

Belarus Activist Jailed on Tax Charge

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MINSK — A Belarussian court jailed leading human rights activist Ales Belyatsky for 4 and 1/2 years for tax evasion on Thursday, sparking an outcry in the European Union, particularly in neighboring EU countries that unwittingly aided his prosecution.

Belyatsky, 49, heads Vesna-96, the best-known rights group in Belarus. The organization has campaigned for scores of opposition activists prosecuted by the government of President Alexander Lukashenko.

The EU immediately denounced the sentence as "clearly politically motivated" and said it had targeted Belyatsky and his Vesna co-workers because of their "courageous support to victims of repression."

With fresh loans from Moscow now assured, Lukashenko, once dubbed Europe's last dictator by the United States, appears to be signaling that he will not relax his hard-line policies toward the political opposition in exchange for Western help.

The EU, in its statement issued by the bloc's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, said the sentence passed on Belyatsky was "a symbol of the ever intensifying crackdown on civil

society in the country."

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Azubalis said, "This case must be seen as part of a broader pattern of harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders in Belarus." He called for Belyatsky's release.

Belyatsky was arrested and charged after officials in Poland and Lithuania unwittingly helped his prosecution by supplying information about bank accounts held in his name after a request by Belarus' financial authorities.

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

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.

It had latterly been used to support families of opposition activists arrested in a police sweep last December after mass street rallies against Lukashenko's re-election for a fourth term.

Two opposition leaders are still in jail for their part in those protests.

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