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BELARUS: “THEY ARE STEALING THE BEST OF US”. ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND FORCED EXPULSION OF LEADING OPPOSITION ACTIVISTS

As Belarusian authorities have stepped up their campaign against the leaders of peaceful protest in Belarus which has been ongoing after the contested result of the presidential election in August. The authorities promptly responded to popular dissent by mass arrests of peaceful street protesters, and subsequent torture or other ill-treatment while they were in custody. In August, [the authorities also opened a criminal case](#) threatening criminal prosecution against protest leaders under charges of crimes against the state. Now this threat has been put into action. The incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed to have won the election despite accusations of vote-rigging, and called the creation of an opposition Coordinating Council “an attempt of seizure of power”.¹ Subsequently all members of the Council’s seven-strong Presidium have faced harassment, threats, arrests, or forced exile, and only one remains in Belarus who has not been placed under arrest or forced to leave the country at the time of writing.

The Coordinating Council was founded by political exile Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the former presidential candidate whose candidature galvanized the popular protest vote in August 2020, and who may have actually won a substantive majority of the votes. She ran against Lukashenka after her husband, popular blogger and government critic Syarhei Tsikhanousky, was arrested in May. On 10 August, Tsikhanouskaya went to the office of the Central Electoral Commission to file documented reports of vote-rigging. She never publicly emerged from the building. It transpired later that in the office she was met by unidentified law enforcement officials who threatened her and her family and demanded that she immediately left the country, which she did. Details of the discussion are not public, but Tsikhanouskaya said that she had to make a “very tough decision” for the sake of her children. She was led out of the Electoral Commission’s building through a back door, put into a car and immediately taken to the border with Lithuania. She became the first protest leader forcibly exiled by the authorities. In Lithuania, she launched the Coordinating Council which claims to have around 4,300 members,² the identity of most of them is not publicly disclosed for fear of reprisals. The Council is led by its Presidium, and six of its seven members have since been either expelled from Belarus or placed under arrest.

On 20 August, [Prosecutor General of Belarus criminal investigation into “calls to actions seeking to undermine national security”](#), under Article 361³ of the Criminal Code of Belarus. It was clear that the measure targeted members of the Coordinating Council. Contraventions of this vaguely-worded Article can result in up to 5 years imprisonment. Over the next few days investigators summoned for questioning several members of the Coordinating Council’s Presidium, including Maksim Znak, Syarhei Dyleusky, Pavel Latushka, Maryia Kalesnikava, and Svyatlana Aleksievich.

On 24 August, the police arrested Syarhei Dyleusky, head of the Strike Committee of the Minsk Tractor Works, and also a member of the Presidium. He was accused of participation in an illegal assembly and of disobeying police orders. He was sentenced to 25 days⁴ of “administrative detention”, where he remains at the time of writing.

Also on 24 August, another member of the Presidium, Volha Kavalkova, was arrested and similarly sentenced to 25 days for the same “offenses.” However, on 5 September, according to her subsequent media interview, members of the authorities took her from the detention centre, forced her into a car, drove her to checkpoint Bruzhi at the border

¹ <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-belarusi-koordinacionnyj-sovet-oppozicii-sformiroval-prezidium/a-54623916>

² <https://reform.by/162124-znak-v-reglament-koordinacionnogo-soveta-vneseny-izmenenija>

³ https://kodeksy-by.com/ugolovnyj_kodeks_rb/361.htm

⁴ https://belapan.by/archive/2020/09/03/ru_1058226/

with Poland and told her to leave the country. They had threatened that otherwise she would “remain in prison for a long time”. Kavalkova says she had no intention of leaving Belarus and wants to come back as soon as she can.⁵

On 31 August, well-known Belarusian lawyer Liliya Ulasava, also a member of the Presidium, was arrested by officers of the State Control Committee,⁶ a government agency responsible for economic audit and combating corruption, after she refused to be questioned over her participation in the peaceful protests. Her home was searched on the same day. Officials later claimed⁷ that Ulasava and her son Barys Ulasau are suspects in an investigation into alleged tax evasion by companies he co-owns. The timing of the arrest and the involvement of a central government agency which ordinarily deals with high-profile alleged corruption cases leaves little doubt that she is being targeted for her work at the Coordinating Council.

Against this backdrop, another member of the Presidium, Pavel Latushka,⁸ who had earlier been fired from the position of director of Yanka Kupala National Theatre for publicly supporting the protests, left Belarus for Poland on 2 September.

Maryia Kalesnikava, a professional musician and former artistic director of a cultural centre, who joined the campaign of presidential hopeful Viktor Babaryka in May, became one of the leaders of the opposition after Babaryka and Siarhei Tsikhanousky were arrested as criminal suspects during the election campaign. Together with Veranika Tsapkala, she joined Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya to form an all-female trio who led an electoral challenge to, and galvanized mass protest vote against, the incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Veranika Tsapkala left Belarus on 9 August for fear of persecution, to join her then-exiled husband Valery Tsapkala, also a former presidential hopeful who was arbitrarily disqualified from the election by the Central Electoral Committee. Following Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s forced exile on 10 August, Maryia Kalesnikava thus emerged as the highest-profile opposition figure in Belarus. She appeared on the frontline of numerous peaceful street protest actions, repeatedly confronted abusive police, gave numerous media interviews and continued to support individuals who had suffered arbitrary arrest and torture and other ill-treatment in detention.

Maryia Kalesnikava [went missing](#) on the morning of 7 September, at the same time as two other prominent Coordinating Council members, Ivan Krautsou and Anton Radnyankou. Eyewitnesses saw her being dragged into a van marked “Communications” by masked men in plainclothes. Throughout that day, the authorities denied any knowledge of their fate and whereabouts. The following morning Ukrainian authorities officially confirmed that Krautsou and Radnyankou had crossed into the country. It later transpired in the media, including from comments by Ukrainian officials, that the two had been forced to leave Belarus against their will.⁹ It also transpired that Maryia Kalesnikava was with them but managed to avoid expulsion into Ukraine by tearing up her passport. Despite the Belarusian authorities’ denials, it was widely believed that she was in custody. Her whereabouts were only disclosed on 9 September, more than 48 hours after her disappearance. After being held by the border guards in Mazyr, she was transferred to the pre-trial detention centre SIZO-1 in the capital Minsk, where she remains at the time of writing as a criminal suspect facing charges¹⁰ under Article 361.

On the morning of 9 September, Belarusian authorities arrested two lawyers, Maksim Znak, who is also a member of the Coordinating Council’s Presidium, and Illia Salei, who acted as legal counsel for Maryia Kalesnikava and her associates. Both are now reportedly facing similar charges, under Article 361.

⁵ <https://meduza.io/news/2020/09/05/beloruskie-pogranichniki-zayavili-chto-chlen-prezidiuma-koordinatsionnogo-soveta-oppozitsii-olga-kovalkova-pokinula-stranu>

⁶ <https://meduza.io/news/2020/08/31/v-minske-zaderzhana-chlen-prezidiuma-oppozitsionnogo-koordinatsionnogo-soveta-liliya-vlasova-u-nee-doma-proshel-obysk>

⁷ <http://mediazona.by/news/2020/09/03/vlasova>

⁸ <https://meduza.io/news/2020/09/02/byvshiy-ministr-kultury-belarusi-pavel-latushko-pereshedshiy-v-oppozitsiyu-uehal-iz-strany>

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/anton.gerashchenko.7/posts/3273700299383461>

¹⁰ <https://meduza.io/news/2020/09/09/advokat-nazvala-mariyu-kolesnikovu-podozrevaemoy-po-delu-o-popytke-zahvata-vlasti>

At the time of writing, six out of the seven members of the Presidium of the Coordinating Council are either under arrest or have been forced into exile. The only exception is Svyatlana Aleksievich, the winner of 2015 Nobel Literary Prize, who remains in Belarus and not in custody. She reported however that unidentified men had tried to enter her home on 9 September. “None of my friends or sympathisers in the Presidium of the Coordinating Council have been left. Everyone is either in prison or thrown out of the country. Maksim Znak was the last to be taken today,” she said in a statement, “they are stealing the best of us.”

The escalating official campaign of persecution, harassment, forcible exile and prosecution of members of the Coordinating Council and its supporters and associates is a matter of deep concern, and must stop immediately. It constitutes a gross and widespread violation of the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, personal liberty, fair trial, freedom of movement and other fundamental human rights.

All detained members of the Coordinating Council and their associates are prisoners of conscience, and the Belarusian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release them. They must also guarantee that any Belarusian citizen who has been forced to leave the country can safely return. All reported human rights violations committed by law enforcement officers and other members of the authorities in Belarus should be investigated in a thorough, transparent manner, and those responsible brought to justice in fair trial proceedings.

Amnesty International also [reiterates its call](#) on the international community and intergovernmental organisations to step up pressure on the Belarusian authorities to respect the human rights of all persons in the country, and to take an active initiative in monitoring, documenting, reporting and condemning human rights violations committed in Belarus, as well as taking steps to ensuring accountability for those responsible, as well as for protecting survivors of these violations.