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U.S. Hits Dozens Belarusians With Visa Restrictions Amid Renewed Crackdown

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The U.S. has now sanctioned more than 100 Belarusians and Russians seen as involved in cracking down on the opposition following a disputed election. **Alexandra Mudrats / TASS**

The United States has imposed visa restrictions on Belarusian law enforcement and justice officials it holds responsible for a renewed crackdown on activists and journalists, the State Department announced Thursday.

The State Department condemned this week's sentencing of two Belarusian journalists for covering 2020 election protests, as well as police raids on dozens of journalists, rights activists and trade union members' homes and offices.

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The new visa ban targets 43 high-ranking Belarusian officials as well as rank-and-file personnel who abused protesters and handed out prison terms, as well as academic administrators who threatened students for protesting.

The U.S. has now sanctioned more than 100 Belarusians and Russians seen as involved in curbing independent media, running last summer's elections that triggered mass protests and perpetrating the ensuing crackdown on the opposition.

"The United States continues to support international efforts to independently investigate electoral irregularities in Belarus, the human rights abuses surrounding the election, and the crackdown that has followed," the State Department said.

"We stand with the brave people of Belarus and support their right to free and fair elections," it added.

Several Western leaders have refused to recognize the August 2020 election results, and the European Union has imposed sanctions on Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and his allies.

But Lukashenko continues to receive Moscow's backing and the Kremlin said Thursday that Russian President Vladimir Putin would meet with him next week.

Lukashenko said Thursday that Belarus and Russia "shouldn't sweat" the western sanctions.

"I'm from the Soviet era and I'm familiar with state planning," he was quoted as saying. "We can count everything and fully provide for ourselves, with the exception of some things."

AFP contributed reporting.

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