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5 Belarus Candidates in Jail

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Relatives of those detained in election protests wait at the walls of a Minsk prison for word on loved ones Tuesday. **Dmitry Brushko**

Five of nine Belarussian opposition presidential candidates were languishing in prison Tuesday, two days after an election ended in violent protests with thousands of people demanding President Alexander Lukashenko's ouster.

The vote was lambasted as rigged by the opposition and called undemocratic by international election observers.

The violence, which lasted until the early hours Monday, saw the detention of more than 600 people, including foreign journalists.

The fate of presidential candidates Andrei Sannikov, Vladimir Neklyayev and Nikolai Statkevich raised special concern because the three were beaten by abductors thought to be security agents before being whisked away to unknown detention facilities.

The whereabouts of other activists, among them well-known opposition journalist Alexander Feduta, remained unclear Tuesday. Feduta was summoned by the KGB on Monday morning and never returned, his wife told Interfax.

Sannikov was beaten so badly on Sunday night that he had to be taken to the hospital. But his car was stopped by police and he was beaten again and taken to a detention center run by the Belarussian security service, known as the KGB, the opposition Charter97.org web site reported.

Preliminary official results published on the Belarussian election commission's web site say Sannikov placed second in the election, winning 2.4 percent of the vote. Lukashenko won with 79.7 percent.

Sannikov's wife, Irina Khalip, who works as a reporter for Moscow's Novaya Gazeta, was also pulled from the car and beaten while she was speaking live on the air to Ekho Moskvy radio.

"What are you doing?" she asks her attackers. "OK, OK, I'm standing like in an American action film. They have pressed me up against the car. My husband is lying on the ground. Monsters! [Expletive]! Fascists! They're hitting me in the face! They're tying my hands behind my back."

She was taken to the Okrestina detention center, Radio Liberty reported.

Also badly injured was Neklyayev, who was snatched by security agents from his hospital bed.

His lawyer Tamara Sidorenko said Tuesday that Neklyayev was being held in an unidentified KGB prison and that he needed warm clothes because he had been taken from the hospital wrapped in a blanket.

Also abducted and beaten was opposition candidate Statkevich. He was hauled from a taxi in central Minsk by plainclothes agents, beaten and taken to an unknown location, his aide Alexei Gavrutikov told Interfax.

Two other opposition candidates Ales Mikhalevich and Vitaly Rymashevsky, remained in detention Tuesday.

A sixth candidate, Grigory Kostusyov, was freed on condition of not leaving the country, Interfax reported.

He told reporters Tuesday that he was "interrogated toughly" by the KGB but not physically mistreated.

"They wanted me to renounce and publicly condemn my colleagues ... but after I refused to do this, they let me go," he said, The Associated Press reported.

Also freed was candidate Dmitry Uss. The last two candidates, Yaroslav Romanchuk and Viktor Tereshchenko, were never detained, local media reports said.

In a sign that the opposition was severely weakened by the arrest of so many leaders, a protest Monday night was quickly disbanded by police, Oleg Kozlovsky, a member of the Russian

Solidarity opposition movement, told The Moscow Times. "They detained about five activists, after which the crowd dispersed," he said by telephone from Minsk.

Alexander Milinkevich, who ran against Lukashenko in the 2006 election that was followed by days of protests, said activists planned to protest Tuesday night outside the jail where many of their colleagues were believed to be held.

The United States has condemned the violence and said the election results were not legitimate.

Assistant Secretary of State Philip Crowley told reporters Monday in Washington that the U.S. administration was concerned over the beating and detention of presidential candidates and called upon the government of Belarus to release them immediately.

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