

Belarus Bars Man From Breathing in Public

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Belarussian authorities have prohibited a local businessman to breathe in a central square of the city of Baranovichi, saying it would violate the law on public rallies.

Nikolai Chernous requested that City Hall allow him a two-hour breathing exercise near the downtown Lenin memorial, human rights center Vesna [reported](#) on its web site Monday.

But the Baranovichi administration rejected the tongue-in-cheek request, saying it violated several clauses of the law on rallies, Vesna reported, without elaborating.

Chernous earlier tried to stage a bike rally and a marathon walk "against bureaucracy," but both were also banned.

Updated legislation on public rallies went into effect in Belarus this month despite a huge backlash from local and international rights groups and activists. The law now prohibits all kinds of unsanctioned public events, including pickets and flash mobs.

Law enforcement officials said the law is aimed at boosting public safety, but critics denounced the bill for an attempt to suppress all dissent by the authoritarian president, Alexander Lukashenko, in power since 1994.

A wave of street protests swept the country after Lukashenko's victory at last December's presidential elections, which most observers said was rigged and undemocratic. Many street events were coordinated online and arranged to look like nonpolitical flash mobs, but were nevertheless dispersed by police.

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