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Belarus Suspends Influential Independent Media Website

By AFP

September 29, 2020

Quique Garcia / EPA / TASS

Authorities in Belarus on Tuesday suspended independent news provider Tut.by for three months, a move decried by the opposition to beleaguered President Alexander Lukashenko.

Tut.by has been covering widespread protests against Lukashenko since his recent disputed election win over rival Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who denounced the halting of the site as an attack on the "right to truth."

An information ministry statement said the site would be "suspended" from October 1 to December 30.

The ministry had previously launched a legal bid to have the website closed down, citing its coverage of "information whose broadcasting is forbidden" as reported by "government organs."

It did not elaborate.

Belarus has been shaken by large scale protests against the rule of authoritarian leader Lukashenko, the official winner of the August 9 presidential election, an outcome the opposition says was rigged.

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Despite a heavy police presence, tens of thousands of people have been rallying weekly to demand Lukashenko resign.

Leading opposition figures as well as journalists have been jailed or forced into exile in the meantime.

Launched in 2000, Tut.by is Belarus' main independent media news organisation and has repeatedly come under pressure from the state for its coverage of demonstrations, publishing videos showing a regime crackdown which have gone viral.

Tut.by issued a statement confirming that it had "lost its media status from October 1" and with it the right to transmit information from "conflict or risk zones, large demonstrations and socially important events."

But the statement added the site, which only won that official status last year, would continue to operate "in the usual fashion as a website."

Several media outlets close to the opposition operate in Belarus illegally for want of accreditation. Some correspondents from Western media have seen their own accreditation withdrawn since the start of the protests.

Tikhanovskaya, currently in exile in Lithuania, said the move was an attempt by the regime "to prolong its existence.

"The regime today showed how it deprives Belarusians of their right to truth," her press service quoted her as saying.

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