

Jailed Belarus Protest Leader Wins Top Rights Award

By [AFP](#)

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Maria Kolesnikova was jailed over her role in protests against strongman President Alexander Lukashenko. **Ramil Nasibulin / BELTA / TASS**

Jailed Belarus opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova was awarded one of Europe's top human rights awards, the Vaclav Havel Prize, on Monday for leading protests against strongman President Alexander Lukashenko last year.

Kolesnikova was sentenced to 11 years in prison last month over her role in the mass protests that erupted after Lukashenko claimed victory in a disputed election.

The 39-year-old activist, a former flute player in the Belarusian philharmonic orchestra, was arrested after resisting deportation from the country and held for a year before her trial behind closed doors.

Related article: [Belarus Hands Long Prison Term to Protest Leader Kolesnikova](#)

The prize, named after the dissident Czech playwright who led his country's transition from communism to democracy, is awarded annually by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg for civil society action in defense of human rights.

Announcing the award, the president of the Council of Europe's parliamentary assembly, Rik Daems, said Kolesnikova's only "crime" was "wanting to have a say in who is in charge of her country."

"In standing up against a regime which used force and brutality against peaceful and legitimate protestors...Ms. Kolesnikova truly represents courage," he added.

Accepting the prize on her behalf at the assembly in Strasbourg, Kolesnikova's sister Tatsiana Khomich said it was "a sign of solidarity of the entire democratic world with the people of Belarus."

Holding up a picture of her sister, she said: "If you do not want Belarus to turn into a gulag, we must support the Belarusian people today and now."

Previous winners of the Vaclav Havel Prize, which comes with 60,000 euros, include the Uighur intellectual Ilham Tohti and the Saudi rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul.

Belarus is one of the few European countries that is not a member of the Council of Europe, which aims to uphold human rights, democracy, and the rule of law on the continent.

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