

**POLITICAL ACTIVIST**

**ABDUCTED AND LOCKED UP**

**FOR 11 YEARS**

**WRITE  
FOR  
RIGHTS**

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL



Maryia  
Kalesnikava,  
Belarus

Human Rights  
Education  
Activity



## WRITE FOR RIGHTS

# WRITING LETTERS CHANGES LIVES

**When just a handful of people unite behind someone, the results can be amazing.**

More than 20 years ago, a small group of activists in Poland ran a 24-hour letter-writing marathon. In the years that followed, the idea spread. Today, Write for Rights is the world's biggest human rights event.

From 2,326 letters in 2001 to nearly 6 million letters, tweets, petition signatures and other actions in 2023, people the world over have used the power of their words to unite behind the idea that geography is no barrier to solidarity. In 2023 alone, more than 1.4 million people were engaged through human rights education activities. Together, our actions have helped transform the lives of more than 100 people over the years, by releasing activists from detention, securing justice for those whose rights have been abused and protecting people who advocate for change.

This year's campaign once again includes people from around the world. They are connected because their human rights have been violated simply for who they are or because they exercised their rights. Together, we can fight for them to receive justice. Through Write for Rights, each of the individuals will receive personalized messages of solidarity from thousands of people across the globe. The awareness that their situations are gaining public attention offers reassurance to them and their families that they are not forgotten. And, by writing directly to the authorities to demand that they end the injustice, we can create a more just and equal world.

Individuals and groups featured in the campaign in previous years report the difference that these actions make, and often describe the strength they derive from knowing that so many people care about them.

Often, there is a noticeable change in the treatment of these individuals and others in a similar situation. Charges may be dropped and people released from detention. People are treated more humanely, and new laws or regulations addressing the injustice are introduced.

*“From the bottom of my heart, this campaign has kept me alive, it's what has stopped them from killing me because they know that you are there.”*

Jani Silva, environmental defender, 2021

## BEFORE YOU START

This **human rights education activity** can take place in a variety of online or offline settings, such as a school classroom, a community group, a family or an activist group. As a facilitator, you can adapt the activity to best suit the context and group you are working with. For example, you may want to consider what knowledge the group already has about the issues discussed, the size of your group and how to best organize the activity to allow for active participation, the physical setting of your activity, delivering it in-person or online, and any limitations. When participants want to take action for an individual or group, discuss whether it is safe for them to do so.

The activities are all based on **participatory learning methods** in which learners are not merely presented with information; they explore, discuss, analyse and question issues relating to the individuals' stories. This methodology allows participants to:

**DEVELOP** key competencies and skills

**FORM** their own opinions, raise questions and gain a deeper understanding of the issues presented

**TAKE CONTROL** of their learning, and shape discussions according to their interests, abilities and concerns

**HAVE THE SPACE** required for them to engage emotionally and develop their own attitudes.



Letter writing with friends in Czechia for Write for Rights 2023.

© Valerie Mirić

Read about the people we're fighting for: [amnesty.org/writeforrights](https://www.amnesty.org/writeforrights)

Contact the Amnesty team in your country: [amnesty.org/countries](https://www.amnesty.org/countries)

Tweet your support to @Amnesty using the hashtag #W4R24

If you are not familiar with participatory learning methods, look at Amnesty International's **Facilitation Manual** before you start: [amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/)

Amnesty International offers online human rights education courses, including a short course about human rights defenders which introduces the **Write for Rights campaign**: [academy.amnesty.org/learn](https://academy.amnesty.org/learn)



# YOUR WORDS ARE POWERFUL

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER ACQUITTED

Rita Karasartova is a human rights defender and an expert in civic governance. For more than a decade she has dedicated her life to providing independent legal advice, helping people whose rights had been violated by a corrupt and unreliable legal system. Alongside 26 others, Rita was arrested for opposing a new border agreement giving control of a freshwater reservoir to Uzbekistan. Charged with attempting to “violently overthrow the government”, which carries a maximum sentence of 15 years’ imprisonment, Rita and at least 21 other defendants were acquitted on 14 June 2024.

*“I would like to express my huge, huge gratitude... Your timely actions – these letters, petitions, signatures, and the huge number of letters that went to the court, that went to the prosecutor’s office – it was all very powerful. In fact, it was very empowering to us all... Of course, the acquittal was totally unexpected. I don’t even know how to process it in my head. We had been playing with all sorts of scenarios, different outcomes in our heads, but we didn’t think we would all be acquitted!... I thank you all.”*

Rita Karasartova  
from Kyrgyzstan



© Private

*“I feel so relieved, and I thank you for the amazing Write for Rights campaign. I am forever indebted. It is like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Reading all the letters and cards made me feel so loved and appreciated.”*

Cecillia Chimhiri from Zimbabwe



## OPPOSITION ACTIVISTS FREED

Opposition activists Cecillia Chimhiri, Joana Mamombe and Netsai Marova were abducted, tortured and imprisoned after attending a protest in Zimbabwe. They were charged with “communicating falsehoods” and “obstructing the course of justice”. Netsai fled Zimbabwe following the attack. After being featured in Write for Rights 2022, Cecillia and Joana were acquitted by the High Court.



© Amnesty International Togo



Amnesty supporters in the Netherlands (far left) and Togo (left) at events for Write For Rights 2023.

# ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are the basic freedoms and protections that belong to every single one of us. They are based on principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect – regardless of age, nationality, gender, race, beliefs and personal orientations.

Your rights are about being treated fairly and treating others fairly, and having the ability to make choices about your own life. These basic human rights are universal – they belong to all of us; everybody in the world. They are inalienable – they cannot be taken away from us. And they are indivisible and interdependent – they are all of equal importance and are interrelated.

Since the atrocities committed during World War II, international human rights instruments, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have provided a solid framework for national, regional and international legislation designed to improve lives around the world. Human rights can be seen as laws for governments. They create obligations for governments and state officials to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of those within their jurisdiction and also abroad.

Human rights are not luxuries to be met only when practicalities allow.



Write for Rights event in Benin in 2023.

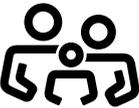


## THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR)

The UDHR was drawn up by the newly formed United Nations in the years immediately following World War II. Since its adoption on 10 December 1948, it has formed the backbone of the international human rights system. Every country in the world has agreed to be bound by the general principles expressed within the 30 articles of this document.

The UDHR itself is, as its name suggests, a declaration. It is a declaration of intent by every government around the world to abide by certain standards in the treatment of individual human beings. Human rights have become part of international law: since the adoption of the UDHR, numerous other binding laws and agreements have been drawn up based on its principles. It is these laws and agreements which provide the basis for organizations like Amnesty International to call on governments to refrain from the type of behaviour or treatment that the people highlighted in our Write for Rights cases have experienced.

# UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

 <p>Civil rights and liberties Right to life, freedom from torture and slavery, right to non-discrimination.</p>	<p><b>Article 1</b> Freedom and equality in dignity and rights</p> <p><b>Article 2</b> Non-discrimination</p> <p><b>Article 3</b> Right to life, liberty and security of person</p> <p><b>Article 4</b> Freedom from slavery</p> <p><b>Article 5</b> Freedom from torture</p>
 <p>Legal rights Right to be presumed innocent, right to a fair trial, right to be free from arbitrary arrest or detention.</p>	<p><b>Article 6</b> All are protected by the law</p> <p><b>Article 7</b> All are equal before the law</p> <p><b>Article 8</b> A remedy when rights have been violated</p> <p><b>Article 9</b> No unjust detention, imprisonment or exile</p> <p><b>Article 10</b> Right to a fair trial</p> <p><b>Article 11</b> Innocent until proven guilty</p> <p><b>Article 14</b> Right to go to another country and ask for protection</p>
 <p>Social rights Right to education, to found and maintain a family, to recreation, to health care.</p>	<p><b>Article 12</b> Privacy and the right to home and family life</p> <p><b>Article 13</b> Freedom to live and travel freely within state borders</p> <p><b>Article 16</b> Right to marry and start a family</p> <p><b>Article 24</b> Right to rest and leisure</p> <p><b>Article 26</b> Right to education, including free primary education</p>
 <p>Economic rights Right to property, to work, to housing, to a pension, to an adequate standard of living.</p>	<p><b>Article 15</b> Right to a nationality</p> <p><b>Article 17</b> Right to own property and possessions</p> <p><b>Article 22</b> Right to social security</p> <p><b>Article 23</b> Right to work for a fair wage and to join a trade union</p> <p><b>Article 25</b> Right to a standard of living adequate for your health and well-being</p>
 <p>Political rights Right to participate in the government of the country, right to vote, right to peaceful assembly, freedoms of expression, belief and religion.</p>	<p><b>Article 18</b> Freedom of belief (including religious belief)</p> <p><b>Article 19</b> Freedom of expression and the right to spread information</p> <p><b>Article 20</b> Freedom to join associations and meet with others in a peaceful way</p> <p><b>Article 21</b> Right to take part in the government of your country</p>
 <p>Cultural rights, solidarity rights Right to participate in the cultural life of the community.</p>	<p><b>Article 27</b> Right to share in your community's cultural life</p> <p><b>Article 28</b> Right to an international order where all these rights can be fully realized</p> <p><b>Article 29</b> Responsibility to respect the rights of others</p> <p><b>Article 30</b> No taking away any of these rights!</p>

## ACTIVITY

# RIGHTS TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

### KEY CONCEPTS

- Right to peaceful protest
- Freedom of peaceful assembly
- Freedom of expression
- Human rights defenders and activists

### ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

Participants will learn about human rights, with an emphasis on two of the rights that enable peaceful protest: freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. To fully understand these rights, the participants will get to know Maryia Kalesnikava from Belarus, who was arrested after exercising her right to peaceful protest. As part of the activity, participants are encouraged to write letters in support of and showing solidarity with Maryia.

**AGE:** 14+

### TIME NEEDED

**60 minutes** – you may want additional time for the **Take Action** section.

### MORE INFORMATION

Learn more about human rights including the right to protest and the right to freedom of expression at the Amnesty Academy: [www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/online-courses/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/online-courses/)

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will:

- **learn** about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- **understand** the concepts of freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression and how they relate to the right to peaceful protest.
- **explore** the consequences for people if their government does not respect the right to peaceful protest.
- **learn** about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign.
- **write** letters in support of and showing solidarity with Mariya Kalesnikava.

### PREPARATION

- Print the picture of Maryia Kalesnikava from page 10 or prepare to show it on a screen.
- Print Maryia Kalesnikava's story for each participant/group.
- Print and cut out the matching rights cards for each group.
- Read the background information and Maryia Kalesnikava's story.

### MATERIALS

- **Handout: Matching rights cards** (pages 11-12)
- **Handout: Maryia Kalesnikava's story** (page 15)
- **Picture of Maryia Kalesnikava** (page 10)
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** simplified version (page 5)
- **Background information** (pages 13-14)
- **Paper and pens**
- **Envelopes** (if sending letters)
- Optional: Template letters from [www.amnesty.org/writeforrights/](http://www.amnesty.org/writeforrights/)
- Optional: Video of Maryia Kalesnikava from [www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos](http://www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos)
- Optional: "Write for Rights: Take action" video from [www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos](http://www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos)

### PRECAUTIONS

This activity discusses the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. It assumes that participants generally experience a high level of freedom in expressing their thoughts, ideas, identities, religious beliefs, and so on. However, some participants may have faced significant limitations on their right to protest and other human rights, which can evoke a strong emotional response. Facilitators should be mindful of participants' backgrounds and experiences, adjust questions and discussions to be sensitive to these experiences, provide a safe space for participants to express their feelings and offer support as needed.

## 1. UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHT TO PROTEST



Split the participants into small groups. Distribute paper and pens. Read out loud the following statement:

*"Imagine you are living in a country where the government is constantly violating the human rights of its inhabitants. A close friend of yours, who has not committed any crime, is in jail without a fair trial. The situation is incredibly unfair. You want to protest against the government's action by making people aware of what has happened to your friend, as well as letting people know that your government is not respecting human rights."*

Ask each participant to draw or write down different ways in which they would draw attention to and protest against what happened to their friend and the other human rights violations taking place in that country.

After drawing/writing down their ideas, let the participants share their examples in small groups. Ask them to discuss the following questions:

- **What did you draw/write down?**
- **How and where would you try to draw attention to the human rights violations and protest against them?**
- **Can you think of more ways of drawing attention and protesting?**

Bring the groups back together to share their thoughts in plenary. Write down on a board or large piece of paper the different ideas so that all the participants can see them. Point out ideas related to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression as part of the right to protest. Give the participants credit for their creativity.

Next, cross out some of the ideas. Explain that, in a country where freedom of assembly and freedom of expression are unduly restricted, these actions might not be accepted by the government.

Ask the participants the following questions and take answers from a few volunteers:

- **How would you feel if your way of protesting was not allowed by the government or you were punished for protesting in this way?**
- **Why do you think the government (in this case) would not accept your actions?**

Discuss why the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression are important. Use the background information on page 13 to facilitate this discussion.

## 2. MARYIA KALESNIKAVA'S STORY



Show participants the picture of Maryia Kalesnikava (page 10). Introduce her to the participants by explaining that Maryia is a musician, a political activist and an outspoken advocate for human rights in Belarus.

Using the background information on Belarus on page 14, explain the context in Belarus to the participants and outline some of the human rights violations perpetrated by the authorities there. Read out loud the following paragraphs:

*"Maryia Kalesnikava likes to say that 'love is stronger than fear'. With her creativity and spirit, she believes in change, and in Belarus becoming a country where everyone can live freely and with their human rights respected. Her activism has inspired and given hope to the Belarusian people that a better future is possible. In 2020, the Government of Belarus had Maryia arrested for 'extremism', 'trying to seize power', and for making 'calls for actions causing harm to national security', solely because of her peaceful activism.*

*"Maryia was sentenced to 11 years in prison. She is in poor health and is being kept in inhuman conditions. Her family worries about her and has not heard from her since February 2023. It is extremely difficult for anyone in Belarus to stand up for Maryia's rights because independent lawyers have been prevented from working, and human rights organizations and independent media have been closed down or fled the country. Maryia's family, who are still in Belarus, risk punishment if they try to show her support."*

Divide the participants into groups and hand out copies of Maryia's story (page 15). Ask participants to read through it in their groups.

Then, ask the groups to discuss the following questions:

- **What are your thoughts after having heard Maryia's story?**
- **What do you believe gives Maryia the strength to protest?**

Bring the participants back together and ask the groups to share their thoughts.



### 3. MATCHING RIGHTS

Hand out the matching rights cards (pages 11-12) to each group. Some of the cards describe episodes from Maryia's story. The other cards describe different human rights that can be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Explain to the participants that they are going to pair up the cards describing Maryia's story with the cards that describe human rights.

The groups can share their answers in plenary when they have finished the exercise.

To end the exercise, ask the participants:

- What do you think should happen to Maryia now?

### 4. TAKE ACTION

Explain about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign. Explain that Amnesty International is encouraging people to demand justice for Maryia Kalesnikava. You can give examples from last year's campaign (page 3) demonstrating how successful writing letters and taking other actions can be, or watch the "Write for Rights: Take action" video from [www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos](http://www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos)

If there isn't enough time for participants to take action within the time allowed, encourage them to organize how to do so afterwards or divide the actions among the groups. Encourage them to be creative.



If this is the first time that participants are introduced to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, you should focus on building a shared understanding of what it is first, using the information starting on page 4. For example, you could ask the participants to think about the human rights they have made use of today, relating human rights to their everyday life. You can also ask how they would feel or react if that right was taken away from them.



Show participants the video of Maryia Kalesnikava which can be found here: [www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos](http://www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos) (available in English).

*Prior to her arrest, Maryia mobilized people in Belarus and stood at the frontline of peaceful protest.*



## WRITE A LETTER

Encourage participants to write to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Belarus using the contact information on the right.

- Tell the minister something about yourself to make this a personal letter.
- Tell them what shocks you about Maryia's story.
- Tell them why you think it is important that the government respects and upholds the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.
- Tell them to **immediately and unconditionally release Maryia from prison, and that her unjust conviction must be overturned.**

### Minister of Foreign Affairs

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the  
Republic of Belarus  
vul. Lenina 19  
220030, Minsk  
Republic of Belarus

Email: [mail@mfa.gov.by](mailto:mail@mfa.gov.by)

X: [@BelarusMFA](https://twitter.com/BelarusMFA)

Instagram: [@belarusmfa](https://www.instagram.com/belarusmfa)

Hashtags: #FreeKalesnikava  
#W4R24 #ProtectTheProtest

Salutation: Dear Minister

## SHOW SOLIDARITY

Send Maryia a message of hope and solidarity to show her and the Belarusian prison authorities that she is not forgotten.

Maryia speaks Russian, Belarusian, German and some English.

Maryia Kalesnikava  
Penal colony No. 4  
vul. Antoshkina 3  
246035, Homel  
Republic of Belarus

Instagram: [@kalesnikava](https://www.instagram.com/kalesnikava)

X: [@by\\_kalesnikava](https://twitter.com/by_kalesnikava)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/  
maria.kalesnikava/](https://www.facebook.com/maria.kalesnikava/)

Hashtags: #FreeKalesnikava  
#W4R24 #ProtectTheProtest



Maryia's sister, Tatsiana Khomich, stands in front of a mural of Maryia.

# MARYIA KALESNIKAVA



**HANDOUT****MATCHING RIGHTS CARDS****HUMAN RIGHTS CARDS****UDHR ARTICLE 1****FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
DIGNITY AND RIGHTS** **UDHR ARTICLE 3****RIGHT TO LIFE, LIBERTY AND  
SECURITY OF PERSON** **UDHR ARTICLE 9****NO UNJUST DETENTION,  
IMPRISONMENT OR EXILE** **UDHR ARTICLE 19****FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION  
AND THE RIGHT TO SPREAD  
INFORMATION** **MARYIA'S EXPERIENCE CARDS**

On 7 September 2020, Maryia was forcibly disappeared by the Belarusian authorities. She was dragged into a van by masked men. The government did not approve of Maryia's or other opposition members' political activism and therefore did not respect their rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. 

Maryia's unjust arrest and imprisonment is denying her the right to live freely. 

Maryia has been arrested even though she has not committed any recognizable crime under international law. 

The government has denied Maryia the right to freely express herself and to protest against the authorities. Before her arrest, she inspired many to join peaceful protests. She spread the message: "Love is stronger than fear". 

**HANDOUT****MATCHING RIGHTS CARDS****HUMAN RIGHTS CARDS****UDHR ARTICLE 25**

**RIGHT TO A STANDARD OF  
LIVING ADEQUATE FOR YOUR  
HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

**UDHR ARTICLE 5**

**FREEDOM FROM TORTURE**

**UDHR ARTICLE 10**

**RIGHT TO A FAIR TRIAL**

**UDHR ARTICLE 20**

**FREEDOM TO JOIN  
ASSOCIATIONS AND MEET  
WITH OTHERS IN A PEACEFUL  
WAY**

**MARYIA'S EXPERIENCE CARDS**

For more than a year, Maryia has been denied any communication with her family and lawyers, including phone calls, letters and visits. She is unwell and is not getting the healthcare she needs.



Maryia was placed in an isolation cell for more than 10 days, despite having serious health concerns. Maryia reportedly had to sleep directly on the floor during that period as there were no mattresses, pillows or bed linen. Warm clothes were not provided. Her cell was so cold that she could not sleep and had to walk constantly to keep warm.



Maryia did not receive a fair and public trial.

Maryia was found guilty and sentenced to 11 years in prison for "calls for actions aimed at causing harm to national security", when all she did was advocate for change in a peaceful way.



Maryia was sentenced for participating in and leading peaceful protests. Maryia was often seen making heart-shaped signs with her hands as a symbol of peace and love at peaceful demonstrations.



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

# THE RIGHT TO PEACEFUL PROTEST

Peaceful protest is a dynamic and public way of exercising our human rights. Throughout history, protests have allowed individuals and groups to express dissent, opinions and ideas, expose injustice and abuse, and demand accountability from those in power. Peaceful protests cover a wide spectrum of activities, from letter writing and organizing petitions, to pickets, rallies, marches and strikes. They include colourful and noisy mass demonstrations, silent vigils, sit-ins, flash mobs and media stunts. They also include Twitter storms and online organizing to share similar slogans and messages, as well as hunger strikes, banner drops and street art. They can be individual or collective and can take place online or offline. All these and other forms of protest are protected under the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and sometimes other human rights as well.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

Article 19 of the UDHR protects your right to hold your own opinions and to express them freely, without government interference. This includes the right to express views through public protests or through written materials, media broadcasts, the internet and works of art. We need a free flow of ideas to ensure that different opinions are taken into account and different ideas are aired. Limiting the right to freedom of expression undermines transparency and accountability and makes the fight for human rights even more difficult. Freedom of expression is important not just to society as a whole, but also to the individual. Our opinions and thoughts are a fundamental part of what makes us human and stopping people from expressing these is equivalent to cutting off a part of their personality!

The right to freedom of expression is not an unlimited right. Sometimes, governments have a duty to protect other people's rights or certain public interests which requires some expression to be prohibited or restricted. But the circumstances in which the authorities can restrict the right to freedom of expression are very narrow and must be considered as exceptional rather than the norm.

The right to freedom of expression is closely linked to the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, which is the right of people to come together in a public place for a common expressive purpose, such as for meetings, strikes, processions, rallies and sit-ins. The right to peaceful assembly means that someone can gather together with others peacefully without fear of being arrested or harassed by the police. In fact, the authorities have a positive duty to facilitate peaceful assemblies, so the police may be required to take special measures to ensure the safety of the people assembling and the general public.

## UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR), ARTICLE 19

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

# THE RIGHT TO PROTEST IN BELARUS

Marya's story is about standing up against a repressive government and being at the forefront of the 2020 peaceful protests in opposition to the widely disputed results of the presidential election held in Belarus in August 2020.

Marya's belief in freedom of expression and human dignity inspired many Belarusian people to stand up for their rights. Following the disputed 2020 presidential election, tens of thousands of Belarusians peacefully took to the streets to protest using poems, songs and other creative expressions. Weekly peaceful protests continued across the country, both on the streets and within enterprises, theatres, universities and elsewhere. The police arrested thousands of peaceful protesters and artists who were performing during political events, violating their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. The police also arrested journalists and human rights defenders who were documenting what was taking place.

Below are two short illustrative examples from real life in Belarus:

*“A woman is wearing red and white trousers; colours which are associated with the banned historical flag of Belarus. For wearing these colours, the police force her to spend a night in jail and she is fined.”*

*“A woman buys red and white flowers for her daughter's birthday party. Because these colours are associated with a banned historical flag, the woman receives a fine of \$350.”*

*Portraits of Belarusian political prisoners, May 2023.*





## MARYIA KALESNIKAVA'S STORY

Maryia Kalesnikava has a dream for her country, in which Belarusians can enjoy human rights and feel free from oppression. Now, she is in prison for protesting peacefully and for believing in her dream.

Maryia was living in Germany as a professional musician but chose to return home to Belarus to create space for art and music. It was this passion, along with her dedication to human rights, that led her to join the opposition before the August 2020 presidential elections. The results of the election were strongly disputed, and afterwards many opposition figures had to flee the country. Maryia stayed, and suddenly found herself the main public opposition figure, standing on the frontline of peaceful protests, confronting police officers by making a heart-shaped symbol with her hands. Mariya told people that “love is stronger than fear”. She called for change and offered hope to many.

On 7 September 2020, Maryia was forcibly disappeared by the Belarusian authorities. She was dragged into a van by masked men. She escaped, but was soon arrested, detained and sentenced to 11 years in prison on charges including “undermining national security” and “extremism”.

Maryia is not the only one. More than 1,300 people are imprisoned in Belarus on politically motivated charges. These people are bloggers, political activists, human rights defenders, journalists, businesspeople, artists, students and peaceful protesters, locked up because they exercised their human rights.

Maryia is imprisoned in poor conditions, with limited access to the healthcare she needs and isolated from other inmates. Her family and friends have not heard from her for more than a year.



© Private



© Nasha Niva



© ViktorBabaryka HQ (Photo: Pasha Kritchko)

Top and bottom: *Maryia Kalesnikava.*  
Centre: *Police special forces at a protest in Belarus in 2020.*

# ABOUT AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We investigate and expose the facts, whenever and wherever abuses happen. We lobby governments as well as other powerful groups such as companies, making sure they keep their promises and respect international law. By telling the powerful stories of the people we work with, we mobilize millions of supporters around the world to campaign for change and to stand in the defence of activists on the frontline. We support people to claim their rights through education and training.

Our work protects and empowers people – from abolishing the death penalty to advancing sexual and reproductive rights, and from combating discrimination to defending refugees' and migrants' rights. We help to bring torturers to justice, change oppressive laws, and free people who have been jailed just for voicing their opinion. We speak out for anyone and everyone whose freedom or dignity are under threat.

© Amnesty International 2024

Except where otherwise noted, content in this document is licensed under a Creative Commons (attribution, non-commercial, no derivatives, international 4.0) licence.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

For more information please visit the permissions page on our website: [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)

Where material is attributed to a copyright owner other than Amnesty International this material is not subject to the Creative Commons licence.

First published in 2024  
by Amnesty International Ltd  
Peter Benenson House,  
1 Easton Street  
London WC1X 0DW, UK

September 2024  
Index: **POL 32/8284/2024**  
Original language: **English**

All images © Amnesty International  
unless otherwise stated.

Cover photo: © Private

**[amnesty.org](http://amnesty.org)**

**WRITE  
FOR  
RIGHTS**

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL** 