC), of which the SoA is a member, is a federation of 41 national organisations of professional writers and translators from across Europe, including Belarus, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey and Montenegro, writing in 31 languages and representing 150,000 authors of all genres.

Belarusian citizens are being subjected to another wave of violence and repression following the recent presidential elections, including attacks on peaceful demonstrators demanding an end to police violence and the release of unjustly held prisoners, together with the organisation of free and fair elections, and the proper safeguarding of human rights and freedom of speech. Journalists and bloggers are being attacked or arrested. Websites have been blocked and free access to information is being curtailed. Independent sources report police violence in the streets and worse abuse still in the country's prisons, as more particularly set out in the [Voices Of Belarus](#) report authored by the [Union of Belarusian Writers](#) ('UBW').

In June 2018, I spent a few days in Minsk as part of an EWC delegation held in the city to support our friends and colleagues at the UBW. Whilst the SoA's principal public policy concerns relate, for example, to fair copyright and contract provisions for our members, it was a chastening experience to spend time in a country in which concerns abound about the most fundamental of freedoms and in recent weeks our concerns have increased.

The UBW was created in 1934 and today has around 470 members, including the Nobel prize winner, Svetlana Alexievich. In 2002, the UBW was prevented from publishing periodicals it had previously distributed. All the editorial staff disloyal to the authorities were sacked. The organisation used to have its own building but, in 2006, it was forcibly removed, and its Writers' House was given to a state writers' union. The Ministry of Justice subsequently brought a case against the UBW to shut it down, which the UBW fortunately won.

All Belarusian authors are subject to state censorship. If an author's name appears on a state-sanctioned black- or greylist, it will very often not be published and it becomes virtually impossible to reach an audience, irrespective of whether the work is political. Some UBW members' works have been withdrawn from school textbooks following determinations by the state about the authors' political views. It remains possible to pay privately to have your works printed, but they will not be sold in bookshops, all of which are state-run. As a Belarusian author, you cannot give a reading on any state-owned property if your work is black- or greylisted, nor will you be able to work in a state-controlled job. The Belarusian language itself is suppressed, with only 15% of students now taught it in school, and no universities teaching in the language.

Svetlana Alexievich's books have not been published by Belarusian state-owned publishing houses since 1993. At the SoA, we play our part alongside our partners at English PEN in arranging for authors' work to be translated and disseminated internationally. In fact, we were lucky enough to be able to celebrate a translation by Bela Shayevich of Svetlana Alexievich's incredible *Second-Hand-Time*, when we awarded it our inaugural [First Translation Prize](#).

Perhaps inevitably under a such regime, several UBW members are in prison for their writing. Last week Svetlana Alexievich was called for questioning but has subsequently been released, due, no doubt, to international pressure.

The UBW continues its work courageously and peacefully. When we were treated to a poetry reading by UBW members during our 2018 visit, movingly, most of them were based on love or personal themes. It publishes a magazine, arranges readings of members' works, gives literary awards, has set up an independent book distribution network and even runs a young writers' school. From the UK, looking back across to Belarus, seeing how the liberties we take for granted here are so often denied, we feel humbled.

On behalf of the SoA, I would ask you to publicly condemn the violence and repression in Belarus and to ensure that the UK plays its part in raising awareness of the plight of Belarusian citizens in your discussions with Foreign Ministers and as part of the ongoing UK's diplomatic missions to the Council of Europe, the OSCE, UNESCO, the UN and elsewhere. I would also ask that the UK continues to apply pressure on the Belarusian regime for the release of all citizens unlawfully arrested during its 2020 presidential election campaign and the holding of free and fair elections under international observation.

I look forward to hearing from you further. In the circumstances, I would be grateful for a response [by email](#), copying in our Public Affairs Manager, [Eddie Reeves](#). We would be pleased to engage in a constructive dialogue with the FCO about these and ongoing matters affecting authors and the free expression of their work.

Yours sincerely,



Nicola Solomon
Chief Executive