

Belarus Rights Activist Goes on Trial on Tax Charges

November 02, 2011

The  Moscow Times

MINSK — A leading Belarussian human rights activist went on trial on Wednesday for tax evasion in a case for which neighboring EU members Poland and Lithuania supplied information about bank accounts that may have helped his prosecution.

The case of Ales Belyatsky, who heads the Vesna-96 rights organization in Belarus, led to a public apology in August by Poland and also caused high-level embarrassment in Lithuania. The two countries gave information about the bank accounts in response to a request by financial authorities in Belarus.

Vesna-96 says the arrest and prosecution of Belyatsky, 49, is politically motivated and part of a clampdown on the political opposition by authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Belyatsky, who was held in a metal cage in a Minsk courtroom when his trial opened on Wednesday, could face seven years in jail if convicted of failing to declare "large-scale income."

Scores of fellow rights activists turned out for the start of the trial, mingling with Western diplomats and members of the opposition in the courtroom.

Vesna-96 says the money held by Belyatsky in Poland and Lithuania belonged to the organization and was set aside for paying for human rights activities and supporting political prisoners and their families.

Belarus imposes tough restrictions on the financing of nongovernmental organizations and their activities that virtually rule out any financial help from abroad.

Vesna-96 is the best-known rights group in Belarus and has played an active part in supporting scores of opposition activists who were prosecuted after rallying against Lukashenko's re-election last December.

Poland apologized for what it said was a "reprehensible mistake" in the case and dismissed two prosecutors responsible for providing information that helped Belarus detain Belyatsky.

It was an additional embarrassment for Poland in that it holds the European Union's rotating presidency until the end of the year and has been in the forefront of efforts to help shape the bloc's policy toward its eastern neighbors.

The EU and the United States introduced travel restrictions and other sanctions against Lukashenko and other officials after he secured a fourth term in office in a December 2010 vote widely criticized as rigged.

Europe's top human rights watchdog says Minsk is systematically persecuting the opposition and civil society while gagging the media.

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