

Belarus Jails Opposition Figure Kolesnikova as Nobel Winner Intimidated

By [Tatiana Kalinovskaya for AFP](#)

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Maria Kolesnikova and Maxim Znak were both detained this week amid a widening crackdown on the opposition. **Valery Sharifulin / TASS**

Belarus investigators said Wednesday prominent opposition figures Maria Kolesnikova and Maxim Znak had been detained in a national security probe as Minsk ramped up a crackdown on a protest movement.

The country's Investigative Committee, which probes major crime, said in a statement the two were being held as an investigation continued into "calls urging action aimed at harming national security."

They join a number of top critics of strongman Alexander Lukashenko already in jail.

A lawyer for Kolesnikova, the most prominent opposition figure still in Belarus, said she was in a central Minsk jail and faced up to five years in prison.

"Maria is in good spirits," lawyer Lyudmila Kazak told AFP. "She confirms she tore up her passport on purpose to remain in Belarus."

On Tuesday, Kolesnikova was detained at the Ukrainian border after she prevented authorities from expelling her by tearing up her passport and jumping out of a car.

The 38-year-old ally of top opposition figure Svetlana Tikhanovskaya went missing on Monday, with witnesses saying she was bundled into a minibus by unidentified masked men in Minsk.

Unprecedented demonstrations broke out after strongman Alexander Lukashenko claimed to have defeated political novice Tikhanovskaya and won re-election with 80% of the vote in the Aug. 9 ballot.

Lukashenko has refused to step down and turned to Russia for support to stay in power, while his security services have arrested thousands of protesters. Several people have died.

Nobel winner intimidated

Tens of thousands have taken to the streets for the past month but Lukashenko, who is set to meet with Russia's Vladimir Putin in Moscow soon, has intensified the crackdown over the past few days.

Earlier Wednesday masked men detained Znak, while Nobel Prize-winning writer Svetlana Alexievich complained of intimidation.

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Znak, who had worked as a lawyer for jailed presidential hopeful Viktor Babaryko, had been due to participate in a video call but did not show up, instead sending a message with the word "masks," Babaryko's press service said.

It said a witness had also seen Znak, 39, being led down the street near his offices by several men in civilian clothes and wearing masks.

Along with Alexievich, Znak was the last of the seven members of the opposition Coordination Council's governing presidium to remain free in Belarus.

The council was set up to ensure a peaceful transfer of power after opposition candidate Tikhanovskaya rejected Lukashenko's claim to have been re-elected to a sixth term.

Alexievich, 72, told reporters that unidentified men in plain clothes were seeking to intimidate her by gathering outside her block of flats and ringing her door bell.

"They called my house intercom system non-stop," she told reporters, pointing to two buses parked outside.

Diplomats from countries including Sweden and Lithuania joined the prominent author in her flat in a gesture of support.

Alexievich said that security services were "snatching the best of us," referring to Znak's detention.

Tikhanovskaya in Warsaw

Tikhanovskaya, 37, left the country under pressure from the authorities and was granted refuge in EU member state Lithuania.

On Wednesday, she met with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and said she hoped that Belarus's path to democracy would be "much shorter" than it was for Soviet-ruled Poland.

"It was a long road for Solidarity but I hope that for us it will be much shorter," she told students at the University of Warsaw before talks with the current leadership of the Solidarity trade union, which helped topple communism in 1989 after nearly a decade.

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In a separate video address, she urged Russians not to believe propaganda trying to "poison" ties between the two peoples and thanked those backing Belarusians' "fight for freedom."

Her first major statement aimed at Russians came after Lukashenko gave a wide-ranging interview to Russian state media on Tuesday.

"Let's not allow propaganda to poison ties between two friendly peoples," she said.

No date has been set, but Lukashenko is preparing to travel to Moscow for talks with Russian President Putin.

Putin quickly congratulated Lukashenko on his re-election and has offered Russia's support.

Lukashenko said he did not rule out calling early elections but it was too soon to set a date.

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