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Belarus Media Crackdown at 'Critical Point,' OSCE Warns

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VIENNA — Belarus' media crackdown since a disputed presidential election in December has reached a "critical point," with Minsk in clear violation of international obligations, Europe's top rights and security watchdog said.

Western governments have pressed President Alexander Lukashenko to free journalists and protesters held after the election, judged as fraudulent by the opposition and international monitors.

Belarus, backed by Russia, has stood by the result.

The Vienna-based Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said Tuesday that authorities continued to intimidate and harass domestic and foreign journalists.

"This worrisome trend, which strengthened after the Dec. 19, 2010 presidential election, has reached a critical point," the OSCE's media freedoms chief Dunja Mijatovic said.

She said Belarus was in "flagrant violation" of OSCE commitments that call for a free and fair press. Her sharper language over the past few months has in part been designed to raise the pressure on Belarus at the Vienna diplomatic body.

Mijatovic has been pressing for a visit to Belarus to discuss treatment of the media with authorities.

She said she had appealed again to Belarussian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov, urging him in a letter to "change these unacceptable practices toward media."

The letter said she was gravely concerned about criminal investigations against reporters Irina Khalip and Natalya Radina, several jailed Belarussian and Russian journalists and a charge of "insulting the president" brought against Andrzej Paczobut, who was working for a Polish daily.

The OSCE, which monitored the election, was forced to leave Belarus after it criticized the conduct of the vote and condemned detentions and attacks on demonstrators and journalists.

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