

Belarus Leader Pardons Six Jailed Opposition Figures

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Belarussian President Aleksander Lukashenko

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko has pardoned six jailed opposition figures, including Nikolai Statkevich who was imprisoned after running against him for the presidency in 2010, his administration said on Saturday.

Lukashenko, who has been in power in the ex-Soviet republic since 1994 and is running for a fifth consecutive term in an election in October, had been motivated by humane principles, his press service said.

Statkevich, 59, is the last to be released of about 10 politicians who were rounded up and detained after running against Lukashenko in an election in 2010 dubbed fraudulent by the West.

EU foreign affairs chiefs said the prisoner release marked “important progress toward the improvement of relations between the EU and Belarus.”

Lukashenko is largely ostracized by Western governments because of his intolerance toward political opposition.

Although Western sanctions are still in place, there have been small signs of a thaw this year, with Lukashenko distancing himself from the tough policies of Russia — his country's biggest ally — toward neighboring Ukraine, and reviving contacts with European Union and U.S. officials.

The European Union is an important trade partner for Belarus and the two sides have been working for a number of years on closer relations to remove trade barriers.

Progress has stalled because of what the European Union sees as Belarus' lack of commitment to democracy and political and civil rights.

"We now expect the authorities of Belarus to remove all restrictions on the enjoyment of full civil and political rights of the released," EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and EU enlargement commissioner Johannes Hahn said in a joint statement on Sunday.

Statkevich was given a six-year jail sentence in May 2011 on a charge of organizing mass street protests against Lukashenko's re-election at the time.

"Elections are approaching and Lukashenko now has a chance to get from the West a more or less favorable assessment. It was clear that such an assessment would not be forthcoming from Western politicians while political prisoners were being held in jail," Minsk-based political analyst Alexander Klaskovsky said.

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