Nobel Peace Prize winner sentenced to 10 years in Belarus

March 3, 2023

By AP
NBC News

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/nobel-peace-prize-winner-ales-bialiatski-sentenced-10-years-belarus-rcna73221>

A Belarusian court on Friday sentenced [Ales Bialiatski](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/nobel-peace-prize-2022-win-human-rights-activists-russia-ukraine-rcna51167), Belarus’ top human rights advocate and one of the winners of the [2022 Nobel Peace Prize](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/nobel-peace-prize-winners-blast-putins-invasion-ukraine-rcna61111), to 10 years in prison.

Bialiatski and three other top figures of the Viasna human rights center he founded were convicted of financing actions violating public order and smuggling, Viasna reported Friday.

Valiantsin Stefanovich was given a nine-year sentence; Uladzimir Labkovicz seven years; and Dzmitry Salauyou was sentenced to eight years in prison in absentia.

Bialiatski and two of his associates were arrested and jailed after massive protests over a 2020 election that gave authoritarian President [Alexander Lukashenko](https://www.nbcnews.com/video/watch-in-full-nbc-news-exclusive-interview-with-belarusian-president-alexander-lukashenko-150697029703)a new term in office. Salauyou managed to leave [Belarus](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-draw-sanctions-ongoing-abuses-belarus-after-plane-s-n1269086) before he was arrested.

Lukashenko, who has ruled the ex-Soviet country with an iron fist since 1994, unleashed a [brutal crackdown on the protesters](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/protests-violent-clashes-belarus-ruler-cracks-down-after-contested-vote-n1236276), the largest in the country’s history. More than 35,000 people were arrested, and thousands were beaten by police.

During the trial, which took place behind closed doors, the 60-year-old Bialiatski and his colleagues were held in a caged enclosure in the courtroom. They have spent 21 months behind bars since the arrest.

In the photos from the courtroom released Friday by Belarus’ state news agency Belta, Bialiatksi, clad in black clothes, looked wan, but calm.

Viasna said after the verdict that all four activists have maintained their innocence.

In his final address to the court, he urged the authorities to “stop the civil war in Belarus.” Bialiatski said it became obvious to him from the case files that “the investigators were fulfilling the task they were given: to deprive Viasna human rights advocates of freedom at any cost, destroy Viasna and stop our work.”

Exiled Belarusian opposition leader [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/belarusian-election-fallout-opposition-leader-flees-country-amid-protests-n1236355%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)denounced the court verdict on Friday as “appalling.” “We must do everything to fight against this shameful injustice (and) free them,” Tsikhaouskaya wrote in a tweet.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee, a non-governmental organization working to ensure that human rights are respected in practice, said that it was “shocked by the cynicism behind the sentences that were just issued to our Belarusian friends in Minsk.”

“The trial shows how Lukashenka’s regime punishes our colleagues, human rights defenders, for standing up against the oppression and injustice,” Secretary General Berit Lindeman said in a statement.