

URGENT ACTION

JOURNALIST MAY LOSE SON AFTER COVERING PROTESTS

The Belarusian authorities are threatening to take journalist Larysa Schiryakova's 10 year old son away from her. This threat follows her critical reporting of events in the country including the ongoing crackdown against peaceful protesters.

Larysa Schiryakova is an independent journalist from Homel, in south-eastern Belarus, who works for Polish TV station, *Belsat*. Because of her critical reporting over the years, the authorities have arrested and fined Larysa Schiryakova numerous times for working "without an accreditation." She and her TV channel have applied for the accreditation at least four times, but have been arbitrarily denied it each time. In 2016 alone, Larysa Schiryakova received such fines three times.

Larysa Schiryakova has been actively covering the latest anti-government protests in Belarus since their beginning in mid-February. On 12 March, she was arrested while covering the protest in the city of Rahachou and accused of participating in an "unauthorised mass gathering". She was released several hours later but arrested again on her way home to Homel. The police told her that she resembled a wanted suspect in a house theft and held her for eight hours before releasing her without charging her on account of this purported theft. Five days later, on 17 March, Homel District Court found Larysa Schiryakova guilty of attending an "unsanctioned mass event" on 12 March in Rahachou and fined her BYN 140 (about US\$ 75). On 18 March, the local police visited her parents' home in Homel, where they were taking care of her son, and warned them that their daughter would lose custody over her son because of the large number of administrative violations she had committed over the years.

Larysa Schiryakova was briefly arrested again on 25 March, when covering another street protest, this time in Homel, and told to go to the police station the next day for questioning. During the questioning, the police issued her with records (so-called *protokols*) of two new administrative offences: failing to register her dog and not cleaning up sand around her apartment. She was not aware that these constituted administrative offences, and had never heard of these being held against anyone. An officer at the police station told her that her family might be considered "socially irresponsible" because of the number of administrative offences she keep committing, and that the authorities might have no choice but to take her son away from her and place him into a children's home.

Currently, Larysa Schiryakova is awaiting a court hearing on 12 April for her arrest in Homel on 25 March. If she is found guilty, this would mean at least two additional administrative fines, which could potentially further advance the prospect of the police taking away her son to a children's institution.

Please write immediately in Belarusian, Russian or your own language:

- Urging the authorities to immediately end the harassment of Larysa Schiryakova, including by threatening to remove her son from her care and place him a children's institution;
- Reminding the authorities about their obligations to uphold the right to freedom of expression for all Belarusians, and that a free and independent media is an essential component of this right;
- Calling on the authorities to stop detaining, harassing and placing arbitrary restrictions on journalists in Belarus.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 18 MAY 2017 TO:

Ministry of Internal Affairs
Ihar Anatolyevich Shunevich
Vul. Haradsky val 4
220030, Minsk, Belarus
Fax: +375 17 203 99 18
Email: pismo_mvd@mia.by
Salutation: Dear Minister

And copies to:
President
Alyaksandr Lukashenka
Vul. Karla Marksa 38
220016, Minsk, Belarus
Fax: +375 17 226 06 10
Email: contact@president.gov.by

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. HIS EXCELLENCY MR SERGEI ALEINIK Embassy of the Republic of Belarus, 6 Kensington Court W8 5DL, 020 7937 3288, Fax 020 7361 0005, uk.london@mfa.gov.by, www.uk.mfa.gov.by

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The wave of peaceful street protests began in Belarus in mid-February after hundreds of thousands of Belarusians received tax bills under a Presidential Decree aimed at ending “social parasitism” – effectively, a tax on the unemployed.

On 21 March, President Lukashenka accused “Western” organizations of financing the protests in order to instigate “scuffles and bloodshed” in the country. He also stated that some 20 “fighters” had been detained for “preparing armed provocations” on 25 March.

On 25 March, police raided the offices of the prominent human rights group Vyasna and briefly detained around 60 people. Amnesty International’s monitors personally witnessed the arrest of over 20 peaceful protesters in Minsk on Independence Avenue near the Academy of Sciences building. They witnessed one elderly woman being knocked to the ground by riot police before being arrested. Around 700 people were detained on the day in Minsk, including peaceful protesters and independent journalists as well as bi-standers.

Many court hearings are still pending as the large number of those arrested and detained has overwhelmed the capacity of Belarusian courts. At the time of writing, Larysa Schiryakova was still awaiting the administrative court hearing, on 12 April, for her arrest on 25 March.

She is determined to continue her work as a journalist but is afraid that doing so would lead to the authorities issuing her with new records of administrative offences and new fines. The law in Belarus requires that all foreign media obtain accreditation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such accreditation is regularly denied arbitrarily to critical media outlets and independent journalists for purported minor infringements or failure to comply with some obscure technicalities.