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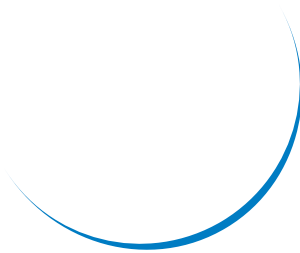
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Belarus: Activists, Journalists Jailed as Election Looms

Authorities Arbitrarily Detain Peaceful Critics, Endangering Health



A nearly empty Oktyabrskaya Street in Minsk, Belarus amid coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic precautions on April 05, 2020. © 2020 Stringer/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

(Moscow) – [Belarusian](#) authorities have intensified their crackdown on independent activists and journalists, with [presidential elections](#) less than three months away, Human Rights Watch said today.

Between May 6 and 13, 2020, the authorities arbitrarily arrested [over 120](#) peaceful protesters, opposition bloggers, journalists, and other critics of the government in 17 cities. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, and the increased risk of virus transmission in closed settings such as detention facilities, courts handed down jail sentences of up to 25 days on charges of “participation in unsanctioned public gatherings.”

“The new wave of arbitrary arrests in Belarus is particularly disturbing in light of the Covid-19 pandemic,” said [Tanya Lokshina](#), associate Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Belarusian authorities should not be arresting people for peaceful protests, but to expose them to higher risk of a deadly infection is unacceptable.”

The Belarusian leadership should act on the calls by the [World Health Organization](#) and other expert international bodies such as the [UN Sub-Committee on the Prevention of Torture](#) to minimize the number of people in custody during the pandemic.

Belarus, which had [31,523](#) registered Covid-19 cases as of May 21, [hasn't ordered](#) a lockdown, citing its potential [economic and social costs](#).

Those arrested included environmental protestors who oppose construction of a battery factory in Brest; supporters of Sergei Tikhanovsky, a popular blogger who recently [announced](#) he would run for president; [Youth Block](#) movement activists concerned over human rights and the rule of law in Belarus; and human rights defenders and journalists who reported on peaceful public gatherings.

Human Rights Watch spoke with three activists after their release. One was diagnosed with Covid-19 shortly after his arrest, another fell ill with symptoms during his arrest, and the third was placed in a transport vehicle next to another detainee who was coughing and had no mask. The families of two of the activists did not discover their whereabouts for more than 24 hours.

Sergei Piatrukhin, a video blogger, was arrested when meeting with Tikhanovsky's supporters on May 6, and five days later was sentenced by a court in Brest to 15 days of detention. He told the court that he was running a fever and had other symptoms of a respiratory disease and requested an ambulance. The judge consented, but, defying the court order, law enforcement officials took Piatrukhin to a detention center before the ambulance arrived.

Piatrukhin told Human Rights Watch that he was detained for alleged participation in an unsanctioned public gathering on April 19 against the construction of a battery plant near Brest, from which he live-streamed his blog. He said that on May 6, riot police broke into a house in the village of Ostrov where he was meeting with Tikhanovsky's supporters, arrested him and two of his interlocutors, and drove them to a local police station.

There, the police blindfolded Piatrukhin, took him in a police van to the vicinity of Baranovichi, and transferred him to other police waiting for him. They then took him to a detention center in Brest, where officials finally registered his detention. The unsanctioned gathering that he was charged with participating in was one of a series of regular peaceful protests against the battery plant.

On May 8, a judge ordered Piatrukhin released until his next hearing on May 11. But police detained Piatrukhin as he was leaving the building, and returned him to the temporary detention center. On May 11, after the court sentenced Piatrukhin to 15 days of detention, the authorities took him back to the holding center, though an ambulance had been called for him.

At the detention center, Piatrukhin convinced staff to take his temperature. When they found he had a fever, they called another ambulance, which took Piatrukhin to a hospital. On May 12, Piatrukhin tested positive for Covid-19, and is being treated at the Brest Central Hospital.

Police [detained](#) Tikhanovsky on May 6 on the outskirts of Mogilev and detained him based on a 15-day sentence he received in January for alleged participation in an unsanctioned public gathering. On May 18, a different court [sentenced](#) Tikhonovsky to 15 days more for meetings with his followers in Orsh and Brest, which the authorities considered unsanctioned public gatherings.

On May 19, in a separate proceeding, the court handed down [another 15 days](#) for meetings with his followers in Soligorsk and Miory. Tikhanovsky told reporters that [seven more](#) administrative cases against him are pending over meetings with his followers in different towns.

Roman Kislyak, a human rights defender from Brest, was arrested on May 10 while monitoring a peaceful protest against the battery plant. Kislyak said there were about 230 participants, who did not shout slogans or hold posters, but rather fed the pigeons, a local protest tradition. Police detained Kislyak when the protest ended.

The officers took Kislyak in a police bus to a detention center in the nearby town of Kobrin. He was given no reason for his arrest until May 12, when he was taken to a police station in Brest, and given a charge sheet alleging he was at an unsanctioned gathering on April 12.

Between May 10 and May 12, Kislyak's family had no information about his situation or whereabouts. His mother filed a missing persons report with police.

At Kislyak's May 12 hearing, the authorities would not allow his lawyer into the courtroom. Kislyak complained to the judge about that, and about detention center staff taking away his pen, preventing him from drafting a complaint about his arbitrary detention.

The judge postponed the hearing on the merits and told Kislyak he was free to go. However, the police detained him by the building exit and took him to a detention center in Brest. The officers there said he was being detained on "an administrative violation" but provided no more information, and denied his request for a lawyer.

During a second court hearing on May 14, Kislyak found out that he was being charged with participation in an unsanctioned protest on May 3. He asked the court to review footage on his mobile phone to show his whereabouts that day. The judge granted his request, and Kislyak was allowed to return home pending a hearing scheduled for May 19. But he soon fell ill and is [self-quarantined](#) at home with respiratory symptoms resembling those of Covid-19.

Ales Asiptsou, a journalist from Mogilev working with the independent BelaPAN information agency, was arrested while covering a protest in Bobruisk on May 9 over President Alexander Lukashenka's plans for a World War II [Victory Day parade](#) in Minsk despite the risks from Covid-19.

Asiptsou said that a plainclothes police officer detained him without explanation. They took him to a police station, searched him, and five hours later, at 5:30 p.m., took him to a station in Mogilev. Officers there showed him his detention report, saying he was charged with participation in a meeting with Tikhanovsky, with his followers in Mogilev on May 5, which the authorities considered an "unsanctioned public gathering." Asiptsou had covered the meeting on assignment from BelaPAN.

Police drove him in a small prison vehicle to a temporary holding center, along with a detainee with a bad cough and other respiratory disease symptoms who was not wearing a mask. At the holding center, Asiptsou was put in a cell alone.

Asiptsou's relatives searched for him for over 24 hours, unable to get information from various authorities about his situation or whereabouts. They eventually

located him at the detention center by tracking his cell phone and calling the facility, where officers confirmed they had Asipstou in custody.

On May 12, a court in Mogilev sentenced Asiptsou to 10 ten days of detention. He was released on May 19 and is at home in apparent good health.

Belarusian authorities should respect freedom of assembly, Human Rights Watch said. Under international law [everyone has a right to take part in peaceful assemblies](#), assemblies should be presumed lawful, and no person should be held criminally or administratively liable for participating in a peaceful protest, even if the authorities deem it unlawful.

“Arresting people for participating in or reporting on peaceful gatherings is an unjust penalty even in normal times, and pursuing this practice during a pandemic is simply outrageous,” Lokshina said. “Belarus authorities compromised the health of the activists they detained, as well as the health of other detainees and officials around them. The authorities should focus on containing the spread of Covid-19 rather than contributing to it by prosecuting and arbitrarily jailing people.”

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