

URGENT ACTION

FREE OPPOSITION LEADER MARYIA KALESNIKAVA

Belarusian authorities abducted opposition leader Maryia Kalesnikava on 7 September. After she resisted expulsion from Belarus she was detained and, on 16 September, charged with “undermining national security”. The authorities are rushing her prosecution to make it a precedent and serve as a warning to all peaceful protesters, for whom she has become a symbol of resistance, dignity and courage. Maryia Kalesnikava is a prisoner of conscience and must be released immediately and unconditionally.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

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Copies to Maryia Kalesnikava's legal team: kolesnikova.urgentaction@gmail.com

Dear Prosecutor General,

I am writing concerning the ongoing detention and unfounded prosecution of **Maryia Kalesnikava** under article 361 of the Criminal Code (“Calls to actions seeking to undermine national security”).

Maryia Kalesnikava has committed no internationally recognised crime and is being prosecuted solely for exercising her human rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Her prosecution has no basis under national law and violates Belarus's international obligations. Criticising the authorities, taking part in peaceful protest or organising peaceful demonstrations is every person's human right and not a crime against the state.

As you, no doubt, know, Maryia Kalesnikava went missing in Minsk on 7 September. It promptly transpired that she was abducted by masked men in plainclothes and taken to the border where she resisted expulsion to Ukraine by tearing up her passport. She was detained, and on 16 September officially charged with a crime she did not commit.

Maryia Kalesnikava's case is emblematic of dozens of persons in Belarus prosecuted under trumped-up charges for peacefully exercising their human rights. They are all prisoners of conscience, and they all must be released immediately and unconditionally.

In the light of the above, I urge you:

- **End the criminal proceedings against Maryia Kalesnikava and all other Belarusian prisoners of conscience, and ensure their immediate and unconditional release;**
- **Instigate a prompt, effective and impartial investigation into all reported violations of human rights, including Maryia Kalesnikava's abduction, all instances of unlawful deprivation of liberty and arbitrary arrests, unlawful use of force by law enforcement officials, and fabrication of criminal charges against political activists, and ensure that anyone found responsible for these violations is held accountable in fair trial proceedings.**

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Maryia Kalesnikava, a professional musician and former artistic director of a cultural centre, joined the campaign of presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka in May. She became one of the leaders of the opposition after Viktor Babaryka and another presidential hopeful, Siarhei Tsikhanousky, were arrested in the run-up to the presidential election on 9 August. Together with Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Veranika Tsapkala, Maryia Kalesnikava formed an all-female trio who led an electoral challenge to, and galvanized mass protest vote against, the incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Veranika Tsapkala left Belarus on 9 August for fear of persecution. Following Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya's forced exile on 10 August, Maryia Kalesnikava emerged as the highest-profile opposition figure in Belarus. She appeared on the frontline of numerous peaceful street protests, repeatedly confronted abusive police officers, gave numerous media interviews and continued to support individuals who had suffered arbitrary arrest and torture and other ill-treatment in detention. Maryia Kalesnikava is one of the seven-member Presidium of the opposition Coordinating Council formed after the election.

Maryia Kalesnikava went missing on the morning of 7 September, at the same time as two other prominent Coordinating Council members, Ivan Krautsou and Anton Radnyankou. Eyewitnesses saw her being dragged into a van marked "Communications" by masked men in plainclothes. Throughout that day, the authorities denied any knowledge of their fate and whereabouts. In the morning of 8 September, Ukrainian authorities officially confirmed that Ivan Krautsou and Anton Radnyankou had crossed into the country. It later transpired in the media, that the two had been forced to leave Belarus against their will. It also transpired that Maryia Kalesnikava was with them but resisted and managed to avoid expulsion into Ukraine by tearing up her passport. Despite the Belarusian authorities' denials, it was widely believed that she was taken in custody. Her whereabouts were only disclosed by Belarusian authorities on 9 September, more than 48 hours after her disappearance. After being held by the border guards in Mazyr, she was transferred to a detention centre in the capital Minsk, and later to a detention centre in Zhodzina, away from the capital where crowds were regularly gathering at the gate demanding her release. She remains in detention as a criminal suspect facing charges under Article 361 of the Criminal Code ("Calls to actions seeking to undermine national security"). If convicted, she faces up to five years' imprisonment.

Maryia Kalesnikava is not the only one prosecuted in connection with the election. Even before the election day, dozens of critics of Alyaksandr Lukashenka were arrested under trumped-up charges including Siarhei Tsikhanousky, Viktor Babaryka, Paval Sieviaryniec, and Vitali Shklyarau. When peaceful demonstrations against Lukashenka's officially proclaimed victory started on 9 August, authorities cracked down on the protesters. Riot police shot rubber bullets, threw stun grenades, used water cannons and chemical irritants to disperse peaceful crowds. Some 7,000 protesters were arrested, and many of them were beaten, humiliated and tortured and otherwise ill-treated in overcrowded detention centres during the first week of protests. Thousands of peaceful protesters have been subjected to similar treatment since. Leaders of the protest were arrested or forced into exile.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Belarusian, Russian.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 13 January 2021

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Maryia Kalesnikava (she/her)