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Belarussian Court Sentences Polish Reporter

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Andrzej Poczobut flashing a victory sign as his wife, Oksana, reacts as they leave a Grodno court on Tuesday. **Vasily Fedosenko**

MINSK — The Belarus correspondent of a Polish newspaper was given a three-year suspended sentence on Tuesday after being found guilty of defaming President Alexander Lukashenko in his articles.

Andrzej Poczobut, who writes for the daily Gazeta Wyborcza, announced his sentence to reporters after emerging from a court in the city of Grodno in western Belarus, close to the border with Poland.

Poczobut, who was detained April 6, was said to have committed the offenses in articles he wrote in his newspaper and on an opposition web site.

The trial and sentencing took place amid a wave of youth protests against the 17-year rule of Lukashenko and a severe financial crisis that is hurting the economy.

Poland, the rotating president of the European Union and a critic of Lukashenko's human rights record, has been in the forefront of EU protests against a crackdown on the Belarussian opposition, including mistreatment of journalists covering rallies.

Poland denounced the verdict and repeated calls for all political prisoners held in Belarus to be released. Even a suspended sentence on Poczobut was to be condemned, Polish Foreign Ministry spokesman Marcin Bosacki told reporters.

"Releasing all prisoners of conscience and the rehabilitation of all those convicted is a condition for re-establishing regular political contacts with Belarus as well as providing economic support by the European Union," Bosacki said.

Human rights organizations in Belarus say about 300 people were arrested on Sunday night in "clapping" protests against Lukashenko and some of them have been given jail sentences of up to 15 days.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Azubalis, speaking for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, expressed strong concern on Tuesday over Sunday's crackdown by the Belarussian police.

"I urge the Belarussian government to release those detained, and further refrain from using violence against peaceful citizens and ensure respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms," Azubalis said.

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