



Photo Source: Radio Liberty

COURT SHOULD RECONSIDER CLOSURE OF TRIAL OF BELARUSIAN BLOGGER AND ACTIVIST

This statement can be attributed to a spokesperson for the Clooney Foundation for Justice. For further inquiries, please contact media@cfj.org.

CHARGES

Organization of mass riots; incitement of social hatred; organization of activities that grossly violate public order; and obstruction of the exercise of electoral rights.

MAXIMUM PENALTY

15 years' imprisonment

STATUS

Trial ongoing

July 1, 2021

Belarus has shut off public access to the trial of popular Belarusian blogger and pro-democracy activist, Sergei Tikhanovsky. He is being tried behind closed doors in a prison where he is currently detained. Mr. Tikhanovsky, the husband of opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya – along with five other co-defendants – [is accused of creating a blogger “network” to incite hatred and organizing mass riots](#) through his social media channels. Further, Mr. Tikhanovsky’s lawyers have had to sign non-disclosure agreements ensuring they can’t release information about what happens during the trial. If convicted, Mr. Tikhanovsky faces up to 15 years’ imprisonment. TrialWatch, a Clooney Foundation for Justice (CFJ) initiative, has not been able to monitor Mr. Tikhanovsky’s trial due to the secretive nature of these proceedings.

CFJ calls on the Belarusian court to make public its reasons for closing this trial. So far, the court has not provided specific reasons, as required by international human rights law, nor does it appear to have balanced alleged state interests against the public’s interest in transparency. Natallia Matskevich, defense counsel for Mr. Tikhanovsky, reported that “Tikhanovsky was presented with a court order to hold a closed trial ‘to ensure the safety of the participants of the proceedings and to protect the secrets safeguarded by the law.’ It is not explained what the danger consists of or for whom exactly, nor what the secret is.” Under international law, defendants have the right to a public trial, except in specific circumstances. The lack of publicity in Mr. Tikhanovsky’s casts doubt on whether the trial is likely to be fair.

Background

Sergei Tikhanovsky faces multiple charges, including organizing mass riots; incitement of social hatred; organizing activities that grossly violate public order; and obstructing the election. The charges are ostensibly related to his social media channel “Country for Life”, which showcases human-interest stories of Belarusians and is often critical of the Lukashenko government.

Mr. Tikhanovsky was arrested on May 29, 2020 while campaigning for Ms. Tikhanovskaya [who was herself forced to flee the country after President Lukashenko claimed victory in the August 2020 election and launched a crackdown on the opposition.](#) He has been held in detention since his arrest.

Mr. Tikhanovsky and his co-defendants are not the only ones being prosecuted for ‘organizing protests’ in Belarus. In February 2021, following an unfair trial monitored by TrialWatch, [journalists Katsyaryna Andreyeva and Daria Chultsova were convicted of violating public order and sentenced to two years’ imprisonment for live-streaming a protest.](#) More broadly, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that as of February 2021, almost 250 people had been sentenced to prison on “[allegedly politically-motivated charges in the context of the 2020 presidential election.](#)”

ABOUT THE CLOONEY FOUNDATION FOR JUSTICE’S TRIALWATCH INITIATIVE



TrialWatch is an initiative of the Clooney Foundation for Justice. Its mission is to expose injustice, help to free those unjustly detained and promote the rule of law around the world. TrialWatch monitors criminal trials globally against those who are most vulnerable — including journalists, protesters, women, LGBTQ+ persons and minorities — and advocates for the rights of the unfairly convicted. Over time, TrialWatch will use the data it gathers to publish a Global Justice Ranking exposing countries’ performance and use it to support advocacy for systemic change.