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Recently released from prison, Belarusian opposition figure Sergei Tikhanovsky and his wife Svetlana Tikhanovskaya arrive for a public gathering with the Belarusian diaspora on June 26 in Warsaw, Poland. Tikhanovsky had been jailed for five years after announcing an election bid in 2020.

THE ACCIDENTAL POWER COUPLE

AFTER YEARS IN PRISON, OPPOSITION LEADER RELEASED TO FIND WIFE LEADING RESISTANCE IN BELARUS

FRANCESCA EBEL
in Paris

For five long years, Belarusian opposition leader Sergei Tikhanovsky was held in total isolation. When he was abruptly freed this June in a “miracle” prisoner release made possible by U.S. President Donald Trump, he returned to a world and a home he no longer recognized — and one that didn’t recognize him.

Since they had last spoken, his wife Svetlana, 42, once a self-described housewife with no political education, had transformed into a dogged and skilful stateswoman in her own right, leading the charge against Belarus’s long-time dictator Alexander Lukashenko from exile.

Sergei, 47, has since had to relearn how to be a husband and father, while struggling to find a new role within the political movement he inspired, as many Belarusians are losing hope for any political change in the country.

“She was a housewife, and now she’s a president,” he said in an interview with The Washington Post, recalling his shock when observing a meeting between Svetlana and E.U. foreign ministers this summer.

“At home, she’s still my beloved wife, but at work it’s a nightmare,” he said with a smile. “She’s like a businesswoman. I never saw this side of her before ... I realized that she’s a different person.”

In an interview in Paris, where they were attending a French parliamentary meeting in support of Belarus, the tension was visible on the Tikhanovskys’ faces. The couple talked candidly about five years of impossible choices, heartbreak and loss and the strain that recent events have put on their family.

They spoke about their mission to prove themselves reliable political partners for the West even as Trump describes their nemesis Lukashenko as “highly respected,” viewing him as a useful back channel to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Since Sergei’s release, the couple has been catapulted into a political whirlwind as Belarus has found itself back on the agenda following a wave of prison-

er releases orchestrated by the Trump administration as Lukashenko seeks to cast off his status as an international pariah and push for sanctions relief.

“Now that Sergei is beside me again, I’ve felt chaos and calm simultaneously,” Svetlana said. “But then you think about how many people are still out there (in jail) — we can’t stop, we have to keep working.”

As they try to convince the United States and the European Union to keep up their pressure on Lukashenko’s regime and fight to save more political prisoners, there has been little time for the family to rest and adjust to their new reality. Svetlana is constantly travelling across the world for meetings and conferences, returning home exhausted.

“Before, when I was in business, I would come home, and there would be a delicious dinner with my wife and children waiting for me. I had their undivided attention. Now it’s as if the roles are starting to reverse,” Sergei said. “I constantly tell my wife and children to hug me more often, because I don’t get enough hugs.”

ACCIDENTAL POWER COUPLE

The daughter of a truck driver, Svetlana first met Sergei at a nightclub in 2003 in Mazyr, a small town close to Ukraine. She was training to be an English teacher; Sergei owned the club while producing music videos and concerts. They married after a year, and Svetlana later left her teaching career to commit herself full time to helping their deaf son learn to speak.

Lukashenko had already been in power for seven years after ending a brief window of freedom that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in the years that followed he clamped down on critics, while aligning Belarus closely with Vladimir Putin’s revanchist Russia.

In 2019, frustrated by bureaucratic red tape and pressure from officials, Sergei launched a YouTube channel called “Country For Life” interviewing ordinary people about social problems, corruption and Lukashenko. The channel proved immensely popular, rapidly gaining over 100,000 subscribers and giving him a significant political following.

In 2020, Sergei decided to prove a point and register for the upcoming presidential elections. He was predictably denied. But on the way home from the electoral commission, thinking of the number of people her husband had inspired, Svetlana had an idea — what if she did it?

Without discussing it with Sergei, she returned to the commission the next day and submitted her own candidacy, to the smirks of officials. “It was an act of love for my husband,” she remembers. And it worked.

“The dictator said that a woman couldn’t be president, so they calmly registered her,” Sergei said. “He was sure that no one would vote for her.”

It was a misstep by the regime. Thousands turned out to support Svetlana. On May 29, 2020, Sergei was arrested while collecting signatures for her candidacy.

Bloggers and opposition leaders were swept up, prompting hundreds of thousands of Belarusians to take to the streets in protest. Thousands were arrested, beaten, jailed and tortured as Lukashenko, backed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, rounded up his opponents. Belarus’s international isolation deepened as the West responded with sweeping sanctions.

“Ukraine and Belarus have one enemy: Putin’s Russia, which does not allow independence or freedom in either Ukraine or Belarus, considering them to be its sphere of influence,” Sergei said. “This is the whole problem. If Putin had been reined in (at) Minsk in 2020, there would have been no war in Ukraine in 2022. But Europe remained silent, and so did the U.S. And now you see what mistakes lead to.”

Sergei was sentenced to 18 years in jail at the end of 2021. Svetlana has since been recognized in the West as the true victor in Belarus’s 2020 presidential election.

“I wouldn’t say I chose this path, this path chose me,” Svetlana said. “When life itself puts you in a situation where you have to do something, either you do it or you don’t. Sergei did it. I did it without understanding the consequences ... People in 2020 also followed their hearts.”

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