

Belarus Frees Detainees as EU Readies Sanctions

January 30, 2011



Belarus Releases 7 Detainees As Europe Readies Sanctions **Alexander Vasukovich**

MINSK — Belarus on Saturday released seven detainees, including a former presidential candidate, who were arrested in December during mass street protests over the re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko.

The move came on the eve of an expected announcement by the European Union that it will reinstate a visa ban on Lukashenko and other Belarussian officials in response to his crackdown on protests following his disputed re-election in December.

Belarus' KGB said in a statement that Vladimir Neklyayev, 64, and six other people, including the wife of another jailed presidential candidate, were being provisionally released because of good behavior.

Neklyayev, a poet who heads the Tell the Truth movement, and Irina Khalip, a Novaya Gazeta journalist married to Andrei Sannikov of the For a European Belarus movement, will be kept under house arrest, the KGB statement said.

Neklyayev himself was beaten by state security police on Dec. 19 while he was on his way to join a protest march in the city center and was spirited away from his hospital bed to jail by KGB officials while recovering.

Analysts said the Lukashenko leadership had clearly timed the move to complicate the EU's approach to punitive measures. The United States has also said it is weighing renewed sanctions and has equally called for the release of detainees.

EU foreign ministers are expected to agree on Monday in Brussels to re-impose visa bans that were suspended by the EU in 2008 to encourage reforms in Belarus.

The release of detainees "is an attempt to ... disarm those in the EU who are in favor of tough sanctions. It indicates that Belarussian authorities attach importance to these sanctions despite Lukashenko's swagger," said independent analyst Valeriy Karbalevich in Minsk.

Meanwhile, the mother of Irina Khalip confirmed that her daughter had been re-united with her 3-year-old son, Danil, at home.

"He could not believe his eyes," Lyutsina Khalip said, adding that her daughter was not allowed to come to the telephone under the terms of her provisional release.

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