

Belarussian Asks EU to Save Son From Execution

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Lyubov Kovalyova at the European Parliament in Brussels on Tuesday. **Yves Herman**

CORRECTION APPENDED

BRUSSELS — Lyubov Kovalyova, a Belarussian receptionist, was listening to the radio at work in April when she heard that her son had confessed to helping plan a terrorist attack — a bomb in a metro station in Minsk that killed 15 people.

Eight months later, after a two-month trial, her son — who says he is innocent — and a childhood friend were condemned to death, a sentence carried out in Belarus by a pistol shot at an unannounced time.

In a race to gain a reprieve, Kovalyova is taking her case to European institutions, and she is also campaigning to abolish the death penalty in her country, the only one in Europe still to practice it.

She met the EU subcommittee on human rights last week. On Monday she spoke in Strasbourg

to the Council of Europe, the international organization promoting human rights and rule of law. On Tuesday, she met with lawmakers at the European Parliament in Brussels.

"The focus now is to secure the life of my son," Kovalyova said over the weekend. "The ultimate goal is to get a moratorium on the death penalty."

Belarus has Europe's longest-serving leader, President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994. But election irregularities led to the country's barring from the Council of Europe in 1997, making it the sole European country outside the grouping.

Lukashenko, who secured a fourth term in power in December 2010, despite mass protests against his rule, has said he is considering a pardon for Kovalyova's son, Vladislav Kovalyov, 26, and Dmitry Konovalov, 25.

He says he faces a hard decision.

Kovalyova, a slim woman of 47 with short, blond hair, said her son was framed for an act he did not commit.

Law enforcement agencies say otherwise. "Guilt was fully proven in the court. Sufficient proof was presented. So any further comment is simply unnecessary," Belarussian KGB spokesman Alexander Antonovich said in an interview in Minsk after being presented with Kovalyova's allegations.

Since the judgment was delivered by Belarus's Supreme Court, there is no right of appeal, and the two on death row can now only hope for a presidential pardon.

A Mother's Fears

Kovalyova, who lives in Vitebsk, a small city in eastern Belarus, had never left her country until last year when she went to talk about the case in neighboring Poland. Speaking in a Brussels hotel room, she kept her composure, except when recalling how she learned about her son's arrest.

The bomb explosion took place last April 11 during evening rush hour on the platform of one of Minsk's busiest metro stations. Apart from the final death toll of 15, about 200 people were wounded. Vladislav had left home the previous year to work in Minsk as an electrician, so she tried to call him.

"I was worried because he uses the metro to get to work," she said. "So I was trying to reach him on the phone, but I couldn't get through because the network was overloaded."

On the morning of April 12, she reached him. He told her he was fine, as he hadn't been in the metro at the time of the blast. "His voice was completely normal," she said. "I was not worried any more after I heard his calm voice."

At 2 a.m. that night, the police came to Lyubov Kovalyova's apartment and searched her son's belongings. Asked by a neighbor what Vladislav was suspected of, a policeman said merely that he had been at the "wrong place at the wrong time."

The following morning, Kovalyova went to the hardware factory where she works. At 9 a.m., Lukashenko went on national television and radio to announce that authorities had rapidly caught two people responsible for the Tuesday bombing — and that they confessed to this as well as to two previous incidents — a series of blasts in 2005 and another in 2008.

The president said one of the two was an electrician — like Vladislav. The other was a lathe operator — like Vladislav's childhood friend Dmitry Konovalov, who had just traveled to stay with him in Minsk in order to visit a girl he'd met online.

Lyubov Kovalyova became "shocked, hysterical, scared," she said, and went home for the day.

'Not Normal' Court

In the months after her son's arrest, Kovalyova found a lawyer and decided to trust the judicial process, which she thought would find him not guilty.

Five months later, when the trial started, Vladislav told the court he had never confessed and had only agreed to testify against his friend after hearing his screams from a nearby jail cell. Video of parts of the interrogation shown during the trial revealed him bruised, his mother said.

He added that later during his detention, after he said he would retract this testimony, a prosecutor told him he would put a green mark on his forehead — which he understood as code for putting a bullet through his head.

When she saw her son in court — for the first time since his detention — Kovalyova decided that it was not a normal trial. "That's when I realized that the case has already been planned out and that my son and his friend were already convicted even prior to the beginning," she said.

A key piece of evidence was a video of a man, supposed to have been the bomber, put together from the metro's closed-circuit television system. Prosecutors said the man in the video was Konovalov, who was accused of having left the bomb — Vladislav Kovalyov was accused of having supplied him with explosives. But, said his mother, the Russian Federal Security Service, which was brought in to help with the investigation, said that Konovalov had a different body type from the man in the video.

"Everyone could see that he [her son] was being framed," she said. "The court did not allow examination of the evidence. ... Motions to bring in witnesses and other evidence were rejected. That showed they were not interested in finding out the truth."

Right after the Supreme Court reached its decision, evidence such as a supposed bomb-making facility and the two young men's clothes were destroyed, she said.

On Nov. 30, the two were handed the death penalty. Lyubov Kovalyova issued a statement saying: "While they try to persuade people that my son and his friend should be shot, the real criminals are going free."

Trying to save her son, she has initiated petitions in several languages with the human rights group Change.org, which have gathered more than 50,000 signatures. She has approached

independent media in Belarus and Lukashenko himself.

In Belarus, relatives are told about executions only after they have been carried out, and the executed are buried in a secret location. Lukashenko has pardoned only one person on death row in the past 16 years.

Correction: An earlier version of this article stated that Vladislav Kovalyov told the court he had confessed to police. In fact, he told the court he had never confessed and had only agreed to testify against his friend, Dmitry Konovalov. The earlier version also stated that Kovalyov said he would retract the confession; in fact, he said he would retract the testimony against Konovalov.

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