

**Maria Kolesnikova** (b. 1982 in Minsk) is a Belarusian musician turned opposition activist and leader of the pro-democracy movement. She graduated from the Belarusian State Academy of Music, where she studied conducting and the flute. She also received M.A. in Early Music and *Neue Musik* from the State University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart, Germany. As a respected conductor and flute player, she toured Germany and Belarus with great success. She also organized international cultural projects in both countries, including the music enrichment lecture series, “Music Lessons for Adults,” and served as the art director of the OK16 culture club in Minsk.

After befriending Viktor Babaryka, president of Belgazprombank and an arts patron, she realized the need for political change and became involved in his bid for the 2020 presidency against the incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko. When Babaryka and his son were arrested in June 2020, Kolesnikova became the presidential campaign manager for Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. After the dramatic and believed to be a fraudulent election on August 9, 2020, Kolesnikova became the true leader of the opposition. She participated in mass demonstrations against Lukashenko’s regime, becoming a role model and symbol of an independent woman who achieves success despite the prevailing macho mentality of Belarusian society.

In the same month, Kolesnikova joined the presidium of Coordination Council, which attempted dialogue with the Belarusian regime, and announced the will to create a new political party, Razam. Her political activism was halted on September 7, when she was detained and pressed to leave Belarus. However, during the attempt to expel her from her country, Kolesnikova destroyed her passport, strengthening her image as an uncompromising anti-regime leader. Her act resulted in an arrest on the grounds of attempting to incite the overthrowing of the constitutional state power and harming national security. She is facing the punishment of three-year imprisonment. Belarusian defenders of human rights consider her a political prisoner, one of 169 awaiting court proceedings. All attempts to free them on bail have been unsuccessful. When the Lukashenko regime proposed to meet with the arrested opposition activists on October 10, 2020, Kolesnikova was the only one to refuse as she believed the offer was staged under the pretense of a dialogue with the opposition.