

MARYIA KALESNIKAVA, Belarus

A professional musician, Maryia Kalesnikava has filled her life with music, art and people. She's passionate about meeting people and learning from them, and dreams of a Belarus where everyone is respected and allowed to speak freely. This led Maryia to become involved in the August 2020 presidential elections. She joined the campaign of independent candidate Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya alongside Veranika Tsapkala. The three women united after the leading male candidates had been jailed or fled. In a country where rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly are

severely restricted, this formidable trio called for change and offered hope to many.

It is widely believed the opposition won, but the election was rigged, and Alyaksandr Lukashenka returned for his sixth term. Following the election,

Svyatlana and Veranika were forced into exile and Maryia emerged as the highest profile opposition figure. She stood at the front line of peaceful protests, confronting abusive police officers, and making a heart-shaped symbol with her hands in front of riot police.

On 7 September 2020, Maryia was abducted by the Belarus authorities. Dragged into a van by masked men, she was taken to the border, intimidated and pressured to leave the country. She escaped through the van's window and tore up her passport to resist deportation. Maryia was arrested, detained and later sentenced to 11 years in prison on charges including "undermining national security" and "extremism".

Maryia is imprisoned in appalling conditions, with limited access to the healthcare she needs and isolated from other inmates inside the prison.

Maryia's family and friends have not heard from her for over a year.

SHOW MARYIA THAT SHE IS NOT ALONE

Send Maryia messages in letters/cards of hope and solidarity. Let her know you support her in her fight for human rights in Belarus.

Include red hearts and musical notes in your messages.

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