

Belarus Court Sentences Journalists to 2 Years in Prison

By [AFP](#)

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Katerina Bakhvalova, 27, and Daria Chultsova, 23 [EPA / TASS](#)

A court in Belarus on Thursday sentenced a pair of television journalists to two years in prison for covering a protest last year, the first lengthy jail term in a legal crackdown on independent news media.

Standing defiant in a cage, Katerina Bakhvalova, 27, and Daria Chultsova, 23, flashed V for victory signs as they smiled and blew kisses to the courtroom ahead of the verdict.

The two women were detained in November while filming one of the anti-government rallies that swept Belarus after strongman Alexander Lukashenko claimed victory in an August election that the opposition said was rigged.

The women, who denied their guilt on the first day of their trial earlier this month, were accused of "attracting people to participate in a mass event" via their broadcast and convicted

of leading "group actions that grossly violate public order."

Exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya praised the two journalists for their defiance following the verdict.

"I know that we will not live in a cage. We will achieve truth and freedom — thanks to Ekaterina Andreyeva, Daria Chultsova, all honest journalists," she wrote on her Telegram channel, using Bakhvalova's pen name.

Embed:

Journalists Darya Chultsova and Katsiaryna Andreyeva were sentenced to 2 years in prison for a live stream from Bandarenka's memorial in Nov.

Just look at Darya and Katsiaryna – strong, smiling, and saying goodbyes to their loved ones through bars. Lukashenka can't break us. pic.twitter.com/nVkou883Ia

— Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (@Tsihanouskaya) [February 18, 2021](#)

The case has sparked widespread condemnation from Western countries and advocacy groups.

Human Rights Watch on Thursday urged the Belarusian authorities to "stop treating journalists as their enemies", while the president of neighbouring Poland called for "an amnesty."

"At the same time, Poland calls on all partners in the European Union to respond in solidarity, consistently and resolutely to the latest manifestation of suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms," Krzysztof Szczerski, an advisor to Polish President Andrzej Duda, wrote on Twitter.

'Absurd situation'

After the protests erupted last year, Belarusian authorities unleashed a crackdown that left at least four protesters dead and thousands in jail.

Bakhvalova and Chultsova, who work for the Poland-based television channel Belsat, were detained filming a rally in November in support of a protester the opposition believes died at the hands of Lukashenko's security services.

"I showed these events live. For this I was thrown into jail on trumped-up charges," Belsat reported Bakhvalova as telling the judge Wednesday in her final statement before sentencing.

"It's an absurd situation because the journalists were just covering the protest," her lawyer told reporters after the ruling outside the court in the Belarusian capital Minsk.

The demonstrator, 31-year-old former soldier Roman Bondarenko, died from brain damage

in Minsk after police arrested him.

Investigators later said he showed signs of intoxication, but independent Belarusian media cited a doctor as saying no alcohol had been found in his system.

The journalist who published the story, Katerina Borisevich, and the doctor, Artyom Sorokin, were soon detained on charges of "divulging medical secrets, which entailed grave consequences." They are set to go on trial Friday.

The prosecutor general's office said in a statement Thursday it had opened a criminal case into Bondarenko's death.

Growing crackdown

Lukashenko weathered the protests and last week claimed his ex-Soviet country had defeated a foreign intervention.

As the demonstrations subside, the authorities are pursuing a number of criminal cases against activists and the press.

Eleven journalists are currently detained in connection with the protests, according to the independent Belarus Association of Journalists (BAJ).

On Wednesday a trial also began in the case of leading opposition member Viktor Babaryko, who was arrested ahead of the presidential election after he announced he would run against Lukashenko.

The former banker was one of several opposition figures who were arrested or fled the country.

Several Western leaders have refused to recognize the election results, while the European Union has imposed sanctions on Lukashenko and his allies.

But Lukashenko continues to receive Moscow's backing, and on Thursday the Kremlin said Russian President Vladimir Putin would host him for talks on Monday.

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