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Belarus Targets News Agency in Ongoing Crackdown

By AFP

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Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko (R) **president.gov.by**

Belarus police on Wednesday searched and detained employees of an independent news agency in an escalating crackdown on the media under President Alexander Lukashenko.

The ex-Soviet country has been in political turmoil since a disputed presidential election last August that sparked historic demonstrations against Lukashenko's nearly three-decade rule.

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In the wake of the protests, Belarus has sought to eradicate any remaining pockets of dissent, cracking down on the opposition, rights groups and media not under state control.

On Wednesday, police searched the home of BelaPan news agency's editor-in-chief Irina Levshina before taking her to the outlet's newsroom for a search there, reported website

Naviny.by, which is owned by BelaPan.

BelaPan deputy editor Alexander Zaitsev said his home was also searched and his phone, computer and other devices were confiscated.

He said it was part of an investigation into public order offenses.

Later on Wednesday, Naviny.by said that BelaPan's accountant and its former director had been taken to a detention centre in the capital Minsk.

Naviny.by also reported that BelaPan's website was down.

AFP journalists in Moscow and Paris were unable to access it as of 12:30 GMT.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists called for the "immediate" release of all BelaPan employees.

"You can close independent media, detain their employees and scare people. But nobody can hold back thoughts and ideas," the group said in a statement.

BelaPan is not openly pro-opposition but it carries critical material not seen in most other Belarusian media, and its offices have been raided in the past.

In January, the outlet's headquarters were searched and a former employee was arrested and later charged with treason.

Journalists who covered anti-Lukashenko protests have come under mounting pressure in recent months, with several receiving long jail terms.

In July, Belarus raided the homes of several regional media organisations and blocked the country's oldest news organisation Nasha Niva.

Popular news website Tut.by was blocked in May and several of its employees arrested on tax evasion charges.

Lukashenko's regime sparked international outrage by forcing an Athens-Vilnius flight to land in Minsk to arrest a dissident in May, and again last month when it was accused of trying to force home a sprinter from the Tokyo Olympics.

Western nations have slapped a slew of sanctions on Lukashenko and his regime over the crackdown in his country, but they appear to have had limited effect as he maintains backing from key ally and creditor Russia.

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