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Belarus Jails 2 News Site Managers for 12 Years

By AFP

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Lyudmila Chekina and Marina Zolotova (L-R) **t.me/mlynby**

Belarus on Friday handed long jail terms to senior staff at the country's largest independent news site, which was forced to shutter after historic demonstrations against strongman Alexander Lukashenko.

The verdicts are the latest in a crackdown targeting journalists, opposition figures and activists who challenged Lukashenko's claim that he won a sixth presidential term in 2020.

A court in Minsk sentenced the editor-in-chief of the Tut.by portal, Marina Zolotova, 45, and general director Lyudmila Chekina, 54, to 12 years behind bars.

The women faced a raft of charges including tax evasion — which critics say is regularly used as a pretext to silence dissent — and "incitement to hatred."

Exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who Lukashenko critics say won the

presidential election, condemned the long jail terms.

"The verdict for Marina Zolotova and Lyudmila Chekina is another attempt by the regime to kill honest journalism in Belarus," she said.

Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) called for the women to be released.

"RSF is outraged by this iniquitous sentence, which is Lukashenko's revenge against those who inform the population," the Paris-based campaign group said.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists condemned the verdict as "cruel revenge for the truth."

The proceedings are linked to massive rallies that broke out against Lukashenko after the August 2020 vote and the brutal crackdown he instigated against perceived critics of his nearly 30-year rule.

Earlier this month, Belarus handed a 10-year prison term to Nobel Prize winner and rights activist Ales Bialiatski, drawing international outrage.

Thousands of people were detained during the anti-Lukashenko rallies, hundreds claimed mistreatment in detention and nearly all opposition figures have since been exiled or jailed.

The crackdown expanded to journalists. In the push against opposition voices, Tut.by's offices were raided and the media group was declared an "extremist organization" in 2022 and shuttered.

Zolotova and Chekina were both detained in May 2021 alongside a dozen colleagues. Their homes were raided as well.

'Integrity and resilience'

RSF earlier dismissed the charges against the women as "absurd" and pointed to the fact that the court proceedings happened behind closed doors.

Some of Tut.by's staff fled the country fearing reprisals — including to Ukraine — and re-started operations under the name Zerkalo ("mirror" in Russian).

The media outlet's staff abroad have not revealed their identities for fear of bringing family members still in Belarus to the attention of law enforcement.

"Mila, Marina, we are proud of you. Your integrity and resilience are an example to us all," Zerkalo staff said ahead of the verdict.

"We will continue your work — telling Belarusian people the real news, no matter what."

Belarus also jailed two other perceived government critics on Friday.

Political analyst and website editor Valeria Kostyugova was handed 10 years in prison.

She was sentenced at the same time as Tatyana Kuzina, who founded a school of public

administration and was also handed a 10-year prison term.

Both were accused of inciting hatred, undermining national security and supporting acts to topple the government.

Opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova was jailed for 11 years in 2021.

She was part of a trio of women — along with Veronika Tsepkalo and Tikhanovskaya — who spearheaded the massive rallies.

Both Tsepkalo and Tikhanovskaya, who has been sentenced to 15 years in jail in absentia, are living in exile.

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