

Belarussian Wife Sends Appeal to Putin' and Medvedev's Wives

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Belarussian journalist Irina Khalip has appealed to the wives of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to help free her husband, a former presidential candidate jailed by President Alexander Lukashenko.

In a letter to Svetlana Medvedeva and Lyudmila Putina dated Sunday and published in Novaya Gazeta, Khalip wrote: "You are also wives and mothers. And I implore you to convince your husbands to do everything possible to prevent my husband, Andrei Sannikov, from being executed and to demand that Lukashenko free him and other Belarussian political prisoners."

Sannikov was sentenced to five years in prison in May on charges of organizing rallies in Minsk on the day of the presidential election on Dec. 19. Khalip was also convicted in connection with the rallies but given a suspended sentence.

Several presidential candidates were jailed after the rallies. Lukashenko pardoned and released one of them Saturday.

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A financial crisis in Belarus, which has triggered two devaluations in its ruble currency and caused soaring prices for staple goods, has pushed Lukashenko's popularity ratings down to their lowest level, a survey indicated Monday.

Of the 1,503 Belarussians polled in September, only 20.5 percent would be prepared to vote for Lukashenko's re-election now, compared with the 53 percent recorded immediately after he won a fourth term in power in December, the survey showed.

"In other words, his ratings overall ... have reached the lowest levels in the 17-year history of monitoring by the institute," the Independent Institute for Social-Economic and Political Research said.

The financial crisis emerged in March due to reckless pre-election spending late last year on public sector wages, many economists say.

(MT, Reuters)

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