

Belarus Raids Main Independent News Site

By [AFP](#)

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Marina Zolotova, editor-in-chief of the tut.by news portal. **Sergei Gapon / AFP**

Authorities in Belarus raided the offices of the country's largest independent news portal and took down its website on Tuesday, management said, signaling a widening crackdown after historic opposition protests last year.

Journalists in the ex-Soviet nation are facing mounting pressure in the wake of the protests against contested elections won by strongman President Alexander Lukashenko last year.

The long-serving authoritarian leader has drawn scorn from the West, and the United States and EU have slapped sanctions on him and his allies.

The Tut.by news portal became the latest media targeted by authorities in Belarus Tuesday, with security agents searching the offices and homes of journalists working for the site, its editor-in-chief said.

The outlet was then taken offline entirely, a co-founder said.

"TUT.by co-founder Kirill Voloshin reports that the website's domain has been blocked," the news organization reported on its Telegram channel.

AFP journalists said the site was unavailable in Belarus, Russia and France.

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Editor-in-chief Marina Zolotova earlier told AFP that members of a state financial investigations department had searched her home and the homes of several of her employees.

"Representatives of security agencies also came to the newsroom," she said, adding that she was unable to get in touch with several Tut.by employees.

The state control committee's financial investigations department, which confirmed the searches, is a powerful enforcement body that has previously targeted the opposition.

It confirmed Tuesday that it was investigating Tut.by for tax evasion.

The investigative body also notably probed Lukashenko's opponent Viktor Babaryko, who was arrested two months before last August's presidential election.

Babaryko has remained in custody since and is on trial for corruption and money laundering.

Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, claimed a sixth presidential term in last August's vote that the opposition and Western diplomats said was rigged.

All of his opponents have since been jailed or have fled the ex-Soviet republic.

Exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya called on the international community to "immediately" offer support after Tuesday's raids.

"This is a planned attack on our journalists and media, and they need legal protection and emergency relocation," she said on Twitter.

'Unprecedented crackdown'

The 66-year-old authoritarian leader faced down mass protests against his rule in the wake of the vote, with Belarusian law enforcement unleashing repressions that saw thousands of demonstrators detained and more than 400 people given lengthy jail terms.

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According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), 16 journalists in Belarus are currently behind bars as of Tuesday.

Earlier this week, the BAJ reported that Tut.by journalist Lyubov Kasperovich was sentenced to 15 days in police custody for attending an unauthorized mass event.

In March, Tut.by journalist Katerina Borisevich, 36, was handed a sixth-month jail sentence in a closed trial for publishing leaked medical records of a protester who died during a rally last year.

That ruling followed the jailing of two reporters for two years — Katerina Bakhvalova, 27, and Daria Chultsova, 23 — for filming a rally in November in support of the protester, who the opposition believes died at the hands of Lukashenko's security services.

More recently, two Belarusian journalists, including a freelance reporter for German broadcaster Deutsche Welle, were jailed last week for 20 days. Both journalists have reportedly launched a hunger strike in protest.

Belarus is ranked 158 on this year's World Press Freedom Index, which said journalists had been subjected to an "unprecedented crackdown" in the wake of last year's presidential polls.

The mounting pressure on civil society, media and the opposition has been widely condemned by Western countries.

The European Union and the United States have sanctioned Lukashenko and dozens of officials and businessmen tied to his regime with asset freezes and visa bans.

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said earlier this month the bloc was readying a fourth round of sanctions against Belarusian authorities over the crackdown.

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