

Lukashenko Rivals Get Light Sentences

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Former presidential candidates Vladimir Neklyayev, right, and Vitaly Rymashevsky leaving a Minsk court Friday. **Vladimir Nikolsky**

MINSK — Two former Belarussian presidential candidates were handed suspended sentences Friday on charges of organizing riots after last year's disputed election.

The unexpectedly soft penalty suggests that President Alexander Lukashenko's government may be sensitive to Western criticism of its crackdown on dissent.

A district court in the Belarussian capital sentenced Vladimir Neklyayev and Vitaly Rymashevsky to two years in prison each with a two-year suspension. Another four opposition activists were given suspended sentences of one and two years.

Prosecutors had asked the court to give Neklyayev and Rymashevsky actual prison terms. Friday's ruling led to immediate speculation that Lukashenko's government is responding to strong condemnation from the West after another presidential candidate, Andrei Sannikov, was sentenced to five years in prison a week earlier.

Two other candidates are still on trial awaiting a verdict, and another one has fled the country.

The United States and European Union have imposed sanctions, including a travel ban on Lukashenko and his officials, in response to his crackdown on the opposition.

About 700 people, including seven presidential candidates, were arrested when police broke up a protest against alleged fraud after the polls closed in last December's election.

International observers strongly criticized the vote in which Lukashenko was declared the winner.

"Massive repressions and tough sentences are aimed to discourage people from going to the polls," Rymashevsky said in court. "But I'm sure that even more people will come to the square after the next election."

The 65-year-old Neklyayev said in his final words before the verdict that he wanted to "sweep away the rubble of dictatorship and was waiting for our neighbors from east and west, Russia and the European Union, to help us."

Neklyayev was beaten by security agents during his arrest and later taken from a hospital bed to prison.

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