

More Lukashenko Rivals Go on Trial

May 05, 2011



Neklyayev showing a victory sign before a Minsk court hearing Thursday. **Vasily Fedosenko**

MINSK — Two more election opponents of President Alexander Lukashenko went on trial Thursday as authorities pressed ahead with a crackdown on the political opposition.

Vladimir Neklyayev and Vitaly Rymashevsky, both of whom ran against Lukashenko in the Dec. 19 election, were charged together with four other activists with organizing action that violated public order.

The charge carries a maximum of three years' imprisonment.

Last week, leading opposition figure Andrei Sannikov of the Charter 97 rights group, who also ran against Lukashenko, went on trial on the more serious charge of organizing mass disturbances, which carries a maximum of 15 years in jail.

Altogether, 16 activists were on trial on Thursday for their part in the Dec. 19 protests against Lukashenko, who was re-elected for a fourth, five-year term in a poll that the opposition denounced as fraudulent.

Two more former presidential candidates, Nikolai Statkevich and Dmitry Uss, are due to go on trial May 11, court officials said. Another has fled abroad and taken political refuge in the Czech Republic.

In all, nine presidential candidates were arrested during the mass rally in Minsk against Lukashenko's re-election.

Neklyayev, 65, leader of the Tell the Truth movement, was badly beaten by police before he arrived at Minsk's Independence Square, where the main rally took place.

He and Rymashevsky of the Belarussian Christian Democratic party were later released from prison but confined to their homes prior to trial.

The police crackdown on the Minsk demonstration, in which hundreds of opposition activists and dissidents were rounded up, was condemned by rights groups and Western governments that said Lukashenko's re-election was "flawed."

The United States and the European Union have since blacklisted Lukashenko because of the crackdown, imposing sanctions including a travel ban on him and 150 of his associates in power.

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