

Moscow Slams Minsk's 'Harsh' Sentences

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Shenderovich holding a poster of Sannikov and his family during a one-man picket at the Belarussian Embassy. **Vladimir Filonov**

The Foreign Ministry criticized Belarus on Monday for handing down "harsh" prison sentences to opposition activists convicted for protests over a December election in which President Alexander Lukashenko won a new term.

The ministry said the sentences against opposition presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov and others convicted after being arrested in a government crackdown on election day protests "cannot fail to raise questions."

Belarussian courts "have come out with a series of harsh sentences for participants in the protest action that took place in Minsk on Dec. 19," ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said in the statement. "We call on the Belarussian side to relate more responsibly to adherence to its international commitments in the area of human rights and freedoms."

The United States and the European Union have condemned the sentence given to Sannikov as

politically motivated.

Sannikov, a former deputy foreign minister and co-founder of the Charter 97 rights group who ran against Lukashenko in the December election, was convicted on Saturday of organizing mass disturbances and jailed for five years.

His wife, Irina Khalip, a journalist, was convicted Monday of organizing actions that violated public order during the rally and given a two-year suspended sentence.

Khalip's sentence was held over for two years — meaning that she will go to jail if she is deemed to have broken the law in this period.

After being released, Khalip said: "I know that all this time [since December] I have been a hostage with my son. ... My son and I remain hostages."

When Sannikov and Khalip were first arrested, the family expressed fears that the couple's 4-year-old son could be taken into state care if they were both jailed.

In Moscow, about 30 activists including rights champion Lev Ponomaryov and journalists Viktor Shenderovich and Ilya Barabanov took turns Monday staging one-man pickets ([video](#)) against Sannikov's and Khalip's convictions outside the Belarussian Embassy, Novaya Gazeta [reported](#).

The police crackdown on the December rally was followed by mass arrests of dissidents and opposition activists. In response, the United States and European Union have imposed sanctions against Lukashenko, including a travel ban on him and 150 associates.

Two other activists who ran against Lukashenko, Nikolai Statkevich and Dmitry Uss, are on trial on the same charge as Sannikov, of organizing mass unrest. Two other presidential candidates, Vladimir Neklyayev and Vitaly Rymashevsky, are being tried on lesser charges linked with the December protests.

The trials coincide with a severe currency crisis in which the national currency, the Belarussian ruble, has plunged against the dollar. On Monday, it sank further on the interbank market to 6,300 rubles per dollar, trading at half its official rate in a sign the crisis is deepening.

The threat of devaluation has led to a shortage of imported goods in shops, and people are hoarding food staples such as vegetable oil and sugar to hedge against hard times.

Analysts say the economic crisis is pushing Belarus toward Russia, on which it relies for energy imports. Moscow last week refused to put up a loan of \$1 billion that Minsk had been counting on to help it overcome the crisis.

(Reuters, MT)

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