Dear Bennington Community,

We are deeply concerned by reports that a Bennington College student was arrested and detained in Minsk, Belarus on September 9th and is being held in Okrestina detention center, a prison known for human rights abuses of political dissidents. This student was one of tens of thousands of Belarusians participating in peaceful mass gatherings calling for free and transparent elections.

On August 9th, after an election that was widely believed to be rife with fraud and voter suppression, Alexander Lukashenko was declared the next President of Belarus. Often described as Europe’s “last dictator,” Lukashenko has been in power for 26 years. His use of press censorship, corruption, and police violence has inspired an opposition movement calling for democratic leadership and economic reform.

Bennington College unequivocally condemns the suppression of peaceful protest and stands in solidarity with all Belarusians working to build a more democratic society.

We—the peers, teachers, and friends of the detained student—are concerned for her safety. Bennington College is reaching out to our Vermont congressional delegation, to the student’s family, and to international students and other members of our community who may be affected by this. Our focus today is on supporting her loved ones and exploring ways in which this community can deepen its knowledge of the political conditions in Belarus and support its citizens in their fight for democracy. Additional information about these educational opportunities are forthcoming.

Thank you for your concern and your care for one another,

Laura Walker