

**Open Letter to Ignazio Cassis, President of the Swiss Confederation:
Get Natallia Hersche home from Belarusian prison!**

Dear Mr. President

The Swiss-Belarusian dual citizen Natallia Hersche has been in prison in Belarus for over a year.

On 19 September 2020, she took part in a women's rally in Minsk, protesting against the regime of dictator Lukashenko. On that day, she was arbitrarily arrested. In December 2020, Hersche was sentenced to a draconian prison term of 2 years and 6 months in a show trial. Our fellow citizen, who campaigns for women's rights, human rights and democracy, has been a hostage of the Belarusian regime ever since. Just like the more than 900 other political prisoners in Belarus.

The opposition movement, led by the women's trio Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Valeria Tsepkalov and Maria Kolesnikova, and the women's marches were an emancipatory act for many Belarusian women. According to a report by Amnesty International, women are disproportionately affected by human rights violations in Belarus. Discrimination based on gender stereotypes and patriarchal notions of gender roles could already be observed in the presidential election process. They are once again revealed in the treatment of women protesters and political prisoners.

Amnesty International traces this misogyny directly back to the ruler Lukashenko, who publicly insults women in a sexist manner on state television, thus further driving the spiral of violence. Women who are politically active in the opposition are regularly threatened with sexual violence or that the authorities will take away their children. Women like Natallia Hersche, who are detained as political prisoners, are often denied basic necessities. In political imprisonment, they are at the mercy of the regime and live under the constant threat of gender-based violence.

The Swiss government has so far done too little to secure the release of Natallia Hersche. It is not enough to adopt the EU's sanctions against Belarus. More political pressure and more decisive measures are needed against a regime that is guilty of serious human rights violations on a daily basis!

We call on the Federal Council to impose targeted bilateral sanctions: An entry ban should be imposed on all members of the Belarusian government. Belarusian state television should be put on the sanctions list so that Swiss companies such as Nestlé or Sandoz can no longer advertise there.

In addition, we call on you as the President of the Swiss Confederation to personally plead with Lukashenko for Natalia's immediate and unconditional release. The signing of a pardon petition, which is demanded by the Belarusian regime as a condition for her release, is not acceptable. This would mean an admission of guilt. Natallia, who is innocently imprisoned, firmly rejects this – just like the leading opposition politician Maria Kolesnikova, who has also been imprisoned as a political prisoner in Belarus for over a year and sentenced to 11 years in prison.

Finally, we ask you to take a firm stand against the criminal regime that is holding such courageous women and hundreds of other innocent people hostage! Bring Natallia home!

Most respectfully

Barbara Gysi, Member of the National Council and godparent of Natallia Hersche

Claudia Friedl, Member of the National Council and of the Commission on Foreign Policy

Nina Steffen, Libereco Switzerland – Partnership for Human Rights, Vice President

Anna Jikhareva, WOZ – Die Wochenzeitung, Reporter

Bettina Ryser Ndeye, ACAT-Schweiz, General Secretary

Cfd / The feminist Peace Organisation

Ella Rumpf, Actor

Evelyne Sydler and Denise Mäder, Green Liberal Women, Co-Chairs

Feministischer Streik St.Gallen

feministischer verein kanton solothurn

Feministisches Kollektiv Winterthur

Feministisches Streikkollektiv Zürich

Franziska Ryser, Member of the National Council (Green Party)

Franziska Schutzbach, Sociologist

Frauen*streikkollektiv Bern

frauenrechte beider basel / frbb

Frauenzentrale Zürich

Irene Kälin, President of the Swiss National Council

Jolanda Spiess-Hegglin, Activist and Feminist

Julia Küng, Junge Grüne Schweiz, Co-Chair

Leonie Rohner, Libereco Switzerland – Partnership for Human Rights

Leonie Ruesch, Libereco Switzerland – Partnership for Human Rights

Luna Wedler, Actor

Maya Graf and Kathrin Bertschy, Alliance F, Co-Chairs

Medienfrauen Schweiz, Vorstand

Nora Scheel, Campaigner, Campax

Omas gegen Rechts

Regula Mühlemann, Opera Singer

Schweizerischer Verband für Frauenrechte / SVF-ADF

Silvia Süess, WOZ – Die Wochenzeitung, Member of the Editorial Board

SP Frauen (Social Democratic Women)

Valeska Steiner, Musician

Verein Feministische Wissenschaft Schweiz / Association suisse Femmes Féminisme
Recherche

WIDE Switzerland