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Belarus Opposition Leader 'Kidnapped' By Masked Men – Reports

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Maria Kolesnikova. **Tut.By via AP / TASS**

Belarusian opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova has been kidnapped by masked men in central Minsk, media reported Monday, citing eyewitnesses.

Kolesnikova, 38, was one of a trio of women who united to challenge Lukashenko in last month's presidential elections after other opposition candidates were either jailed or driven to flee Belarus. She is the only member of the trio to have remained in Belarus since the election, with presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya fleeing to neighboring Lithuania and Veronika Tsepkalo to Ukraine.

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Eyewitnesses described seeing masked men in civilian clothes capturing Kolesnikova and forcing her into a dark minibus labeled "Communications" outside the national arts museum in Minsk, the news outlet tut.by reported.

Minsk police said they were verifying reports of Kolesnikova's kidnapping. The city's police force later told the Russian state-run RIA Novosti news agency that it could not confirm the reports.

Belarus' coordination council, set up to oversee the transfer of power to Tikhanovskaya, told the RBC news website that Kolesnikova is one of three council members with whom it has lost contact.

The coordination council later published video footage of what it said was the moment when Kolesnikova was placed into the minibus. Kolesnikova herself isn't visible in the footage.

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"We can only assume, but it's obvious that the authorities are doing everything to prevent the council's work as much as possible," Pavel Latushko, former culture minister and currently a senior member of the transitional council, told Interfax.

The disappearances took place less than 24 hours after some 100,000 Belarusians took to the streets for a fourth weekend to protest the results of the Aug. 9 election where Lukashenko claimed an overwhelming majority of votes for his sixth term in office.

Lukashenko has accused the council of attempting to seize power and warned of "adequate measures" against its members.

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